

LIVING

GROUNDED IN THE PAST



BY MELANIE WHITE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY W. GARTH DOWLING



During the peak of its “nature-only” policy days, the National Park Service mandated that the Burt Cabin be moved from its original location on the Three Rivers Ranch near Moran. Fortunately, the structure eventually fell into the hands of a pair of owners who appreciate and honor its rich past.

History, like any living thing, flourishes only if nurtured.

Jayne Ottman and Becky Hawkins both work in health care, tending to the needs of others with a women’s clinic and a physical therapy/acupuncture practice, respectively.

But with their purchase and restoration of a historic Jackson Hole cabin, they have resurrected a piece of the past that otherwise might have returned to dust, like so many stories buried with Jackson settlers.

Ottman, fifty-five, and Hawkins, fifty-two, in 2001 bought a cabin that had been forced to forfeit its original place of being in Grand Teton National Park more than two decades earlier, at a time when the park management was seeking to restore lands to a more “natural” state.

The two women, who previously lived in a “noisy” spot beside the Teton Village Road, had hoped to find a new home of historic relevance and greater solitude. When Ottman noticed a classified ad for a cabin in the newspaper, she sensed it was just

what they were looking for.

“I was on it, man,” Ottman said. She made an appointment to see the cabin that same evening.

“We knew right away it was something we wanted,” Hawkins added.

When the Burt family’s fifty-year lease on its ranch lands expired in 1979, the family donated its main lodge—the Burt Cabin—to the Grand Teton Music Festival. Struthers Burt, author of books like *Diary of a Dude Wrangler* and founder of some of the valley’s earliest dude ranches, built the cabin in 1930 on his Three Rivers Ranch near Moran.

In 1979, the cabin was moved to its new and present location off Teton Village Road. During the ensuing years, as it was rented out to visiting musicians during the summer and ski bums in winter, the cabin fell into disrepair. Most of its short-term residents were unaware of its significance: of the influential dude-ranching and literary family that had built it, of the shifting politics that had displaced it, and of the unique architectural elements disrupted by deterioration and disguised by



This Dutch door, with its four-paned window and split-lodgepole logs, was originally an exterior door of the cabin. Today, it opens onto the laundry room.

new construction.

Ottman and Hawkins, however, perceived the history behind the disintegrated chinking and decaying floorboards.

“Our vision was to preserve the natural historical beauty of the cabin,” Ottman said. “We wanted to preserve as much as possible, but upgrade it and modernize it.”

Toward those ends, the pair enlisted the aid of John McIntosh, owner of Snake River Builders, a company based in Victor, Idaho. Given Hawkins’ woodworking abilities and Ottman’s predilection for painting and design, the cabin’s new owners worked actively with McIntosh on the renovation. As a team, the three set out on a six-month restoration project in May 2002.

“Only when we started digging into it we realized, ‘Oh my God, what have we gotten into?’” Hawkins said. The deterioration was not simply cosmetic; plumbing and wiring needed to be replaced. Surprise elements such as a truss in what is now the cabin’s welcoming, airy kitchen emerged from behind flimsy walls. Ottman and Hawkins spent five weeks scrubbing the cabin’s darkened logs, bestowing a lightness that now reveals the rich character of aged wood. Small details suggested another era: for instance, they discovered the message “July 30 Coffee” etched into a log in the original kitchen area. The note could have been a reminder that visitors, possibly dudes from back East, were expected to arrive on that day of an unrecorded year.

McIntosh, like the cabin’s owners, derives a great deal of satisfaction from uncovering such hints of the past. Although the Burt Cabin remodel was the last such historical project undertaken by his business, it ranks among his most fulfilling experiences as a carpenter and “dreamer artisan,” as Ottman calls him.

“He had the vision with us,” she said, “and he was willing to roll with that.”

When McIntosh embarked on the job, he held weekly meetings with his clients to map out decisions for the days ahead. Ottman and Hawkins would describe their intentions for the cabin’s restoration, and McIntosh then worked out the technical approach.

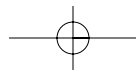
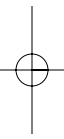
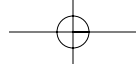
The two “were willing to take some risks,” McIntosh recalled. “They had a tight budget, but that was also satisfying, to make it happen without it costing an arm and a leg. So that was all very satisfying to bring to fruition.

“It is of value, as the valley grows and changes, to still have some old things,” he added.

Shortly after purchasing the cabin, Ottman wrote to Nathaniel Burt, son of Struthers Burt, to inquire about its history. (She had actually been to the Three Rivers Ranch during the early 1970s as a visiting home-health nurse, tending to a woman who had just given birth.) In her endeavor to renovate the cabin in as faithful a fashion as possible—to restore it to some of its authentic early life—Ottman sought to imagine life in the cabin in its heyday.

“It is a beauty of a lodge but in need of some tender loving care,” she wrote in a letter to Burt dated December 6, 2001. “I would like to know more about the cabin, what it looked like





when you lived at the ranch, who might have visited, and generally anything you might be able to share with me. The history of the Three Rivers Ranch is very exciting and we want to preserve as much of it as we can. ... We could sure use your help with the history of this place and what you remember best so we can preserve this fine thread of history in the valley.”

In *A Place Called Jackson Hole*, published in 1999 by the Grand Teton Natural History Association, William Goetzmann laments the loss of some of the valley's historic structures and settlements, including ones established by the Burts.

“The National Park Service's ‘nature only’ policy has largely effaced Jackson Hole's historic dimension,” he wrote. “Famous dude ranches, as well as the barns and cabins used in filmmaking, are being left to moulder away.” He goes on to recount how Struthers Burt sold the Bar BC and Nathaniel Burt sold the Three Rivers Ranch to the Rockefeller Snake River Land Company, and that the Three Rivers was absorbed into Grand Teton National Park.

“Both Burts, strong advocates of the Rockefeller expansion of the park, felt it was their patriotic duty,” Goetzmann wrote. “As they and others lived on at the Three Rivers Ranch as lessees under the terms of sale, neither father nor son envisioned the destruction of the ranches. They believed them to be historic sites, not only because famous people like the publisher Alfred Knopf, who served on the National Park Service Advisory Board, had stayed there, but also because of the distinctive vernacular architecture of the ranch buildings.”

It was in June of 1908 when Struthers Burt traveled by train from the Washington state ranch where he was working to St. Anthony, Idaho—at the time the nearest railway station to Jackson Hole. From there, he struggled along muddy roads en route to Jackson, finally cresting the summit of Teton Pass after a three-day journey. In a 1948 letter to the *Jackson's Hole Courier*, he recalled his first glimpse of the land where he would settle:

“The white-top came to the summit of Teton Pass, up through the forests of the Targhee, and suddenly I looked down on one of the most hair-raising views in the entire world ... A view like Niagara, only forests and mountains and valley instead of water. I took one look, and I've been here ever since.”

Working with a partner and \$5,000 of borrowed money, Burt ultimately homesteaded and developed five ranches in the valley, including the Bar BC. He founded Jackson Hole's first dude ranch, known as the JY Ranch, part of which became the Circle H. In 1929, he purchased two homesteads along the

south side of Pacific Creek, and the Three Rivers Ranch was born, its name alluding to the nearby waterways: the Snake River, the Buffalo Fork, and Pacific Creek. It was here the Burt Cabin was built to serve as the main lodge—a communal gathering place, with a dining room and kitchen for the Burts and their visitors. Other, smaller cabins built around the main lodge provided sleeping quarters.

Had the Burt Cabin remained in its original location, Ottman believes it would have qualified for the National Register of Historic Places. An application prepared in hopes of garnering such acknowledgement describes the cabin's architectural and historical significance. It proved “typical of the rustic cabins which were constructed on western dude ranches of the 1920s and 30s,” the document states. It was built with native

softwoods, rising a single story in height. Its exterior walls were unpainted and the bark-stripped logs laid either with overlapping saddlenotch corner joints or with corner poles into which logs were butted and spiked. Interior walls were varnished, and the floors constructed of varnished pine boards.

The National Register nomination identified two main reasons for the cabin's historical significance: its architecture and its literary heritage.

“Architecturally it represents the culmination and climax of a purely native tradi-

tion of Wyoming log architecture, built by native hands of native materials according to native plans and traditions for native citizens,” the application asserted.

On the literary side, Struthers and his wife, Katharine Newlin Burt, were both notable Western writers of their time. Katharine Burt's novel *The Branding Iron* became a national bestseller, while Struthers Burt won the O. Henry Memorial Prize for his short story, “Each in His Generation.” With the addition of works by their son, Nathaniel, the family members published approximately sixty books to become “unquestionably the first family of Wyoming letters. ... There is certainly no other family of [Wyoming] citizens that can show such a continuous record of national publication, prestige and popularity,” according to the National Register nomination.

To honor the cabin's literary associations, Ottman and Hawkins have assembled a shrine of sorts, an antique table bearing several Burt tomes beneath a hand-painted map from the 1930s depicting the original boundaries of Grand Teton National Park. At the time, the Three Rivers Ranch lay northeast of the park boundary, where the park's Moran entrance is found today.

On the table, bookends prop up Struthers Burt's 1929 *Diary*



This handmade map from the 1930s hangs in a protective frame above a table holding books by Burt family members.

of a Dude Wrangler—perhaps his best-known work—beside his son Nathaniel's Jackson Hole Journal, written in 1983. The latter contains pictures of the cabin from the days when it formed the hub of the Three Rivers Ranch and incorporated a stone chimney that no longer exists.

Margery Burt Smith, Struthers' granddaughter, inscribed the book for Ottman and Hawkins. She and her brother, Chris, neither of whom live in Jackson Hole today, are the last two surviving members of the family. Along with their mother, they visited the restored cabin and its new owners in 2004.

"Thank you for preserving such wonderful memories and bringing fresh life and love to something we have all cherished so much," Margery wrote. Chris Burt and the siblings' mother, Margaret "Winkie" Burt, added their own grateful comments.

"I am so happy that you are bringing new life to this old cabin I loved so much," Margaret wrote in a shaky hand.

"It was an honor to have that old grandma here," Ottman said affectionately, reminiscing about the stories the traveling party told around a campfire in the back yard, an acre of grassy land. "It's very sad, all these cabins that are dispersed now, and the families that grew up in them don't have them," she said.

When they first moved into the cabin, Ottman and Hawkins learned that they might not be the only ones occupying the place. Ottman recalls hearing noises while cleaning, and both she and Hawkins remember occasions when they heard someone say something, but neither of them had spoken.

"We were told there were friendly ghosts here," Ottman said. "It always sounded like low dining-room talk, but always friendly. But we haven't heard it for a few years."

Perhaps once the pair altered the layout and purpose of the cabin's rooms, its former occupants, or visitors, no longer recognized the place where they had passed happy times.

The new owners transformed the original dining room into a living room, the original living room into a kitchen, and the original kitchen and cook's quarters into a bedroom wing. They flipped the function of the cabin's wings for a more light-filled kitchen, which they thought made better sense. When the Grand Teton Music Festival owned the cabin, three small bedrooms and bathrooms had crammed the southeast end; after Ottman and Hawkins ripped out the walls dividing these, a striking, triangle-shaped truss supporting the roof was revealed.

Lines run down the walls in some places like old scars, indicating where the cabin was sliced into three sections to be transported out of the park. Many of the cabin's doors are original, although most have been moved around. The front door now swings open where the fireplace once stood.

Despite the structural changes and the National Park Service policy that carried the cabin away from the site of its dude-ranching days, Margaret Burt wrote to Ottman and Hawkins that her old family home "seems to be thriving in its new location."

"I want to stress what a wonderful job you've done," she wrote.

At this point, the owners are content to agree.

"I would hope we stay here forever," Ottman said. "It is an incredible place." ■



Map showing the original location of the Three Rivers Ranch in Jackson Hole.



Becky Hawkins (left) and Jayne Ottman (right), with their "dreamer artisan," John McIntosh. "They were willing to take some risks," McIntosh says of the present occupants of the Burt Cabin.