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VERMONT HOMES AND GARDENS

A Vermont Poet's Schoolhouse

Jerry Johnson converted a historic schoolhouse into a fine home and finds inspiration in his Northeast Kingdom surroundings.

Most of us can remember days spent sitting in school and writing poetry when we were young, but for Jerry Johnson, writing poetry is still part of his everyday routine! Jerry is a poet in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, and his books are filled with the sense of nature seen outside his window and in the community around him. It is appropriate in a way that his home is one of the state's old schoolhouses

that was once filled with local students, all writing away.

Jerry first encountered the schoolhouse in 1970, when his parents bought the neighboring farm. Jerry asked the seller, "Does that old schoolhouse go with the farm?" When the answer was "no" he replied, "Boy, I'd love to get my hands on that some day!" Thirteen years later, the owner of the schoolhouse was ready to part with it and had remembered Jerry's fondness



During the initial restoration, Jerry removed the old roofing, replaced it with new shingles, and renovated the existing cupola. Inside, and reachable through a wood-framed ceiling hatch (complete with stained-glass depictions of Vermont's birds made by Tim Gustafson Byrne), is a bell. You can open the hatch and ring the bell by pulling ropes on the main floor.



Jerry has a theory that some of the schoolhouse's original craftsmen were French Canadian. When he was taking off the casings around the woodstove to restore them, he noticed that they were marked *allez-gauche* and *allez-droite*. "I was glad that I speak enough French to know which was left and which was right when I went to replace the casings!" said Jerry.

for the historic, deserted building. Before long, Jerry owned the schoolhouse and was drawing up plans to turn it into the home he had been imagining.

When Jerry got to the keys to his new (but old) schoolhouse, it had been boarded up and vacant for more than 30 years. The town didn't have any records on when the school was built, but after asking around, Jerry was able to determine that the first teacher in the school (in the late 1920s) was Dorothy Mae Bovat-King, and that the last teacher was Erdine Gonyaw, who taught there in the 1950s. Jerry's interest in the history of the building was both personal and practical; he wanted to feel a connection to the people and to the schoolhouse's past in order to honor them with the building's preservation.

Right away, Jerry knew that he wanted to adapt the layout of the schoolhouse into that of a comfortable vacation home. At the time, Jerry was a professor at Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts. With degrees in both civil engineering and structural design, he was pretty sure that he could conquer most of the design and construction of the restoration himself. He started the process by creating a series of thorough architectural drawings, focusing on the details of the building's aesthetics and measurements. Jerry used the drawings to place





To speed things up during the restoration process when he could only come to Vermont on weekends and holidays, Jerry took the schoolhouse windows back to Massachusetts on his trips home and repaired and refinished them at his father's workshop.

The pitch of the roof made for some tricky angles in the upstairs sleeping loft. "You couldn't even walk around up there at first," said Jerry. "It was an uninhabitable area." Now it holds bunk beds and the passage to the cupola.

the bedrooms, kitchen, and even the electrical wiring, so that he could envision what the final product of his efforts would be. From those drawings, he set to work. "As I started the restoration, I was able to figure it out," Jerry says. "I was lucky that there weren't many surprises. I focused on one project at a time and that kept me from feeling overwhelmed."

The most stressful project may have been one of the restoration's very first. The schoolhouse desperately needed an upgrade from its dirt floor basement to a new concrete foundation, and the prospect of raising up a fragile old building had Jerry crossing his fingers. "I was a little concerned when we had to jack up the building that the whole thing would collapse before we started!" says Jerry. The schoolhouse was thankfully spared any disaster and Jerry was able to move on to the next project on his list. He updated the building's insulation and

added two woodstoves to make the schoolhouse a comfortable escape year-round. From there, he started meticulously removing and restoring many of the school's existing materials. By reusing pieces, Jerry kept the total cost of the renovation low and also preserved the feel of the original school...even if he didn't always put the pieces back exactly where he found them.

As the rooms started to transform, what had been the girls' toilet turned into the kitchen, and Jerry moved the sign marking the old restroom to a newly added bathroom in the basement. A raised area in the main room was the perfect size for a dining room, and after talking to a farmer who lived down the road, Jerry learned that the raised framework there had been a stage where the students put on plays.

Jerry worked on his schoolhouse—project by project—for



The porch is the newest addition to the schoolhouse, and it has a great example of one of Jerry's clever projects. He made two tables using wine barrels for bases and old wagon wheels, finished with glass for the tabletops.



two-and-a-half years and estimates that he did more than 75 percent of the work himself. He was still teaching at Fitchburg for the duration, so his renovation efforts were confined to weekends and school vacations. To speed things up (and because he was enjoying the work), Jerry brought the original windows back to Massachusetts with him and restored them in his father's workshop. His father, Russell, was a master craftsman who was always willing to lend a hand. He gave Jerry many hours of his advice and handiwork, and his expertise can be found in details all around the finished schoolhouse. Besides his father, Jerry was able to turn to his neighbors for help. He gathered a crew of his friends and local tradesmen alike, and got a real kick out of seeing how well everyone worked together. "Byron Cook, my electrician and a real Vermont character, used to sing in his booming baritone on one side of the house, and I loved how his gospel songs contrasted with the rock music my tennis friends played on the radio while they were outside painting," muses Jerry.

After enjoying his lovingly restored home-away-from-home

The Sun Sets Early

*The sun sets early this time of year
it's all part of the scheme of things.*

*During the summer
the sun drenches our souls
with enduring warmth...
hopefully with enough internal heat
to take us from November to April.*

From *Up the Creek Without a Saddle*
by Jerry Johnson

for many years, Jerry moved to his parents' farm in the Northeast Kingdom full time in the early 2000s. With that move, he decided to make the schoolhouse a little bit bigger. The addition involved turning the existing back porch into an all-season sunroom and adding a new porch on the side of the building. Jerry still envisioned the plans himself, but this time he enlisted the help of Richard Lewis and his son. "When I did the first restoration, I did most of the work on my own," Jerry explains. "When I added on, I worked alongside Richard. Last year, when I wanted a new barn on the property, I found a picture of the one I liked online and just asked him to make it." Jerry's do-it-yourself goals have gotten slightly smaller in scale as the schoolhouse has evolved, but he is still filling his home with his own projects and art.

These days, Jerry lives in the schoolhouse full time with his golden retriever, Toby. He looks to the changing seasons and animals outside his windows for inspiration for his poetry and brilliantly captures the essence of his historic schoolhouse and its surroundings. Jerry has a great outlook on all the work he



The “new barn,” as Jerry calls it, was built this past May. The paintings on the barn are of the special horses Jerry has had in his life and were painted by Roxanne and Heather Brault while they were seniors at North Country High School.

The walls of the schoolhouse were calling out for artwork, and Jerry answered them with works of his own and pieces from many of his friends and Vermont acquaintances. Jerry likes to take antique wooden sap buckets and use them as a base for etching and painting. Like his poetry, his art features many of the animals and scenes of which he is most fond. Besides his own work, Jerry has dedicated a whole corner to the bright landscapes of one of his dear friends, the late Adrien Patenaude. Adrien was a beloved artist in the Newport area, and he collaborated with Jerry to illustrate Jerry’s children’s book, *Noah’s Song*.

has put into his home, his projects, and his books. “If you’ve got a dream and you work hard at things, the right people will come along to help you on your way,” he says. The common notion in the Northeast Kingdom of “doing it yourself” suited Jerry when he first started his restoration project, and he has combined it with the love he has for his community and its natural beauty to make his home and workspace the perfect setting for writing his poems. 🐾

Jordan Werner, originally from Arlington, VT, now lives in Brooklyn, NY and talks about Vermont to anyone who will listen. Carolyn Bates is a professional photographer who lives and works in Burlington, VT. To see more of her work, visit carolynbates.com.



JUST THE FACTS

Jerry Johnson, The Creek Road Poet.

Find out more about Jerry and his books, *Up the Creek Without a Saddle* and *Noah’s Song*, at vtpoet.com.