

BIG SKY JOURNAL

# HOME

MOUNTAIN LIVING + ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN



A Rustic Retreat in Polaris, Montana

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEREMY THURSTON

# TRADITION

## *Transformed*

WRITTEN BY CHRISTINE PHILLIPS

**ARCHITECTURE**

Jeff Crouch

**CONSTRUCTION**

Yellowstone Custom  
Country Homes

**ADDITION ARCHITECTURE**

Plan West Design Firm

**LANDSCAPE DESIGN**

Big Country Landscapes

WHEN ASKED TO TALK ABOUT her family's summer home, Ellen Foster doesn't hesitate. "I'd be happy to," she said. "It's my favorite topic!"

And understandably so. Located in Polaris, Montana, the rustic mountain escape is a beautiful, thoughtfully-designed home that has evolved during the course of 15 years to harmonize with the couple's all-embracing, time-honored approach to summer.

"There is no better place to be than Montana during the summer. It doesn't get any more perfect than that," said Foster.



TRADITION  
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ABOVE: The large great room is a well-balanced blend of dovetail logs, fieldstone, and reclaimed materials. BELOW: Large wood timbers impart the rustic feel of an old-time cabin.

Her love for the home is infectious. The house is a blend of simple, honest materials that are in step with its surroundings — dovetail logs for the main structure, fieldstone fireplaces, plus reclaimed materials incorporated into the trim, furniture, flooring, siding, and ceilings.

Outbuildings are a vital part of the property's gestalt. Below the house is a functioning barn that is home to seven horses. On the same plot as the house is a "combination barn" that serves as a two-car garage, boat shed, and guest quarters.



Foster and her husband, Tim, divide their time between Polaris and Sarasota, Florida. These East Coast natives discovered their love for the West in 1983 when vacationing with friends at a dude ranch in Wyoming. "There was something about the lifestyle that just felt really *us*," she said. "So year after year, we returned — dude ranching, hiking, and fishing. In 2000, my husband decided it was time for us to find

land on which to build our future. We found this spot in Polaris — and what a perfect little piece of heaven it is."

When the couple first decided to build on the property, they envisioned the place to be a summer escape, an antithesis to their bustling East Coast lives. "Our vision has always been early homestead," Foster said. "We don't want it to look too modern. Obviously, we value good beds and good bathrooms, but we wanted to

bury them in a rustic authenticity."

Working with Jeff Crouch, then senior partner and architect at Kibo Group Architecture, they broke ground in 2001, building what they thought would be a guest house. Little did they know that

ABOVE: A "combination barn" serves as a garage, shed, and guest quarters. BELOW: A formal dining room made for a smart addition to the main structure.



# TRADITION *transformed*

modest 1,900-square-foot log cabin with a master bedroom, a few bunk beds, and an unfinished basement would become the foundation for what is now a 4,500-square-foot home that exemplifies their indoor-outdoor living philosophy.

“We started out with a different dream,” Foster said. “Initially the plan was to live in the guest house for a few years until we had a little more time to build the main house. And then we met Howard.”

Howard Mills and his son Wesley, of Yellowstone Custom Country Homes, are master builders recognized for superior craftsmanship and for creating unique spaces that take cues from nature. For 15 years, they have worked with the Fosters, step-by-step, helping them bring their vision to light.

“Every home we build is customized to the distinct needs, design preferences, and desires of the owners — and families — we work for,” said Howard. “The Foster home is unique not only in its design, but also the process. We’ve enjoyed supplying the craftsmanship it requires and helping them make a lifelong dream a reality.”

Foster explained, “We just couldn’t stop ourselves from making selections such as hand-hewn logs and stone — doing everything that comes with working with Howard and Wesley. As a result, the guest house ended up being a bigger undertaking than we initially planned. But even more importantly, we loved it — so much so that we didn’t want to build another house. It was so cozy and comfortable, we didn’t want to leave.”

What followed was a series of expansions to tweak the original model and better accommodate the family’s long-term needs.

“Tim and Ellen both come from large, extended families,” said Wesley. “And they love company. Given the rural nature of the area, they wanted to be able to feed, house, and entertain everyone comfortably.”

First, they needed more bedrooms — and a place for horses. So the team finished the basement and built a horse barn. They also constructed boat storage and a game room above the garage.

Next, partnering with Plan West Design Firm, the team added a new wing to the back of the house, making room for a formal dining room and breakfast nook, as well as a gym and wine cellar downstairs.



LEFT: A recent remodel to the guest quarters included updating the guest suite’s kitchenette.

With the help of Erik Aasheim of Big Country Landscapes, they redesigned the backyard, and reimagined the outdoor living area, adding a log pergola, a stone patio, and a fire pit.

“One of our goals was to create additional space without changing the character or the proportion of the existing cabin,” said Jason West of Plan West Design Firm. “In keeping with this approach, adding the log pergola to the patio area created a dramatic effect with the way light plays through the logs as the sun moves across the sky from season to season.”

“My favorite place to be is sitting on that back patio,” said Foster. “You can look out at the mountains, see the horses, and enjoy the landscape; it’s really a spot where you can take in the place. We eat dinner out there almost every night.”

When the couple realized the game room wasn’t being fully utilized, they repurposed the space to serve as a guest suite. Most recently, they updated the suite’s kitchen and added a bathroom, complete with reclaimed oak, hand-hewn counters and cabinetry, a custom walk-in



ABOVE: When the couple realized the game room wasn’t being fully utilized, they worked with Yellowstone Custom Country Homes to repurpose the space as a guest suite. BELOW LEFT: The bathroom features a walk-in shower and reclaimed, hand-hewn counters.

shower, and a copper sink.

“Howard and Wesley do it all,” she explained. “For us, it just works with them. Not only did they build a beautiful home, they’ve also built some of its furnishings. We’ve been simpatico the whole way.”

“It usually starts with Ellen sharing an idea that she has, and then we explore what it would take to make it work,” said Wesley. “Given the nature of building, we become very involved in the lives of our clients. From that, a relationship evolves. Quite often — such as in the case of Ellen and Tim — it’s a stepping point for a friendship.”

When asked what will be next, Foster laughed. While the couple doesn’t have immediate plans, she said as long as they have Howard and Wesley to help, anything can happen.

“When you love something so much — or [are] that proud of something — you can get kind of fixated on it,” she said. “This house is truly the love of our life. We come out here and the rest of the world kind of goes away. Making it more and more that kind of haven has become our pastime.

“The important lesson we learned from build-



A shaded porch on the main entrance of the house leads to the great room.

ing and expanding this house is that, rather than build the biggest house you can afford, build the house you need,” she concluded. “Optimize the use of every single space and leave as much green space as possible. That way you aren’t invested in things you never use, you can maintain a better connection to your environment, and, as your needs change over the years, you can thoughtfully add exactly those elements that will continue to expand your enjoyment of your home.”