

Well-traveled history

Restored cabins get new life in Highlands

If you love being close to history, but roughing it “Little House on the Prairie”-style isn’t your idea of a great vacation, the new Cabins at Half Mile Farm might strike the perfect balance.

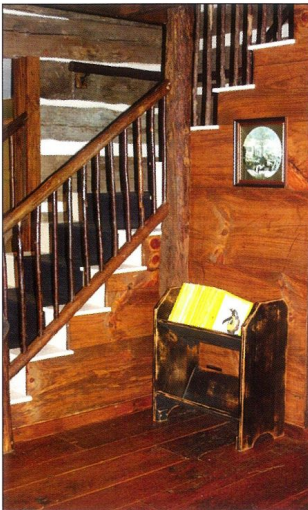
Eight separate buildings originating from across Eastern and Midwestern states originally constructed in the early to mid-1800s now combine to create three cabins with the rustic charm of their early days and the modern conveniences today’s vacationers demand. Who, after all, had indoor plumbing in an 1805 farmhouse?

These updated historic buildings not only boast the indoor bathroom essentials, but today’s guests find large showers, oversized tubs and fine linens, even if they do reach for their soap and shampoo on the seat of a distressed antique chair serving as a shelf.

For David Howard, of Big Springs Preservation & Historic Lumber, these unique buildings are a labor of love. He knows their histories and determines their futures. David collects buildings and ideas from across the country. Some enjoy collecting antiques for their house, while David would rather collect the house, bringing the structures to Tennessee for restoration and — eventually — relocation to their next “perfect spot.”

After spending the past 20 years relocating and restoring historic buildings, David knows a great site when he sees it. One in Highlands, just across the road from the main building at Half Mile Farm, kept popping into his mind.

Story by Melody Spurney
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It wasn't purchase at first sight, though. David looked at the property several years before, and finally committed after a business partner suggested they look at the site together.

"I thought it was the prettiest property in Highlands, and I bought it," he said. "I'd go out there sometimes and take a lawn chair and a bottle of wine and sit and let the ideas bubble up."

In keeping with the buildings' history and spirit, David and his crews strive to use construction techniques appropriate to the buildings' era. That philosophy also helps preserve much of the landscape around a building site as large backhoes and modern construction equipment weren't available to 19th century farmers. Removing large trees was nearly impossible, meaning David and his crew planned building placement and selection around, rather than in spite of, the large trees.



"The really old trees took a lot of planning. We didn't take a single big tree," he said. "It would have been a lot easier to take a big tree or two, but that's what makes it look the way it does."

Stories to tell

David meticulously preserves the buildings that he moves from their original locations to Tennessee and eventually to



Page 8, bottom: Flowers are reflected in the bathroom window of the Lamons cabin. **Above:** Cozy dining nooks in each cabin make the perfect place for breakfast. This is one set with fresh pancakes with cream cheese, blueberry syrup and fresh berries prepared by Half Mile Inn Chef Kimberly Horne.

their new destinations. He also meticulously preserves their stories, making these cabins much more than four walls and a roof.

The oldest building, which now comprises the left side of the center cabin. The cabin dates from 1805 and was built by Nathaniel Lamons in Greene County, Tenn. The rest of the center cabin is comprised of a blacksmith shop from Abingdon, Va., which serves as the lower level, and a tavern dating back to 1822 from North Carolina, which is the main level.

“The tavern came off of the wagon road between Raleigh and old Salem,” he said.

The left cabin boasts the second-oldest building, the Justus family homeplace, built around 1819 in Alamance County, N.C. The main level of the left cabin is made up of the Earnest family cabin, built in 1848 in Barren County, Ky., and a timber addition is part of an Indiana barn.

“These are well-traveled houses,” David said.

The final cabin has two pieces: a tavern fittingly serves as a dining area, and the main cabin is formed by another homeplace originally located between Nashville and Memphis, that David said is the only building on the site where dates and names are fuzzy.

Although he doesn't know when it was constructed, he certainly knows its story.

“The family says a captain in the Union Army rode



Rocking chairs offer a time-honored way of relaxing on the porches of all of the Cabins at Half Mile Farm.

across the farm on the way to what would become known as the Battle of Shiloh,” David said. “He came back after the war and bought the farm.”

Learning the trade

Even experienced construction workers are in for a shock when they work on one of David’s worksites.

In his effort to maintain as much of the buildings’ original character as possible, David leads his crews in learning 1820s building techniques to use in the construction.

“Fundamental skill sets are the same. You’ve got to be able to cut a straight line,



but you’ve also got to cut a curved line. Doors don’t come pre-hung,” he said.

He broke ground on the project in 2004, and added the finishing touches in time for guests to enjoy this season.

Sometimes, finishing a task was the most difficult part of the project.

“I’m going to write a book called ‘David Howard Axioms of Construction.’ The first is, ‘You can’t finish if you don’t start.’ And the second is, ‘You never finish, you just quit working.’”

David credits his crew for the quality work and their willingness to learn new skills.

The cabins’ historic beauty still strikes David, even after two years of overseeing the design, construction and daily operation on the site.

Armed with a Canon Rebel camera, he visited the cabins early one August morning as the sun just began to spill across their rocking-chair porches.

“We really tried to make these cabins look like what they could have been — especially on the outside,” he said. “Some of it was just blind luck.”



Left: Bathrooms are the least authentic part of the project, said David Howard. **Above:** Kitchens are completely furnished with reproduction stoves and hidden modern appliances.