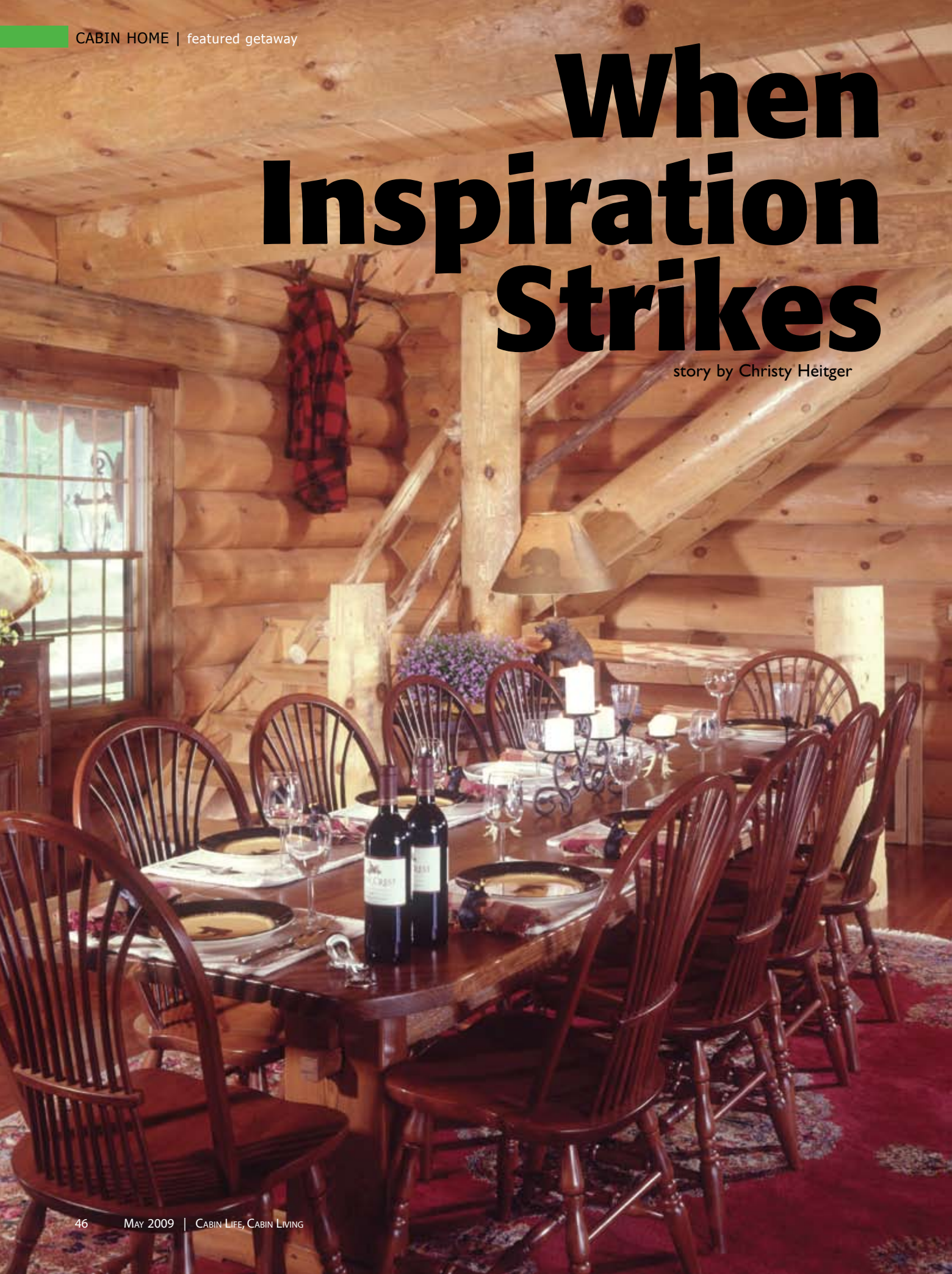


When Inspiration Strikes

story by Christy Heitger



How one man's dream became his family's happy reality

Facing: When does a cabin need a large dining table? When your weekend crowds can grow to 24.

Below: Jim and Mary Joan Cleary's pastimes include trout fishing on a lake on their property.

Bottom: The Clearys' front porch serves as a "welcome spot" for greeting guests.

Photos courtesy Estemerwalt Log Homes.



Jim and Mary Joan Cleary had always been warm-weather folks who spent vacations soaking up the Caribbean sun. Then one day, poof – inspiration struck!

"My husband turned to me and said, 'You know, I've always wanted to build a log cabin,'" recalls Mary Joan. And that was that. Next thing you know, the couple was scoping out property near their Pennsylvania home. Soon thereafter, they were the proud owners of 424 acres of undeveloped land 60 miles north of the Poconos in the Endless Mountains.

When they bought the place, there were no roads, no bridges, no electricity ... nothing.

"We had a vision," says Mary Joan. "We could see what a great spot this would be for a cabin."

They longed for an authentic, rustic, "log cabin" feel, complete with giant, round beams that stretched across the room.

A Vision Realized

Fortunately, the couple found Estemerwalt Log Homes, the only lumber company in the area that manufactures big, thick, 12-inch round eastern white pine logs.

"The Clearys wanted a very timbered looking cabin," says Kurt Propst, president of Estemerwalt. "The outside walls are all log. And the roof system has large, round, rough hewn timbers that fit well in the house."

The Clearys designed the great room so that a ton of natural light could pour into the main level of their cabin. They did this by installing two sections of floor-to-ceiling windows in the great room (one set of three windows behind the bar and another set on the opposite side of the double doors leading out to the front porch).

The couple also envisioned a wide open floor plan on the main level to encourage room-to-room interaction. "If the grandchildren are dancing in the great room, we can join in the fun," explains Mary Joan. "And if the fireplace needs tending, we can see it from the kitchen."

The Cleary's wide-open floor plan even extends to the outside. Their back porch, made of native blue flagstone, runs the full length of the home and offers a dynamite view of a 60-acre lake and Sugar Loaf Mountain. The front porch, made of the same material, acts as the "welcome spot" for greeting folks when they arrive.

"Jim and Mary Joan found a great piece of land and then used the physical attributes of the land to design a fantastic home," says Kurt.

The "Big Gang Theory"

The idea behind the "Big Gang Theory" is that if you build (or buy) a cabin, you can expect to host a good number of family and friends through the years. And that's sort of the point – the cabin is the best place to congregate with loved ones. ➡





Above: Although it's a Pennsylvania cabin, it has a definite ranch look.

Below: The fireplace warms the Clearys and their guests day and night from October until March.



When the Clearys were designing their floor plan, they definitely thought ahead. With three grown daughters, three sons-in-law, and eight grandchildren, they anticipated a crowd. So they made sure to provide space for everyone. And a good thing, too: Over the Christmas holiday, up to 24 people have bunked there at once!

The main floor is made up of the great room with a big fireplace, kitchen with stainless steel range, powder room, and master bedroom suite decorated in earthy brown suede and dark plaid rugs. The upstairs includes four bedrooms, a baby's room and a large bath.

The basement, affectionately termed the "grandkids' retreat," offers a play area complete with pool table, ping-pong, dartboards, board games and toys galore. After a hard day of play, indoors and out, kids of all ages can crash in one of three basement bedrooms: the black bear bedroom with bunk beds, the pink fairy princess bedroom or the gender-neutral animal print bedroom.

A Family That Plays Together

When the family's rottweilers, Samson and Delilah, arrive at the cabin, they likely feel as if they've checked into doggie heaven. Not only do they get to romp around the trails, frolic in the lake and sniff the fresh mountain air – when it's cold or damp outside, they have the luxury of sleeping and dining in the heated mudroom off the kitchen.

The family has created and maintained miles of trails for hiking, walking and riding. A favorite activity is watching for deer, turkey, songbirds, geese and coyote while riding ATVs to the top of the mountain. During one memorable ride, Mary Joan spotted three black bear cubs scooting down a tree.

"We were mesmerized!" recalls Mary Joan, who was snapped back to reality when suddenly she and Jim heard a rustling sound coming from behind the tree. "Jim asked me, 'Where's the mom?' and boom – like that, we took off!"

A Year-round Haven

Jim and Mary typically spend 10-day chunks of time at their retreat all throughout the year. The whole clan gathers at the cabin for both the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. With an average of a foot of snow on the ground in the winter, the kids and grandkids spend most January and February weekends either tromping around the trails in snow shoes or zipping down the slopes on skis.

The family also enjoys bundling up on brisk days to ice fish for pickerel and perch and then racing inside to warm up by the fire, which, according to Mary Joan, "is burning pretty much all day and all night from October until March!"

In late spring, the Clearys snuff the fire and launch the fishing boat so that they can watch the trees come to life while trout fishing on the tranquil lake.

Once summer hits, out come the kayaks, canoes and the kids'

favorite – a giant lake trampoline, which holds eight people.

“We picnic on the trampoline and then jump off and swim,” says Mary Joan.

Most summer nights the family can be found by the bonfire pit Jim built. They often break out the guitar and ingredients for s'mores and spend their evenings eating, singing and laughing by the fire's warm flicker.

Then comes the couple's favorite cabin season: fall. Jim enjoys hunting, hiking and working outdoors while Mary Joan soaks in views of the fall foliage.

“The way the light hits the colors of the red maple and cherry trees and reflects onto the lake – it's like a spectacular light show with color bursting from every angle!” exclaims Mary Joan, who also enjoys watching the beaver and otter play in the lake as the geese and ducks practice their landings.

Even the annual “wood-chopping weekend” is fun when the entire family participates. Some chop, haul and stack wood, while others do minor house repairs and cook up a storm. “The girls and I make big vats of homemade chili, soups and stews,” says Mary Joan. “We eat some but freeze most of it so that we'll have ready-made, cold-weather meals when we come up in the winter.”

Life is a Game

There are, of course, those activities that take place no matter the season – things like playing card games, board games and charades; dancing in the great room; rocking on the porch; eating good food; drinking fine wine; telling silly jokes; and sharing great stories.

By far the family's favorite story is the one about Jim's cabin-building epiphany. Clearly, it's a revelation that has benefited the entire family. ~

Frequent contributor Christy Heitger believes that anyone who has a desire to build or buy a cabin should act on that feeling; it's fate talking.



Above: With a wide-open floor plan, the Clearys and their guests are never sealed off from each other, whether they're cooking a meal in the kitchen, cozying up to the bar-with-a-view or warming up by the fireplace in the great room.

Below: The cherry wood for the kitchen floor actually came from the Clearys' property. The builder, Estemerwalt Log Homes, cut, dried and surfaced the wood for this purpose.

