

THE VILLAGE LOG

CAESAR'S CREEK
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GROWING YOUR OWN ROOTS

The chance to design and build your own house these days is limited to the few who have draftsman or architectural training or building skills enough to tackle the job. But the opportunity to build your own town comes to only a very few in the entire country, and even then to the extent that your sponsoring company finances the project.

To a group of ordinary people in southwest Ohio, building your own town has become a dream realized. In the process it is giving them roots and identity in their community and participation in a goal that is developing to benefit far more than those whose labors stand sturdily in wood and stone.

Few have the opportunities to leave monuments behind. Fewer still are able personally to create these monuments. Fewer yet are those who leave them to the benefit and education of those who follow in future years. To be remembered by the deed done rather than the name held may be as close to immortality as any one can come.

The pages of life appear to be turned by chance, and one is seldom aware of the turning until the new text has been read. It was by such a chance that my wife heard about a few people in our little town who were going to meet at the local church the next evening to talk about saving a log house. She wondered whether I would be interested in attending, but

I had papers to grade, a couple new books to look over, and as always, the lesson plans for the next day. Saving a log house wasn't quite up my alley. Oh, I knew there were a few log houses left in the countryside. I had heard that this or that structure was part-log. We had heard of the pioneers who had moved into the area in the late 1700's, and how they had lived in such buildings, but the style of those was long since replaced by split levels or ranch bricks.

I also suspected that the cause of the concern about the house was due to the demolition of old Quaker farmsteads in the area a few miles to the east to make way for a large lake to be constructed and used for recreation and flood control. A recent immigrant to the area myself, I was looking forward to the day when water would be impounded behind the large dam being built across Caesar's Creek. The quicker the land was cleared, the faster I could get a boat in the water.

She returned from the meeting to announce what I had suspected. Logs had been uncovered under several layers of siding on a ramshackle farmhouse that stood on top of a hill. Probably once a pretty place, it had gone through a succession of owners till the Corps of Engineers had purchased it in their land acquisition. The Corps was making it available to any local organization that wanted to preserve it. The few at the meeting were seeking help in peeling off siding and re-

moving inside plaster and lath. Would I come along and help on the weekend?

Saturday was warm, the countryside green, and the day uncommitted. We drove over to see just what was so great about an old log house. A few others were there, some with hammers and crowbars, and some one had brought a wheelbarrow. Already a large pile of debris was forming outside one window as cans, broken furniture, plaster and rags came flying out. Inside were dust and ripping noises as several figures in tee shirts enlarged holes in the plaster. We didn't know very many of the folks. Nevertheless we helped carry away trash and soon were thickly coated with plaster dust.

Later we found ourselves flopped in the weeds munching sandwiches given us and talking animatedly about the work with others who now had first names as well as dust and sweat streaked faces. There was something challenging about tearing the building apart and pleasure in the common task in which we were involved with other comrades in the work. By the end of the day, one whole room was down to log and so was one side of the exterior.

The next day near dusk, we drove back out. The old house stood just as we had left it, derelict and quiet in what had once been an attractive yard. Old locust trees arched overhead and turtle doves flitted in their limbs. We felt a bit

taken back by the damage a small crew of bar wielders could do in a few hours. As the afternoon shadows deepened, the old building gradually ceased to be an eyesore and became a place where half a dozen or more generations of people had lived and died; had had babies, cooked, worked and laughed; and passed it on to the next inhabitants. The old logs, with their regular broadax hew marks, seemed to have a life, as if their settling into the earth was giving them a life force that kept them strong yet. The crafted corners and careful rock chinking spoke of partisans who had erected the house intent that it would become a home, as indeed it had for many years. It was no longer just a building; it was our building, and we could do with it as we chose. How great to see whether we could return it to the original condition!

We must have had some of these musings in common with others, for as time and energy permitted, the recent gave way to the original and the plain, two-story log house eventually remained. As it took shape, our relationships did also, and shared macaroni salads or pots of coffee on Saturdays brought us acquaintances who deepened into

friends, and idle activities into accomplishments.

Horizons expand as possibilities develop. What started out as a log house and a few acres is now a grouping of structures around a village green. As the old farm has grown into a village, so have the housewreckers of a few years ago grown into craftsmen. From those who scarcely knew a hammer from an ax, the members have spliced logs, mortared and mudded walls, laid up foundations, roofed houses, glazed windows, and built fireplaces. Professional builders? No, indeed; amateurs. Stone masons? no; merely teachers with rough hands. Carpenters? Retirees who have used a saw and pounded nails. Paid bureaucrats to manage and direct? Only volunteer members to meet and take part, typists, bookkeepers and housewives who have put long hours into a project to preserve history. Professional fundraisers? Not one; yet last year alone over \$30,000.00 was raised for restoration.

Amateurs in wood and stone, amateur historians, working with mud on their knees, striving to preserve houses for future generations to see. And amateurs with smiles on their faces. Volunteer and amateur - these are the key words.

Most Americans are concerned about their roots and

interested in tracing them. The boom in antiques, the growth of genealogy, the preoccupation with fads and fashions of the past, have become not only big business but basic values. We seem to need a past from which to stand firm as we wrestle with problems of the future. In a land in which a majority live where they were not born where a third move every four or five years, where the treasures of one's past are often altered or destroyed before he can learn to value them, the security of roots is far more than a catch phrase or real estate slogan.

Yet growing your own roots is as simple as sprouting a plant in a garden in the spring. The opportunity lies dormant until the effort is made.

Alex Haley writes of his personal quest for roots and what significance they are to him. Pioneer Village provides roots for those such as my wife and me, who a short time back, wandered out on a country road to see what was so great about an old log house. The great thing was that it gave us roots into the past and a chance to change the future.

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