

January 2002

It is winter again; amazing, wonderful, and difficult. Because Billy and I live what can easily be considered an alternative lifestyle, we are keenly aware of the changing seasons. Billy and I dated during my last year in high school. We really enjoyed talking to each other and we talked about a lot of different things. I am very sure, though, that neither one of us ever said anything to the effect of "Let's go our individual ways for about 23 years then get back together and be potters and live in a greenhouse in NW Arkansas." It wasn't a direct route but it was a true one and we feel blessed to be here.

When my late husband and I moved from Colorado to Arkansas, our plans were to build a house and pottery studio on some land he had purchased several years earlier. Six months after our move, he died of pancreatic cancer, and the only building on the place was a large greenhouse built to house his extensive plant collection. After my husband's death, I could see no reason to continue renting a house in town, so I moved a small camper trailer to the property and established living quarters between the greenhouse and camper. He left no will, so I didn't inherit the property, and I was reluctant to consider building a home on a piece of ground I didn't own. A year later I was able to buy the property from my late husband's two daughters. By then I had rented a building from my neighbors to use as a studio. All of my time and energy was devoted to potting, and the idea of building a house was set aside. So when Billy and I got married, I was essentially camping and two-and-a-half years later, though we have big plans, we are still living in the camper and greenhouse.

The greenhouse consists of a series of aluminum arches covered by two layers of heavy UV resistant plastic. It does have a few plants in it, but for us the greenhouse is a multi-functional structure. It also contains a washer and dryer, the bathtub and shower, a worktable and tools, and our bedroom. The camper trailer sits near the greenhouse and functions as our kitchen, pantry, and living room. Another charmingly older camper trailer serves as our guest house and computer room. The rest of the place consists of an old shed that was part of the original homestead, a newer storage shed, and a pond.

In the spring, summer, and fall, living here is easy and very fun. Billy and I enjoy the pond enormously, and during warm weather, we are at the pond almost daily, either walking along the bank observing what is happening in the water or sitting on the dock eating lunch and watching how the various frogs, toads, and snakes interact with and/or eat each other. On the spring and summer evenings when we can be home from the studio by dusk, we get tremendous pleasure watching bats feed on the mosquitos and mayflies rising off the pond. Another warm weather plus is getting to use the outdoor shower. The shower consists of a spray nozzle attached to a garden hose hanging from a walnut tree, and under the shower is a large flat rock to stand on. There are also some very basic ways in which weather makes life easier, such as our bedroom is always warm and the water is never frozen. Ah, but after fall comes winter, and that is when we start to think about how nice a house would be.

The comfort of a warm bedroom is one thing about a house that we would really enjoy. The greenhouse temperature can reach a daytime high of 120 degrees, but shortly after the sun sets, the temperature inside the greenhouse becomes the same as outside. We have experienced nighttime temperatures ranging from 80 to -5 degrees F. The greenhouse is equipped with a propane furnace, but it is expensive to run, with a nightly cost of about ten dollars. Instead, in cold weather, we use an electric blanket, along with wool and down covers, to keep our bed very warm. We are also looking forward to having plumbing that is less vulnerable to freezing temperatures.

Spring water is collected in a cistern and feeds a single spigot outside the greenhouse. One end of six separate garden hoses is at the spigot. The other end of each hose is attached to whatever system the hose supplies. For example, if I am doing the laundry, I attach the washing machine hose to the spigot and turn it on. During freezing weather, if we forget to disconnect a hose from the spigot, the spigot freezes. This event requires a lengthy thawing out procedure before we again have running water.

Our dishwashing table sits outside the door of the trailer and freezing temperatures can create some big problems there, as well. If it has rained during the day, or if collected snow has melted, the dishes sitting outside on the wash table will freeze together, and if left long enough, the pile will become a solid mass of dishes, silverware, and ice. At the point when we absolutely must have clean dishes, we carry the entire ice-and-dish laden table into the greenhouse and wait for a sunny day to melt the mess. We also have to remember to lower the drain hose on the back of the washing machine so that it drains completely, otherwise the pump freezes.

Cold weather is not the only reason we look forward to living in a more conventional house. A larger climate controlled area and a modern indoor bathroom will make hosting out of town company and entertaining dinner guests much more enjoyable and likely. We will also appreciate having a more workable area in which to display artwork. We do what we can in the little trailer, employing cabinet doors and the front of the refrigerator as exhibit areas, but we still have many art pieces in storage that we would like to be living with. As much as we anticipate living in a house, we are aware of some uniquely pleasurable aspects of living the bohemian life that we will be giving up by moving indoors.

Some things I will really miss are tied to sleeping in the greenhouse. When we get up in the morning we are immediately in the day as it is transpiring outside. In order to get a cup of coffee or go to the outhouse we have to open the door and leave the greenhouse, so within a few minutes of rising we are outside. Even during very unpleasant weather I delight in the fact that my day starts with being outside and connecting with my environment. I can be very well intentioned but I know that if the bed, the bathroom, the books, and the kitchen are all contained under one roof, I will probably not get up, get dressed, and immediately go outside.

The plastic walls of the greenhouse allow all of the sounds outside to be heard inside. On warm evenings, at dusk, the tree frogs and cicadas start calling. During the night the temperature drops a bit and the frogs and cicadas quiet down and the call of the whippoorwills can be heard until dawn. At dawn the songbirds nesting in the bamboo groves near the greenhouse begin to chatter. These are all sounds of natural abundant life, and I could never adequately express the joy I feel at being in this life. The most enthralling aspect of sleeping in the greenhouse, however, is being surrounded by moonlight. The light of the moon feels thick and fluid already, and the greenhouse plastic diffuses it just a bit more. I'll wake up on a moonlit night and everything in the greenhouse is covered with light. It's not really bright but I can see everything and it has been coated with a full, velvety, tangible light. I am so taken by the events and experiences that are made possible by our current living situation, I worry I may practice some unconscious foot dragging when it comes to building a house.

Foot dragging or not, we are putting forth effort to get a house built. In October 2000 we had a footing dug for our planned 620 sq. ft. straw bale house. Between the ice and snow storms of that winter and heavy spring rains, the ground was completely unworkable until July 2001. By that time we were full force into our show season and had very little time to devote to construction. Billy has made a lot of progress this month, however. He has plumbing laid and is tamping the layer of gravel that the stem wall will be poured on. Hopefully we will be ready for concrete sometime in February. A shortage of time and funds, and an emotional attachment to some aspects of the way we now live, may be working against us. But I hope that next January I can include a photo of a little straw bale house and tell you all about our plans to build a straw bale studio! We are looking forward to the upcoming show season and hope we get a chance to see and visit with you.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Sincerely,

Rebecca and Billy