

February 2008

"Ahh, I hate this stupid internet thing!" "I just want some brushed nickel toilet seat hinges." "I thought it would be easy; why does it have to be so complicated?" "I could have made them myself by now." We had purchased a toilet from the recycling center. It was exactly what we were looking for, in perfect condition and cost only \$5. I decided to splurge on some nice hardware for it. My effort to find what I wanted online was being thwarted, mostly due to my own ineptitude, but at the time I believed it was the computer gods conspiring against me.

Billy appeared to be amused by my outburst. Hmm... that is different. He is usually at least a bit concerned when I am frustrated. "What?!" I demanded. He said "I believe if you would recall the first toilet you had here, you might be less upset about not finding these 'just so' hinges." "You mean the shovel behind the shed?" I questioned. "No, no, the first one you could sit on; the bucket up the hill."

Okay, I'm recalling. That toilet was a five gallon bucket with the bottom cut out, turned upside down on a platform that sat over a large hand dug hole. It was a good 80 yard uphill trek from the greenhouse, and was not even an outhouse. It was just out; no house about it. The bucket certainly did not sport a pair of fancy seat hinges. It was, however, accented with an interesting array of puncture marks.

I moved onto this property mid-May 1998. The helpful advice from my new neighbors included a mild warning about the black bears. Because the spring had been late and cool, the wild berries were slow to put on and ripen. The ordinarily reclusive bears, missing the berries, would be looking for something else to eat and might be drawn by animal feed or discarded food scraps.

A month later I stepped out of the greenhouse and saw a big, ugly, humped back brown dog by the shed. I didn't want my old, blind and deaf blue heeler in an altercation, so I shut her in the camper trailer. I then phoned my neighbor. "Abbey!" I gasped "There's a bear by the shed!" I was not afraid of bears but I was respectful of them, and I was excited.

"Don't feed it, don't feed it, whatever you do, don't feed it!" she yelled at me. "I don't need to feed it Abbey, it's doing a fine job of feeding itself." The bear had pulled enough boards off the side of the shed to gain entrance. It then proceeded to drag out and consume the dog food, the cat food, and for dessert, the bird seed. All of these delicacies had been stored in easy to handle and destroy five gallon buckets.

The next morning I hiked up the hill to use the facilities. Something was out of place. It took my brain a few seconds to realize the bucket was gone. I spotted it about 20 feet further up the hill. I thought that was strange. The wind hadn't blown last night and if an animal had knocked it over, the bucket would have rolled downhill, not uphill.

The third morning in a row of the missing bucket found me a little unsettled. Who or what was moving it, and why? Thankfully, for my state of mind, I noticed the multiple punctures in the sides of the bucket and realized that the bear, due to its successful foray into the shed, now associated a five gallon bucket with food and was dragging my makeshift toilet off hoping it might yield dog chow.

Billy was right. With some perspective I could see that toilet seat hinges were not something to fret over. And it certainly was not as though our perfect recycling center toilet was installed in a finished bathroom just waiting for the right hardware. We were still some time away from that. Our grand scheme to spend less time in the studio and more time on the house worked - just not quite as we had expected.

The plan was to be out of the studio by the end of May and have seven or eight uninterrupted months to work on the place. We hoped to stack some rock walls and clean dead bamboo out of the two large bamboo groves as well as finish the house. Well, life and reality had their way with our little plan.

As scheduled, we participated in only four art shows instead of the usual ten-twelve. But early in the fall we accepted two large custom orders. Since I was back in the studio anyway, I decided I would also work on a backlog of small custom orders. The result was that we never got quite as free from the studio as we had expected.

An almost full month of company in May was great fun and good for us but it did take a bite out of the work schedule. In July we took about ten days each, at different times, to be sick. Billy endured a mean summer cold and I suffered a bout of tick fever. These slight detours probably had some effect on the end results, but the major flaw of our entire endeavor was simply how unrealistic my expectations of what we could accomplish were.

In retrospect, it seems that I believed getting us out of the studio was going to magically make all other responsibilities disappear. I guess Lucy, our dog, was going to cook meals and wash the dishes. The three cats would take on laundry and cleaning duties. Mowing would be split four ways with Lucy mowing the rough areas because she was the biggest. Billy and I would be free to spend every waking minute working on the house.

I was convinced if we had some time and were very determined we could accomplish all I had planned. This attitude, now, reminds me of a belief my younger sister held until she was seventeen. She would say to me, usually just after we had been in a fight with each other, "If I really, really wanted to, I could beat you up." She believed that sheer determination would overcome the fact that I would always be 2 inches taller and at least 20 pounds heavier than she was. Billy's and my determination was not going to overcome the fact that we were just two people with limited prior experience; using very little outside help; attempting to construct a rather labor intensive building.

So it is now late January '08. There are no rock walls but the pile of rocks to build them from is bigger than it was a year ago.

The bamboo groves are still full of dead bamboo and fallen tree branches but my younger sister and my dad are planning a simultaneous visit in February. They want to help us with a project, so we'll get a start on cleaning the bamboo. And, no, the house is not finished and we are not living in it, but we have made a huge amount of progress and it is thrilling to see.

The building is enclosed. The exterior walls are completely covered by two layers of mud. The ceiling is finished and I am about halfway through applying mud on the interior walls. The bathroom walls are framed with some drywall and all of the plumbing in place. We are within a week of installing the toilet and those fancy hinges are on their way. The radiant floor is on and proving all of the accolades about the comfort of radiant heat to be absolutely true. Our first 12°F. night sleeping in the unheated greenhouse, caused us to briefly consider putting a bed in the house. But the small (only 600 square feet) was already crowded with scaffolding, building materials, and tools, so we decided not to try to squeeze a bed in, too. Besides, this is our ninth winter in the greenhouse and we have learned how to keep warm.

Soon our attention will have to be refocused on the studio. Work on the house will again be done on a 'when we have money and time' schedule. We now have enough experience to recognize the remaining projects will require a good amount of both money and time. So we won't be surprised if we aren't living in the house until the end of this year.

We did not achieve even half of what I thought we would but I do not consider this a failed experiment. I stand in this space we have created. It is both comfortable and comforting and I am not disappointed with our effort. I am, instead, very proud of us and what we have accomplished and I think, as I often do, that we are either very brave or very crazy. It depends upon which side of that coin is up.

"No, no." "I don't want a double handle vertical spa with four nozzles or an arc shaped shower system." "I want just two handles." "Two handles, one for hot and one for cold and one showerhead, that's it." "Oh...and I want them in brushed nickel." I am ranting. I hear Billy laughing quietly. I don't even look at him. He is remembering my first shower. It was a garden hose hanging on a tree. The water came directly out of a spring fed cistern and was so cold it gave me an instant headache. I showered reluctantly and infrequently. But it was just the dog and me at the time, and I don't think I ever smelled worse than she did.

We have updated our web site; www.rebeccalivingston.com , and added more house pictures. We no longer have phone service at the studio. You are welcome to contact us at 479-665-2410 or pottery@madisoncounty.net.

We wish you the very best in the new year and, as always, look forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,
Rebecca and Billy