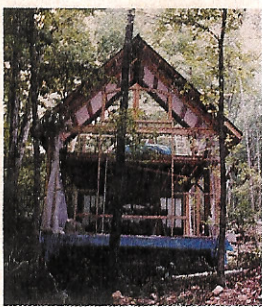
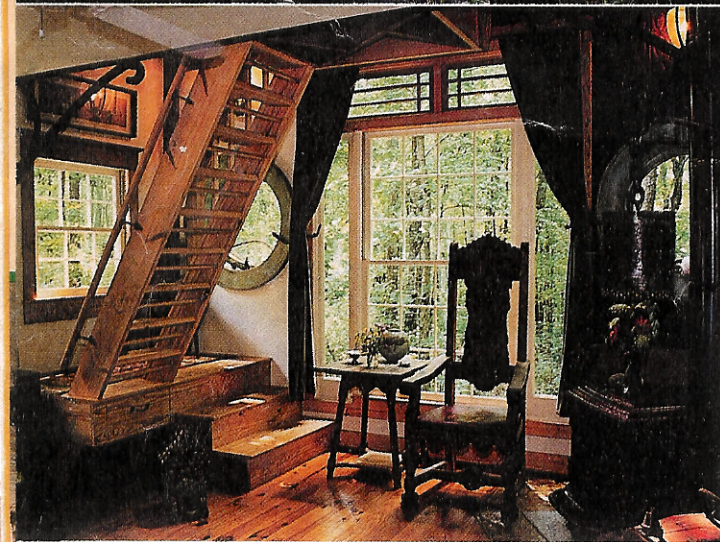


A woodland dream among the trees

The cottage built by the Stoney's charms visitors, offers retreat

BY CAARA STONEY, AS TOLD TO JENNIFER HEWETT
PHOTOS BY ROBB HELFRICK



At top and above: The woodland retreat of Robert and Caara Stoney is crafted of loving and creative touches. Wherever you look there's a story. Doors, traditional sash windows, iron beam brackets and a pressed-

tin wall finish were all selected from architectural salvage. The Jøtul stove is from Norway, and the unconventional staircase is based on those in medieval castles. Of the tin roof, Robert says, "When it rains, it's a comforting sound."

Closing one's eyes, the cool breeze and rhythmic sound of rustling leaves give the sense of being near the ocean. Birds singing and cicadas calling transport one deep into a nature preserve, but here, only three miles from busy Hwy. 515, close to the thriving town of Jasper, lies an undisturbed woodland paradise.

It is where Caara and Robert Stoney, and their 10-month-old son Oliver, call home. Their cottage, set in a leafy clearing on 16 acres of mature woodlands, is reminiscent of a fairy tale. Oaks, hickory and tulip poplar tower into an 80-foot canopy, while

below is a profusion of woodland flora bathed in filtered green light. Although the house is firmly anchored to a rock wall built 60 years ago, it looks and feels like a tree house perched a foot from a lofty oak and overlooking a forested ravine.

When Caara bought the property in 1994, there was no house, except for the remains of a tiny, but exquisitely crafted wooden shack, built by a Birmingham Symphony cellist about 60 years ago. The shack became known locally as the Hobbit House and would have been big enough for one small musician, a cello and nothing else. The

“hobbit” fell in love with a fellow musician and began work on a larger home. But the lady hobbit did not adapt to the sylvan life in the wilds, so they sold up. All that remained was the shack and the rock wall nearby, which Caara, tiring of the “more is better” world, was delighted to adopt as the foundation of her cottage.

Laughing, Caara recalls, “My only problem was that I worked nearly seven days a week and had just started ripping out walls in another home.” Her round-the-clock work as a set carpenter and scenic painter in Atlanta’s film world kept any plans of completing the house far back on her agenda. Little by little, Caara paid out-of-pocket and put together each section, snatching weekends and evenings whenever she could.

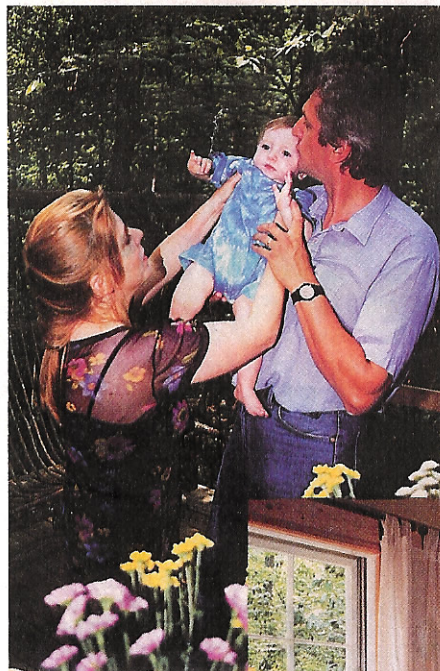
Three years later, the tin roof was on and the house nearly dried in. By now, Caara was working as a faux finisher in Atlanta, and took a trip to Ireland to learn traditional water gilding. “Good for the spirit and a much-needed escape,” she says. “The instructor, who was a friend of Robert’s, mentioned that ‘an attractive man’ would be in the class, but he was ‘off women’ at the time,” Caara recalls, her eyes twinkling. It was Robert. They fell in love and were married a year and a half later.

Robert, a watercolor artist, horticulturist and organic farmer, has an Oxford degree in zoology. Earning his degree introduced him to more creepy crawlies than was good for any one person to know about, he says. But it also gave him a solid foundation in ecology and how the animal and plant worlds interact and thrive—concepts essential for successful organic farming and horticulture. He is currently the horticulturist at Prince Fugger’s Barnsley Gardens near Adairsville.

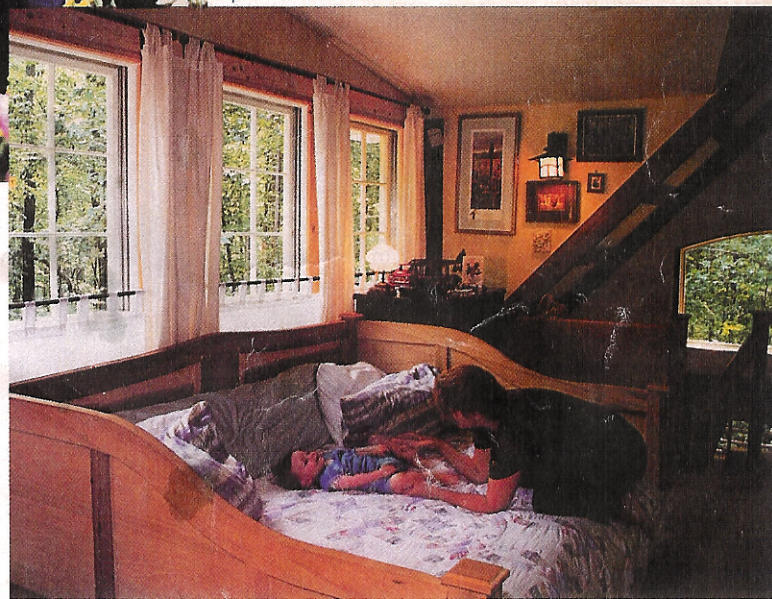
Together Caara and Robert completed the traditional cedar wood siding, by first painstakingly staining each piece Wedgwood Blue before they nailed each shingle in place. Decks were built, wooden floors laid, and finishes and furnishing applied inside. Heart-pine saved from a century-old building in Atlanta was dipped, denailed, planed, sanded and waxed to

an amber-red sheen and used in window molding, paneling and banisters. Two porthole windows on both sides of the east window were custom-made and faux-finished to the color and texture of ocean-tarnished bronze.

And then there are the stairs. “We didn’t want to box it in and restrict the view,” Robert says. “Instead we kept it open, and it works quite well.” Caara found the ideal solution, which she shipped from England: a ladder stairway adapted from a design found in medieval castles that, for ease of defense and a speedy withdrawal into a tower, was steep and lightweight. It has an alternating half tread so you can see where you are putting your feet on the way down, and yet, the unaccustomed assailant, hurtling up and bran-



Baby Oliver, at 10 months old, is a handful for Caara and Robert, but obviously the apple of his parents’ eyes.



The stair leads to an airy loft (with bedroom and bath) that runs almost the full length of the second floor. Mirrors and windows suggest a space twice the size and give the feeling of being inside a tree house.

dishing a sword, could easily be wrong-footed.

The stair leads to an airy loft, which constitutes one huge bedroom and a bathroom with whirlpool tub. It’s up here that visitors might feel like they’re inside a tree house, surrounded by the outside greenery. A cross-vaulted ceiling and exposed beams continue the medieval look, and a green-man gargoyle grimacing benignly from the gable apex completes it.

Though there are no closets, the Stoneys have made good use of space in their abode, with a drawer hidden here and a bookcase tucked there. “I haven’t really missed having closets,” Caara says. “There are plenty of places to tuck things, a cedar storage cabinet in the bathroom, and a pull-out drawer under the staircase. And we plan to add more.”

Downstairs, the kitchen, well-designed to have everything within arm’s reach, has cabinets deliberately left plain for the next occupants to “mark their territory” as we all do the instant we move into a new home. “This way, at least we should be able to save the world a set of cabinet doors,” quips Robert, ever the environmentalist.

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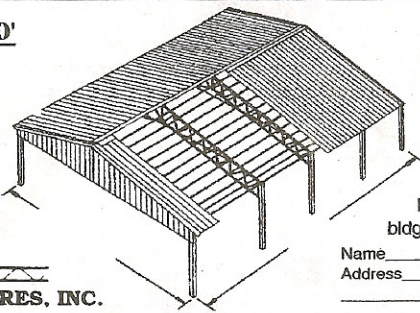
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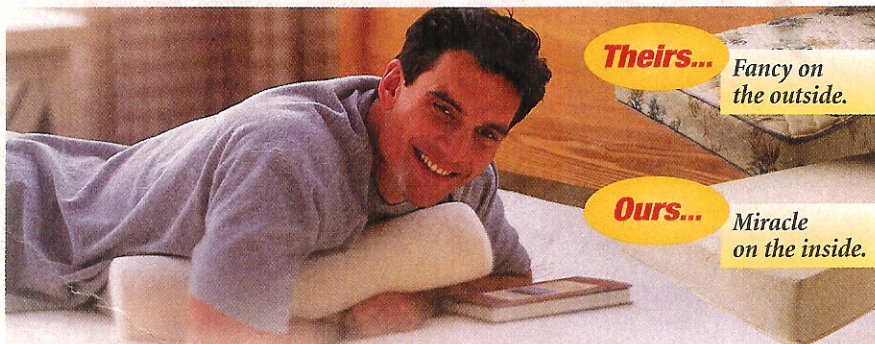
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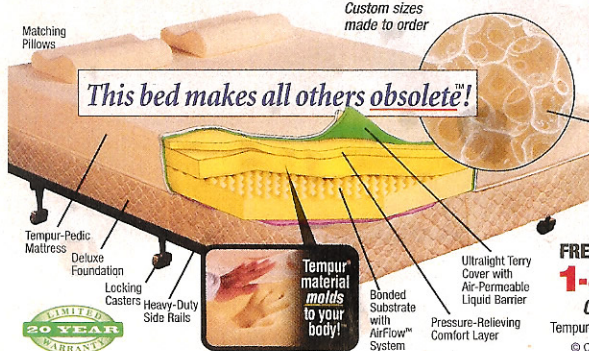
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Moroccan rugs, a silver mote spoon. And, of course, Robert's watercolors hang on what little wall space is not taken up by the light-enhancing windows.

The house is amply heated in winter by a burgundy-glazed Jøtul stove from Norway. In summer, a single window air-conditioning unit is all that is needed for cooling, not only because of the house's modest 700 square feet, but also because the shady glade's temperature is at least 5 degrees below what it would be on the open road. "The house's electric bill is so low it is almost a pleasure to pay it," says Robert. "It's also very environmental, but without any of the stuffiness that a lot of eco-houses tend to have."

Outside, Robert has betrayed his Irish laborer's roots with a two-foot-deep French drain he hand dug around the house to protect the rock wall and crawl space from rainstorms. "It was a swine of a job," Robert recalls. He also constructed a little terraced garden with a stone retaining wall and steps topped with weathered and moss-covered fieldstone harvested from the surrounding forest floor. On another corner of the house, a cup-and-saucer vine entwines artfully up a logging chain suspended from the eave to the vine's container 15 feet below.

You would expect that Robert and Caara would never need or want to venture far from the comforts and beauty they created in North Georgia, set for a lifetime of Waldonian bliss. But the pull of Ireland's fresh fields and ancestral ties is strong. They plan to buy into a small holding in Ireland's County Mayo, to start an organic farm. "I'll miss the peace and seclusion of the cottage most of all," Robert says. And Caara will miss the variety of radio programming available in the states, along with her friends and family—"who can always come and visit," she says.

After applying the finishing touches to the house, they plan to put the property on the market and look forward to starting over again, in a new place they'll build and call home.

Amicalola EMC in Jasper provides power to the Stoneys' cottage.