

at home

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Uninhabitable to Inviting

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cabin gets new life

Makeover Magic

Couple transforms
80s-style house into
21st Century home



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Historic Chico cabin gets new life

BY NANCY KESSLER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANA AABERG



In restoring a 1925 squatter's cabin, owner Sarah Muller ripped out the drop ceiling, gutted the structure, leveled the floor and removed all the old chinking. During the process, she reused all the old materials she could, and learned new skills like chinking. Since completion, she's filled her home with antiques, all of which have a story behind them.

feet main cabin, all built with logs from Emigrant Gulch, and an 8 feet by 11 feet addition.

Working with friend Don Bricker, Muller ripped out the drop ceiling, removed a rotting support beam and basically gutted the entire structure. They then leveled the floor and removed all the old chinking.

"That was the nastiest job," she recalled.

It also led to a new career: Muller hired Alexa Calio, now owner of Refuge Sustainable Building Center, to teach her to chink, and Muller now has her own chinking business.

Muller and Bricker also removed two-thirds of the crossbeams sitting on top of the walls and decked the remaining third to create a loft bedroom. The ladder to the loft and a necessary support beam were made from the cut crossbeams.

"I reused all the materials I could," she said. "The drop ceiling became the walls of the bathroom. An interior wall was made of four old doors, and I used one in the guest cabin. The stubs from the crossbeams

first cabin in 1997.

"It was my dream to live in a log cabin," said Muller, 54. "Ever since I was a kid, I loved Lincoln Logs. And I loved the area. It's close to the hot springs and I can be in the woods in five minutes to ski or hike." It didn't matter that the cabin she bought, built in 1925 and used by squatters for decades, sat on a mining claim, had no running water, septic, well or foundation, and was sinking into the ground.

The Minneapolis native had worked on a ranch across the river for three years, where she helped the manager disassemble several barns and cabins. Thus she felt up to the task of restoring the 22 feet by 24

Gold and Indians —

the search for one and fear of the other led to the first white settlement in Park County, back in 1864 on a bench above the Yellowstone River. Two years later the settlers moved several miles closer to the gold, up to the mouth of Emigrant Gulch, and named their new town Chico.

Few of the buildings erected over the years remain in what is now Old Chico. Most had fallen into such disrepair they were no longer habitable. That was the situation when Sarah Muller found her



the cabin's first plumbing.

"The old timer hauled all his drinking and washing water from 75 feet away," she said. "I didn't want to do that in the middle of winter."

As the workmen dug, Muller sluiced for gold, figuring the cabin was built right at the source. While she didn't strike pay dirt, she "found buckets of stuff, old leather boots, pottery shards, Cavalry uniform buttons, glass bottles, old tins" that now decorate her yard.

Just six months after starting the renovations, Muller moved in. "It was lots of headaches, but well worth it," she said. "I learned a lot. I worked with the people I hired as much as I could."

While there are no interior walls, she created five distinct living spaces: kitchen, living room, office, bedroom and guest quarters in the loft, each filled with period pieces. Many of the antiques came from her family, such as her grandmother's old knitting cabinet used as a nightstand, a trunk she's had since childhood and a library table from her mother.

Even without running water, the cabin had an old wood-surround sink which now functions in the



kitchen. Muller found a pair of old wooden skis in the shed which now grace the living room wall. She bought light fixtures at an auction at Chico Hot Springs when the resort refurbished its dining room. And the front door still locks with its original skeleton key.

One of her prize possessions is a table from the Old Faithful Inn. "It came out of Bat's Alley, where the bellmen used to live, and it has a special place in my heart, because that's where I first worked in the park in 1982," she said. "Everything here has a story."

Another gem is a desk that came out of a Hamilton store that she bought at an auction for \$25. A collector and

wearer of vintage clothing, Muller has much of her prize wardrobe on display, including handmade silk dresses, old-fashioned shoes and a leather jacket with hand-tooled bears, adding she developed an affinity for bruins after being mauled by a grizzly in 1982.

Antique lamps, blankets, dishes, easy chairs, a fainting couch, soapstone boot warmers and more round out the furnishings. Old wicker seating and

were turned into shelves running the length of the cabin up to the loft."

At 6 feet tall, Muller kept hitting her head on the old "funky" screened porch, so she and Bricker tore the whole structure off and rebuilt it with a raised section at the front door, using as much of the old wood as possible.

Installing new windows was a "nightmare job," as none of the walls were straight, but after they were fitted and skylights were added, the two put a new roof over the existing roof, adding a lot of insulation in between and leaving the purlins across the original ceiling exposed.

The "old, gross linoleum and carpet" and a propane heater were ditched, and a new floor of yellow pine was laid, with a granite inset under the antique Majestic wood cookstove in the center of the cabin.

"I found that in the Chronicle," Muller laughed. "It came out of an old farmhouse on South 19th." It is her only cooking appliance, and now her main heat source, although she has a small gas heat stove as well.

The addition, which now holds a full bath, storage and washer/dryer, was sitting on rotten boards, so the pair jacked it up and put in a foundation. At the same time, Muller hired workmen to dig a well, put in a septic system, new wiring and



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an antique seed cleaner grace the front porch. She discovered many of her finds at auctions, thrift stores, garage sales, junk stores and even at dump sites. Some were gifts, such as a coyote pelt, and she traded an old car for her antique dresser.

"I like to barter and trade," Muller said. "Even when I buy something new, I look for an old motif."

Muller maintained the cabin's historic integrity, but lives in the modern age. An antique Spanish black dial telephone hides a wireless router, and her filing cabinet appears to be three stacked trunks.

Once settled, Muller began landscaping, planting lots of aspen and red and yellow dogwood trees, filling old pails and bowls with flowers and herbs, and inviting friends and family to stay. She soon realized her one-room cabin didn't afford much privacy when visitors came, but not long after learned of another old homestead cabin for sale outside of Helena near the Continental Divide.

The 15 feet by 25 feet miner's cabin with a dirt floor was built in 1895 of hand-hewn squared logs. "I fell in love with the logs' green patina," she said. "It had compound dovetail notch ends, one of the trickiest, hardest, most complicated notches you can put in. There were no nails or spikes holding it together. The joy of living in a dry climate is that these old log cabins last forever."

Muller disassembled the cabin and hauled it to her property, where the logs sat until 2002, when she could afford to reconstruct it. She restacked and chinked the logs, put in new windows and skylights and redesigned the interior, which she called "a lesson in small spaces."

The entire loft had been walled in, with entry from an exterior stairway and door that was converted to a large window. She removed half the loft, reusing the wood to make a railing and ladder with old draft horse shoes for handles.

To insulate the roof, Muller added a ceiling of old barn wood. "It was a nightmare to work with, because every board was a different width and thickness," she recalled. She also used recycled barn wood for the floor, adding, "I'll never do that again, because the old nail holes look like dead flies to me."

The doors sporting antique hardware from Chico Hot Springs and kitchen cabinets with elk antlers knobs also are made of barn wood. She is pleased there is no sheetrock at all, even in the full bath or kitchen. Dubbed the Homestead Cabin, it took two years to complete, and it too is filled with family- or



A cozy front porch sits next to a sheepherder's wagon, which Muller offers to family and renters as guest accommodations. Although Muller loves her old cabin, she didn't give a second thought to installing wiring for electricity and plumbing for creature comforts like a hot bath.

friend-provided and found antique furnishings.

"I get all my restoration ideas from restoring buildings on the ranch where I work," she said.

When not filled with her personal guests, the cabin is for rent. Visitors enjoy the large two-level deck Muller added, or can walk past the restacked and now functioning original outhouse to a large fire



pit. Still, Muller found she didn't have enough sleeping space for company, and so is now in the process of reassembling yet another cabin called the Bunkhouse.

"It came from the Flathead Pass in Gallatin Valley," she said. "It was given to me, but only if I

promised it would be restacked."

The low 14 feet by 16 feet structure originally had a sod roof, so Muller added two courses of logs, new windows, heat and a storage loft topped by sheetrock to make it brighter, and eventually will have it wired for electricity.

Not content with just three historic cabins, in 2010 Muller bought a sheep wagon in Lewistown dating back to the late 1800s, and had it restored by Jerry Bluecher. It now provides fully functioning room for another guest, at the edge of her front yard. "I am so obsessed with the history of Montana," she confessed. And, she just finished restoring a nearby 1965 airstream trailer, which she takes on the road whenever she has time.

"I took a huge risk sinking so much money into the original cabin without owning the property it sits on," she admitted. "But I always felt I was doing the right thing deep down in my heart."

Fortunately, Muller was able to buy the mining claim land in 2007. Gazing up to Fridley Peak from her front porch, she said, "It was a risk that paid off. I have a really sweet spot." 📍

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