

## February 2009

"Hey Bec, Merry Christmas! What did you guys do today?" It was my younger sister, Carrie, calling from her home in Michigan. "Hi hon, Merry Christmas to you, too. We did the dishes." "You did the dishes?" "Yes, it's been really cold for a few days so the dishes piled up, but today was warm and windless and the hoses were thawed. Perfect dishwashing conditions." "Okay," Carrie said slowly, "if you are still washing dishes outside that means you are not yet in the house." "Right." I agreed. "So why aren't you in the house?"

I explained that I had planned a big mud-a-thon to finish the inside walls after we got home from our last show in early December. However, the moisture released from the drying mud condensed on the cold windows and we thought that was bad for the wooden window frames, so mudding inside has been put off until warmer weather. We also need to redo the kitchen ceiling. "No, no, Bec," Carrie interrupted, "that all made sense and was even kind of funny for the first five or six years. Now you just have to wonder. Why are you REALLY not in the house?" I hesitated. Carrie was not just my sister but also a good friend to Billy and me and a regular visitor to our place. She has some insight. "I don't know," I answered thoughtfully, "and I do wonder. I know there is something going on, I just don't know what it is. I need to think about it." I did think about it and three days later I sent Carrie the following email:

"We are not in the house because the way we live now is a challenge and meeting the challenge is exciting. It will not be as exciting in the house."

Wow! That felt like a confession, or maybe a revelation. All that whining about cold winter mornings and bears stealing my outhouse, and in truth, I like it!? I was perusing past newsletters and the following lines from the 2002 letter caught my attention. "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." I wrote that seven years ago, and I don't have to worry anymore. I know I'm dragging my feet.

7:37am, January 27, 2009

The loud shuddering clang of the refrigerator motor abruptly shutting off wakes me. We thought this would happen. Seventeen hours of light but steady rain combined with freezing temperatures pretty much guarantees a power outage as ice laden tree limbs fall on electrical lines. At least it waited until morning. Since the intended function of an electric blanket depends upon electricity and the cooling bed was further evidence we no longer had electricity, I got up. I quickly dressed and headed up to the trailer hoping, hoping, hoping Billy, up two hours earlier, had made coffee before we lost power.

He had not. I was giving him a hard time when he pointed out that we could boil water on the stove and make cowboy coffee. "Uh huh, Mr. Molars," I said, "and you are going to grind those beans in your back teeth?" Billy sat down. "Oh, that's right...the grinder." "Hey," he jumped up, "I'll get the inverter from the cargo trailer." We carry a small car battery and inverter to art shows to power the credit card machine. The inverter is a device, about the size of a large paperback book, that connects to the car battery and converts the direct current from the battery into household current.

The easiest battery to get to was in our old Ford pickup. Billy filled the grinder, grabbed the inverter, and headed out the door. I picked up the can of coffee beans and followed. "Let's grind a few days worth," I suggested, "we don't know how long this will last." The frozen slush on the pickup hood made it too heavy for the springs to raise, so I held the hood up while Billy connected the inverter to the battery, plugged the grinder in, and ground enough beans for three days.

We made coffee and had breakfast. Fed and well caffeinated, we considered our situation. We knew the ice storm had caused outages over a huge geographic area and it could be several days before we would again have electricity. The lows for the next few nights were expected to be between ten and seventeen degrees. Our bed is in the unheated greenhouse and sleeping there without the electric blanket was out of the question. The camper trailer we cook in is heated with propane and the stove is propane, so we would be able to stay warm and cook. But the trailer is very small and it would not be a comfortable place to sleep especially with the addition of the dog and three cats.

The house is comparatively roomy and has a pet door so the animals can come and go. The water for the radiant floor is heated in a propane water heater but the pump that circulates the water is electric. The best use of the inverter was to run the pump for the floor. Billy pulled the battery out of the Ford, hooked up the inverter, and plugged in the pump. We then cleaned and repaired two Coleman lanterns, put fresh batteries in two big flashlights and pocketed a key-chain light each. We still have the scaffolding set up in the house, so I built a bed on the lower platform. Not as fancy as the bed we made for Carrie during her visit last February, but still quite comfortable. We spent two nights in the house and, though temporary, it was wonderful.

Like most people, we are very dependent upon electricity and use it almost unconsciously. We were without power for three days and two nights. Meeting the challenge of being without something we were accustomed to having was exciting. Living in unconventional housing evokes the same kind of thrill in me that surviving a power outage does.

My mother lives in northern Wyoming. Her job took her to northeast Montana during the first really cold spell of the winter. It was 20 below zero. She was in Sidney and needed to drive to Wolf Point. The Highway Patrol had closed the road to Wolf Point because it was icy and drifted with blowing snow. Mom and about fifteen guys, mostly oilfield workers, were waiting in the Highway Patrol office for a snow plow to clear the road. They were finally allowed to go but only if they chained up, stayed together, and did not leave anyone behind. The oilfield workers assured the patrolman they would not lose Mom. They lent her a hand held radio, put her in the middle of the convoy and took off;

two semis, six one ton dually pickups, and Mom in her Dodge Neon. It took over four hours to travel the 100 miles to Wolf Point but they all arrived safely and Mom e-mailed me her 'Adventure in Montana' story when she got home.

Mom has assured me that she is prepared to travel on bad roads in foul weather. She has studded tires plus chains, her cell phone, a sleeping bag rated for 30 below, water, food, and two small, fat dogs in case she runs out of food. She is 70 and I suppose she knows what she is doing by now, still I e-mailed back "20 below on icy, snow drifted roads, that sounds a bit scary." She replied "It was a bit scary...that's what made it an adventure."

So I understand how I could come by my 'It's life and a little challenge just makes it more fun' attitude naturally. But, as Billy points out, that doesn't adequately explain why ten years of this kind of fun has not yet been enough. Billy does not feel the same way I do about our quasi-camping lifestyle. For the first four years he complained. "It's too cold. It's too hot. There's too many bugs. If this house were frame instead of straw bale, it would be done by now. As a house, this design stinks (this is true, because I designed the building to be a pottery showroom). The next house I build will NOT be straw bale." He has gotten used to our bohemian living conditions and even agrees that some aspects are fun, but he does not see the way we live as the big adventure I do and he is more interested in getting into the house than I am.

In 2007 we took several months off from the studio to work on the house. We made fantastic progress but in February 2008, when we went back to the studio, work on the house came to a virtual standstill. This past December, after our last show, we returned to working on the house. But it's February again and time to shift our efforts to the studio. At least I now know when we will finish the house. Right around the time we really need it to be done.

I've added new pictures to both the GALLERY and HOUSE sections of the web site. The SHOWS section is current through June and letters dating back to 2000 are available in the NEWSLETTERS section. We would love to hear from you and we do hope to see you at a show this year.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Livingston and Bill Minter