

So You Now Have the Old Home Place

Part 6: The Cabin

by James L. Cummins



Basic cabin

Basic kitchen



Basic bed



PHOTOS BY JAMES L. CUMMINS

This is the sixth in a series titled “So You Now Have the Old Home Place.” In our previous article, we discussed farm ponds and small lakes. In this one, we will discuss my second favorite topic – the cabin.

Many writers, such as Russell Annabel, Anne LaBastille, Robert Service and Jack London have fostered the romantic appeal of a small, simple cabin nestled in a remote hideaway. Henry David Thoreau lived and worked in his one-room cabin on Walden Pond. *Outdoor Life* field editor, Charlie Elliott, had a cabin in Beech Bottoms. The list goes on and on but the point is that there are not many people who love the outdoors that do not dream of one day owning “a cabin in the woods.”

Deciding on the perfect location for your cabin can be an exciting adventure or a nightmare. It is the single most important step in building a cabin because the best cabin ever built, on a wrong site, can be nothing but burdensome and expensive.

As you contemplate your cabin site, write down a description of what you visualize as the setting of your cabin. Take your time and write a detailed description that includes surroundings, desired climate, size and style of cabin and recreational interests you hope to pursue. Once you have a picture in your mind of your desired cabin and its surroundings, you can begin surveying

the land in order to find the ideal location.

While walking the property, try to pick out the best cabin site and stake off the approximate blueprint of the size cabin you would like to build. If there is already an old home site on the property, consider why the site was chosen and whether or not it fits your desires, as this could save you the trouble of walking off the whole property. Our ancestors were pretty smart and probably had a better idea of the ideal home site than we do. When staking, if necessary, move the stakes around to find the position that best suits you. Take into consideration the position of the sun during various times of the day and a north wind. You will then need to determine how you will get water, as well as the availability of any utilities you want run to your cabin.

Other considerations and decisions to be made include answering the following questions: How much land preparation needs to be done? Is the ground level satisfactory for footings? Are the views what you were expecting? If there is no existing access road or driveway into the site, how much will it cost to construct one? Is there adequate drainage around the site? How secure is your site? Are there trees that will be too close to the cabin and need to be removed before construction begins? These are the types of questions you

should ask yourself as you decide on the location of your cabin.

Once you’ve decided on the location of your cabin, start a journal if you haven’t already. This journal can be used to track your progress, including when, where and how the clearing, planting, building and other improvements are developing. This record will assist in future plans and help to avoid mistakes such as planting plants in an area that is prone to weeds. Taking photos will help to determine and track habitat changes. Before and after photos help to ensure that goals are being achieved. They are also a great source of encouragement as you face the challenges that sometimes come with accomplishment.

Next, decide the look you want. Do you want to make your structure out of logs, board and batten, reverse board and batten or another material? What about the roof? Do you want one made of metal, cedar shakes, composite shingles or something else? What style of cabin do you want? Will it be primitive with just one room, an Appalachian-style cabin, a family or club-sized cabin, a cabin with a loft or another style? What about a front or back porch, a wrap-around porch or a deck?

While there are thousands of plans on the market to choose from, take your time to determine what you want. More than likely, someone else has already



A more elaborate cabin with the amenities of home.

PHOTO BY JAMES L. CUMMINS

designed something similar to what you want. Set a budget...then add 25 percent to that number.

There are several options for a bathroom. On the primitive side, one can construct an outhouse or “privy” as my cousins in Scotland call it. If that is what you prefer, just keep it downwind from the cabin. A typical outhouse is about 5 feet square with a 4 foot square pit with wooden sides that are 5 feet deep. A translucent fiberglass roof will allow light to penetrate. If you prefer something less primitive, a waterless, composting toilet will work fine. Or, if you are like me, a traditional bathroom located inside the cabin with a sink, shower and toilet is preferred. However, getting water and utilities to some locations can be a major expense and this type of bathroom is not practical.

To keep the cabin warm, one may choose a fireplace or wood stove, gas or electric heat. To me, a fireplace or

wood stove is the preferred method because the crackle of burning pecan wood, and its smell, has a lot to do with the spirit of the cabin. Wood is certainly renewable, is cheaper and provides twice the warmth – that is, once when cutting, splitting and stacking and once when burning! As I began hunting big game in the upper regions of North America, I noticed there are very few fireplaces – only wood stoves. That is because fireplaces are not near as good as a wood stove for heating efficiency. At 40 degrees that is not that important; at minus 20 it is.

There are several options for lighting your cabin. If you can get electricity to your cabin, that is the best. I have hunted where there are wind turbines and a few solar panels. But this is Mississippi and unless you are near the Coast or on a reservoir in North Mississippi, wind is not the preferred option and solar panels have

their disadvantages too. A gas or diesel generator can be sufficient if it is not practical to get electricity to the cabin site. Propane lanterns can supplement the generator. A central propane gas system is also good and can be used for cooking, lighting and heating, and even refrigeration. Even though my cabin has electricity, I keep a few kerosene lamps handy as remote places, such as our family’s cabin, aren’t exactly on the high-priority list for restoring electricity after a storm.

Many people build cabins to get away and to catch up on some rest. So far, I haven’t mastered the latter. When it comes to beds, they are typically some that are left over, cheap or the kids outgrew. If you need to save some money, don’t do it here. Provide good beds so everyone will get a good night’s sleep and your cabin experience will be much better and your marriage last much longer.



PHOTOS BY JAMES L. CUMMINS

A cabin on a public water supply is easy. A remote cabin will require a bit more thought as to how to meet one's water needs. A drilled well is the most common option when obtaining water when a public water supply is not practical. However, drilled wells can be expensive. Water can be obtained from a stream, river or lake by using a water pump, but it will need to be treated. Water can also be hauled in or one can catch rainwater from the cabin's roof with a gutter system. However, hauling water will really teach water conservation!

As with most homes in the South, life revolves around the kitchen. Whether primitive or modern, one must be able to cook at the cabin. For a cabin complete with running water and electricity, setting up a kitchen is self explanatory. As with most things, however, a more primitive one requires more thought. First, food must

be kept cool. If you have a propane system described earlier, an efficient gas refrigerator can be used. If not, a series of coolers – one for milk, meat and other foods with a block of ice in it and another one for items used more frequently. Cooking at the cabin can still produce delicious food, even if it is primitive. Some of the best food I have had was game cooked on a wood stove at a cabin over 75 miles from the nearest road. One has several options for primitive cooking: a propane camp stove, a camp stove oven, a wood stove, fireplace cooking or a Dutch oven. I prefer a small gas stove, complete with all the amenities from home!

While seclusion is preferred, that attribute also increases the possibility of your cabin being vandalized. First, make sure your cabin is not visible from a public road and the road going to it is gated and locked. Inform the sheriff of your cabin and ask him to keep an eye

on it. The same goes for your neighbors. Never leave guns or valuables inside. Take them with you when you leave. Finally, obtain insurance on your cabin and its contents, especially if it is a more modern one. Many times you can add this to your homeowner's policy.

Finally, name your cabin. This can be a lot of fun. It should be one that suits your cabin's personality, and one that will be with you for years. My wife named our cabin "The Seventh Day," however, there has not been much resting while we have been there. Take your time and don't settle on the first name you come up with. When you get the right name, you will know it.

In the next issue of *Wildlife Mississippi* magazine, we will discuss landscaping, barns, sheds and shooting areas.

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