

House of Trees
By Brendan Leonard
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I don't read magazines like *Home & Design* or *Dwell* -- I entered my early 30s living in a tiny apartment, in fear of home ownership, believing that if I bought a house and the water heater went out, I'd have to cancel a climbing trip, and that would be the beginning of the end, the start of a downhill slide ending with me sitting atop a riding lawnmower, covering up middle-aged man-boobs with a polo shirt and worrying about crabgrass.

One day, I was standing with my friend Mick looking down on the great room of his log home, which sits at the foot of a mesa near Larkspur, Colo., and Mick said, "It's funny, it took eight seconds for us to walk from the basement to the top floor, but it took me eight years to build this." He's an arborist by trade, with the beard, skin and wardrobe of a lumberjack, but the build of a runner – which he was. Years ago, he ran a 4:21 mile. Now he's 52, and the house is pretty much finished, and has been that way since 2002. He never had a mortgage to pay off, but it takes a long time to build your own house, especially when you decide that you want to build your house out of logs. Takes even longer when you don't know what the hell you're doing.

There are 120 or so logs, give or take a few, making up the walls of the house on Yucca Lane, each hand-peeled by Mick, pulling a two-handled draw knife toward himself, like rowing a boat, pulling bark off the trunk of each one, and repeating. He cut most of them down, too, and trimmed all the limbs off with a chainsaw. He slept on a mattress in the basement for four years while he built the house above, the first floor as his roof.

It's more than Jeremiah Johnson's low-ceilinged mountain-man cabin stack of logs – you walk around with Mick for a little bit and you hear dozens of stories. His sister-in-law made all the stained-glass windows, his friend Steve helped him set many of the logs in place, so-and-so helped with this, so-and-so made that. Mick went from his mid-30s to his mid-40s while this home was slowly going up, and his son grew from a 5-year-old to a teenager. Mick's dad died of

cancer. His friend Rich was shot in the back and died, leaving two children and a wife. Mick fell off the house and had the good luck to only break two body parts. He got married in the meadow in front of the house to the love of his life with his son as best man.

The house is all trees – logs for the walls, a thick Ponderosa pine trunk for the center post, the kitchen table a sawed-in-half three-foot-diameter tree. The majority of the trees came from building lots in the south Denver suburbs, where the McMansions that make up the Castle Pines subdivision would be built – the complete opposite of Mick's home, in a forest at the end of a dirt driveway, which is also a parking lot for Bobcats, snowplow blades and Mick and Susan's twin pickup trucks. Out here, your housepets might get eaten by coyotes, and the occasional bear might knock over your trash cans. The walls of the house were borne from the slashing of a forest to make room for a gated community full of BMW SUVs and 3-car garages, and Mick is aware of the irony. The tree-killing business can be a sad, weird place for a Michigan tree-lover to end up, but everybody's gotta eat. Plus, he got into the business intending to do something called “tree care,” not chopping down stands of pines for the next house while the lady next door yelled at him to not cut too many of them down.

Mick said to the lady, “You should have seen how many we cut down so they could build your house.”

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Mick's brother gave him a set of stapled papers about building a log home, and it said two important things:

1. If you think you want to build a log house, first find a 50-foot log and peel it.
2. You have to be willing to work hard and have a good sense of humor.

To accomplish both those points, Mick got himself three 20-foot logs in fall 1994 and spent the better part of two days peeling them with the bevel on his draw knife pointing the wrong way. Then he found an illustration in a book showing the knife with the bevel side facing

down, and voila, "Wow, that's a lot easier." With the knife facing the right way, he could peel a 20-foot log in two hours instead of four.

Prior to the fall of 1994, Mick had neither peeled a log nor done any type of home construction. He had, however, done things like leave his associate photography program at Lansing Community College with one class remaining, and gone on a four-month bicycle tour through eight states to try to forget a girl. So what the hell, why not try to build a house out of logs?

I have repeatedly prodded Mick to write about building his house, as it was one of the events that has defined his life. He tries, but not very hard. I think this is because he believes the house is no big deal, and he talks about building it as if you, too, could do it. And you might believe Mick, because he doesn't project himself as anything extraordinary – kind of a cross between the Brawny paper towel man and Steve Prefontaine, and he seems more proud of his most recent wildflower photo than he is of the house he built with his own two hands in the middle of a country where no one builds their own house anymore, even though most men abstractly like the idea of doing it. Hey, you want another beer? You wouldn't believe the deal Susan got on this couch.

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Mick collected and peeled logs. This was 1994, and he was four years divorced after five years of marriage, and his son Dan was five years old, growing up in nearby Kiowa and visiting Dad on the weekends.

The five acres where the house would sit was near the Palmer Divide, about five miles southeast of Larkspur. Mick had paid \$35,000 for the land. He moved onto the property in a 24-foot camper trailer, showering at friends' houses or at the Castle Rock recreation center. He worked, moving lawns and doing tree work, and when he wasn't doing that, he was chainsawing limbs off tree trunks and peeling bark off them.

A good log is relatively straight, has a straight grain, and has minimal taper – it's hopefully very near the same diameter at both ends. He collected logs a few at a time, got help to load them on his trailer, and pulled the whole mess south down Interstate 25 with his underpowered truck belching black diesel smoke and stacking up commuters behind him at a top speed of 45 miles per hour.

He had a foundation poured, a walk-out basement, and he built a subfloor over the basement. He stretched a pond liner over the subfloor and moved from his travel trailer into the basement. He heated it with a woodburning stove, and he peeled logs. Once he got 80 logs peeled, he started to set them with the help of his friend Steve. Mick estimated the whole thing would take them four months. It took them four years.

“One thing I realized, after I had peeled a whole shitload of logs and started setting them up,” he said, “is that I hadn't even begun.”

To set logs, you put two of them down parallel to each other, the width of the room you're building. You notch them near both ends, kind of like the Lincoln Logs you may have played with as a kid, but your notches are round, not square like Lincoln Logs. You notch two more logs and you roll them on top of the first two, forming a big square the size of the room you want to build. This is called a course. Mick and Steve built the first four courses together, bolting the first course to the subfloor and drilling holes in the second course where the electrical lines would eventually go.

The logs in a house don't just sit on top of each other – you cope a notch, carving a somewhat U-shaped groove on the bottom of a log so it sits on top of the log running parallel beneath it. It takes four different tools – a chainsaw, a gouge adze, a draw gouge, and a rotary sander.

Coping is also a useful skill when people you love start dying. One day, Mick's sister-in-law called to tell him that Rich, his friend of 20 years, had been killed. Rich, his wife and her best friend were walking out of the Wal-Mart in Castle Rock with diapers for Rich's son when

they saw the friend's ex-husband in the parking lot, looking for trouble. Rich told the ladies to go back into the store. The ex-husband shot Rich in the back three times.

Mick silently promised his dead friend he would look after his children, like you're supposed to say. He wouldn't be able to follow through on his promise.

After two years of meritorious service, the pond liner covering the subfloor of the house – the makeshift roof over Mick's head while he continued to live in the basement and work on the house – started leaking. Then, he found out his father, who had been battling cancer back in Michigan, had been told he had eight weeks to live.

“That's when I looked at myself and said, 'This whole thing might be a fiasco,’” Mick says. “The subfloor's going to rot out before I get done building a house on top of it.” He went back to Michigan for two weeks to be with his dad. They left the hospice to go to a bar, morphine drip and all, and his dad fell asleep at the bar in the middle of his first beer. “He's just really tired,” Mick told the bartender.

A neighbor helped dry out the soaked house while Mick was away. After two weeks, Mick came back to Colorado to check on things, and his dad died.

For weeks, Monday through Saturday, Mick would wake up, steer his truck onto I-25, and navigate through sheets of tears for 45 minutes. He'd pull over just before the gate to the Castle Pines subdivision, try to get his shit together, and go to work for the day. His dad never saw the house, or the property.

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There are many meanings of the word “build” when someone's talking about a house. In America, most of the time it doesn't even mean that the person talking about “building” is doing any of the work themselves. You just say something like “We're building a house south of town” to mean you're waiting for someone else to finish putting together your brand-new home on land you picked out. Most of us don't have time to build our own homes – this is 2010, not a Laura

Ingalls Wilder novel. Build my own house? What's next, changing my own oil? Hand-writing a letter?

It's not like we have the money, either. With our 30-year mortgages, writing that last check to pay off your house is a late-life rite of passage. No one can write a check to someone to build a dream house for them, let alone buy the proper materials and equipment to build it themselves.

Mick didn't have the money to buy the proper equipment, either. To move a 1,200-pound log, the best method is a forklift, which you can buy for about \$15,000, or rent for \$400 per weekend. The next best method is a bunch of friends and a system of ramps, over several days or weeks. The forklift would have cost a fortune, and the friends would have created a gigantic debt of beer and owed favors.

So he spent \$300 on cables and rope, and built a series of blocks and pulleys that he thought would work. He tied one end of the rope to a log, the other to the bumper of his Toyota pickup. He shifted the truck into reverse with the other hand tight around the steering wheel, nervous the whole setup would fail and he'd drop a log right through his precious subfloor and wreck everything he'd worked for so far.

He giggled as he backed up the truck and the first log lifted into the air, and he laughed and laughed as he rolled the log over to the foundation, put the truck into first gear and gently lowered the log onto the subfloor. Out there at the base of a butte in Colorado, a middle-aged man celebrated another small personal victory in the battle to build his own house, to the applause, and knowledge, of no one.

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Mick was able to stack logs using his \$300 cable-run line setup, all the way to the top of the windows, where the line wasn't high enough. He had to rent an extended-reach forklift to stack the rest – at \$400 a weekend, money was flowing one direction: out of his working-class wallet. He refused to go into debt to build the house, or use a credit card.

He invited his friend Ty, a professional logwright in Montana, to help. Ty built a 24-foot gable truss to hold the windows over the great room, helped finish the walls, helped put the “header” logs in place, and generally showed Mick how to do log work, the first mentoring Mick had gotten. When Mick finally mustered the courage to ask Ty what he thought of the house so far, Ty said, “I’ve seen worse.”

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Mick stacked more logs. The walls got higher. He built a loft.

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The main ridgepole is the biggest, heaviest log in a log house, and this one was 50 feet long and weighed 2,000 pounds. Lifting it into place would take a crane, or, the working-man's solution, a rented extended-reach forklift operated by a close friend. Mick had already paid for the rental for the weekend by the time he saw the weather forecast: Cloudy, high in the low 20s and light snow expected.

Steve came over anyway, and they maneuvered the giant log, threading it through the trees to the peeling rack to the back of the house, where they would be in position to lift it into place.

The working weight of an extended-reach forklift (how much weight it can handle) decreases the further you extend the forks – like you can lift a lot of weight to chest-height, but not if you hold it and extend your arms out in front of you. It's important to understand this when lifting a one-ton log 20 feet above the house you've been working on, and spending most of your disposable income on, for the past four years.

As Steve worked the forklift's controls to pick up the first, heaviest ridgepole, it became obvious that they were going to max out the forklift. If it tipped over, the house and the forklift would be trashed, and Mick was renting the forklift because he didn't have enough money to buy one. Four palms sweated in the cold.

Slowly, carefully, they eased the ridgepole up and forward. Mick stood at the top of the house, guiding the log in, and Steve muttered panicking curses below. The forklift started to rock on its back tires. Steve gently lowered the log into place as Mick marked the spots where he would need to cut notches. They lowered it back to the ground and Mick went to work notching the log while Steve went into the basement to warm himself by the wood stove. Two hours later, they lifted the log again, fairly certain they wouldn't tip the forklift.

The last log, another ridgepole, would sit perpendicular to the first, a little higher. They repeated the lifting process, only this time the forklift's back tires came off the ground. Once the notches were made and they tried to set the log in place, there was no pulling it back out to re-notch it. If it wobbled in place, it would always wobble.

Steve used the forklift to slide the log almost into place, until Mick only had to roll it a quarter-turn over into its notches. Mick turned it with a cant hook and it dropped perfectly home. He looked down at Steve, frozen in the seat of the forklift, and gave him a thumbs-up. They smiled at each other, and four years after they had worked together to set that first course of logs, they were looking at a house. No doors or windows yet, but a house.

Steve announced that he was heading home to clean out his shorts. Mick climbed back up to the top to bolt the last logs together. He straddled the ridgepole, turning bolts as the sun set and the snow fell around him. The heavy, uncertain work was done and it was easy money from here on out.

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Mick's son, Dan, came to visit on weekends. During his visits, they played baseball in the meadow in front of the house, using pieces of wood for bases. Dan would watch Mick work, or help, or hang out in the basement and watch TV.

One weekend, 10-year-old Dan watched TV while his dad worked on the house, standing on a board 12 feet above the ground. As Mick reached up above his head, the board slipped out and he fell, breaking his heel on a joist log on his way earthward. He landed on his

face, breaking his nose on the ground. He crawled to the basement, face covered in blood, to ask Dan to get him the phone so he could call for help. Dan would have nightmares about it for years. Mick would have crutches and a boot for eight weeks, and work on the house would finally have to wait. When it snowed, he hopped around the house up the slope to knock snow off the "big top" he'd stretched over where the roof would sit.

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The night Mick finished putting on the roof boards, he chainsawed a hole in the floor for a stairwell, put a ladder through the hole and dragged his mattress up from the basement. He measured, marked and chainsawed doors and windows out of the thick log walls. Plastic covered the window holes where the glass would go, and tarps hung where the doors would be. Snow sometimes blew in, piling in the corners.

The house was almost finished when Mick met Susan, a "chick who could pick up a chainsaw during the day and put on a dress at night." She had started her own wildfire mitigation business just before the Hayman fire burned more than 130,000 acres of Colorado land. She was looking for someone who would let her borrow their chipper, and heard Mick had one. They married in the front meadow, with Dan as best man, in 2007. Now they drive matching Toyota Tacomas and Susan runs the Rampart business. The house is still almost finished, with a curtain for a door on the downstairs bathroom.

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Rich once told Mick that he just wanted to stay somewhere long enough to plant a tree and watch it grow. Mick's brother planted a bristlecone pine behind Rich's gravesite, and it's grown strong now, after nine years. Mick drifted apart from the family, and says he has failed at his promise to look after Rich's children. The oldest son has had a few scrapes with the law, and Mick doesn't even know the youngest son, in diapers at the time his father was murdered.

Mick and Susan warm the quiet, tough house on a piece of land that would be a little too snowy, a little too noiseless, and a little too far from streetlights for most of us. Their bedroom

door opens up onto a small second-floor deck with no railing, and Mick can tell you stories about all the buttes that line their extended front yard. The cruel injustice of it all is Mick's tinnitus, a ringing in his ears that's been especially bad the past five years. He's been to a dozen doctors, and no one can do anything for him. He switched to half-decaf coffee in the morning to keep it somewhat in check, and that's all he can do.

Lately, Mick's been working on drinking a little less. He told me that as we were sitting at a bar in Denver. We talk about it a lot, actually, since I've been sober for the past eight years. I tell him I don't know how to cut down on things, but I sure as hell know how to quit them. I don't think he gets too carried away, but maybe he was relying a little too much on beer to help him relax, or have fun. I ask him questions about drinking, you know, Mick, did you drink this much when you were working on the house all those years? No.

I finally get to the point: Do you think you're bored? Huh. Maybe.

Eight years of your life you spend building a home, starting from literally scratch, when you consider the amount of knowledge and prior experience you had at the beginning. All during the time in your life you're supposed to be fighting the mid-life crisis by buying a red convertible or a loud motorcycle. And when you finish, you're 50.

I don't blame you being a little listless. I don't know how I'd follow that act either.

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