



# Raising Your Own Roof

## Lost Art Of Log Cabin Building Being Revived In Warren County

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Laura Bennie and Charlie Davis began building their log cabin in the spring of 1974.

"Originally," says Laura Bennie, "we were going to move a tobacco barn onto the site and maybe put a bunk bed and table inside. But then we ran into all kinds of problems such as rotten timber."

"So, we thought, 'why don't we build a log cabin. We've got rocks in the fields for the foundation; we've got the trees and the land.' Everything was there."

Then Laura Bennie and Charlie began to notice how log cabins were constructed. They chose the finest features from each of the cabins they inspected and assimilated them into what they thought would be the ideal cabin.

"However," insists Laura Bennie, "we did not consciously decide to build the cabin as we did. It took shape as we went along."

"We thought a rock foundation would be the prettiest. We laid the rocks and then hand-dug the cellar."

"At first we wanted a space just large enough to store the canoe, but then we decided to make the cellar deeper and dug 12-15 feet."

Laura Bennie and Charlie went to the mountains of North Carolina where most of the cabins they viewed had the dove-tail notch. They liked it because they felt it to be prettier and more advantageous than the regular square notch.

"The advantage of the dove-tailed notch," says Laura Bennie, "is that it interlocks the logs and pulls them even closer together with time."

"And wherever we could, we used locust pegs instead of nails because a nail will rust in time and logs will loosen, but locust is hard wood and won't rot. It will swell and in time become even more tight."

Last February, things began to move very quickly. In one week, wall logs were laid 11 high.



Charlie had spent many a month in the woods, selecting the choicest trees, cutting them down with a chain saw, hewing them with a foot adze, then transporting them by a flatbed, pulled sometimes by tractor, sometimes by pick-up truck, to the site. There the logs were treated and stacked.

Sometimes Blaine Tharrington would be there to help out and the two would work side by side all day with chain saw and foot adze.

Blaine hand-hewed the upstairs banister. In a seemingly effortless way, he carried it like a spear high above his shoulder to the cabin where it was hoisted up the wall and pegged in place.

With his great strength and the stocking hat he wore last February, Blaine might have been mistaken for Paul Bunyan.

It was Al Whitmore who had suggested to Charlie that he borrow Bobby Bolton's chain hoist to lift the logs.

Charlie thought this the wisest course of action to take. So he threaded the eye of a pulley with a cable. He then clamped the cable to two trees, one at each end of the cabin. Finally, he hooked the chain hoist to the pulley.

This allowed Charlie to pull the chain hoist along the cable to the edge of the log cabin's foundation where a log, which had been dragged by a tractor, was waiting.

The first four logs were hoisted to the necessary height and laid on the foundation where they were notched and set in place.

The logs that came after were hoisted up until Charlie and his crew of volunteers could set them down on the wall logs that had already been placed. These new logs would then be notched and fitted on to the preceding logs.

By this procedure, the cabin grew 11 logs high during one week's work last February. All volunteers were from the Warrenton area but Larry McCall, carpenter and friend of Laura Bennie and Charlie, who had come down from Hot Springs.

Charlie, Laura Bennie and Blaine all agree that the most difficult and frustrating part of building the cabin was putting on the roof, putting the rafters and wind-beams in place.

To make these parts, hewn logs and tier poles from near-by tobacco barns were used.

By this time, the cathedral beams had been hewn, notched and pegged in place and the subfloor of the upstairs had been laid.

With this much accomplished, the most challenging part of the construction was about to begin.

The tier poles would be hoisted up and laid across the cathedral beams, a considerable height from the floor.

Standing on the cathedral beams, with the balance of an acrobat or tight-rope walker, Charlie would cut the male notch out of the end of the first tier pole and the female notch out of the end of the second by skillful use of his chain saw. He would then fit the male and female notches together and peg them.

At this stage of their construction, the rafters worked like the legs of a compass. They could be pulled further apart or pushed closer together until the correct distance between them was discerned.

A long board, serving as a temporary wind-beam, would be nailed to the rafters to keep them from moving. Then the whole structure, which looked like a large A, would be lifted.

If the apex of the A touched the string above it that ran parallel to the floor, the structure could be lowered, laid across the cathedral beams and the wind-beam notched and pegged permanently to the rafters.

The structure would then be raised again and set permanently into its place.

But if the apex of the A did not touch the string, the board serving as temporary wind-beam would have to be taken off, the legs adjusted, the board renailed to them, and the whole structure raised once again for perhaps yet another adjustment.

The most precarious moment of the whole operation occurred when Charlie, a running chain saw in his right hand, stepped from a cathedral beam onto a wind-beam which had already been pegged into the rafters.

But, as the wind-beam was upside down, it was pushed through the pegs when Charlie stepped on it.

His body must have done his thinking for him, for he fell in such a way as to allow the cathedral beam to catch him under the arms. And there he hung, smiling, the chain saw still running in his right hand.

Everybody knows there is some element of risk in using a chain saw. The same holds true for the foot adze.

Arthur Williams, teacher at John Graham, showed Charlie how to use the foot adze, and Charlie says it was a few months before he got to where he could use it quickly and skillfully.

But it is a dangerous tool to use. It has a wooden handle and the head of it is curved. You straddle a log and swing the axe between your legs, thus stripping off the bark and squaring the log at the same time.

Watching Charlie at work one day, Gid Thompson, always helpful with advice, cautioned him: "Be careful of that foot adze, son. It don't know ya."

But Charlie was never hurt, either by chain saw or foot adze, and it is said around these parts that the foot adze is a lost art which Charlie has revived.

Laura Bennie says the problem of chinking is now holding up the progress of the cabin.

There is no authority to turn to, she says, because "everybody had their own way of doing it. Some people chinked with red clay, some with gray. Everybody did it their own way. You can ask five different people and get five different opinions."

She does not want to use cement, preferring something more natural and is thinking about using white dirt.

"We won't know if it works until we do it. We hope it sticks a long time," she says.

When Laura Bennie was asked if she had any advice to give potential cabin builders, she said "Everything about it is going to be a lot harder than you thought it would be and it is going to take a lot longer. I don't know. It wouldn't be that bad to do another one because we've learned a lot."

She added that "the hardest part is what you're doing right then, because you haven't done it before and don't know how you're going to do it."

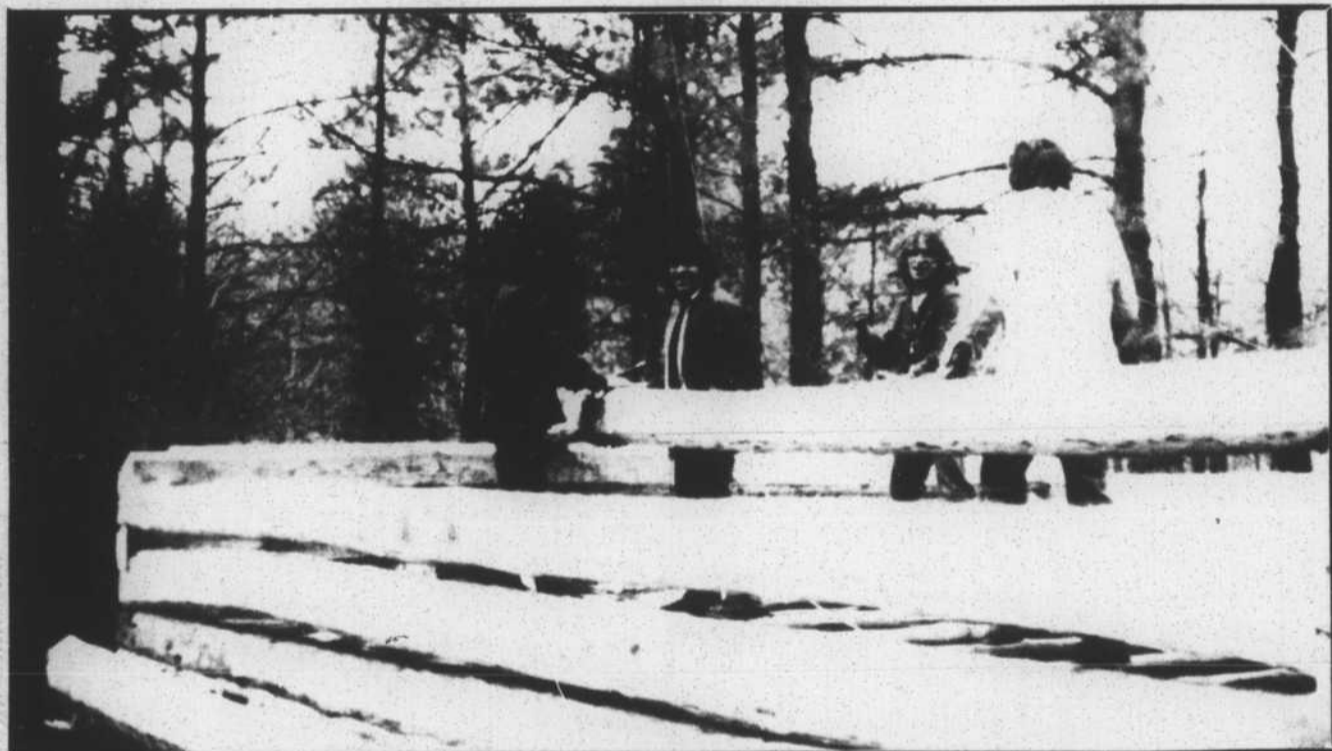
A log cabin has certain associations concerning lifestyle and many of these associations hold true for Charlie and Laura Bennie Davis.

They walk through the woods and fields of their farm out at Warren Plains and those of Afton-Elberon.

They meander along the solitary stretch of Kerr Lake shore-line known as Beer Beach.

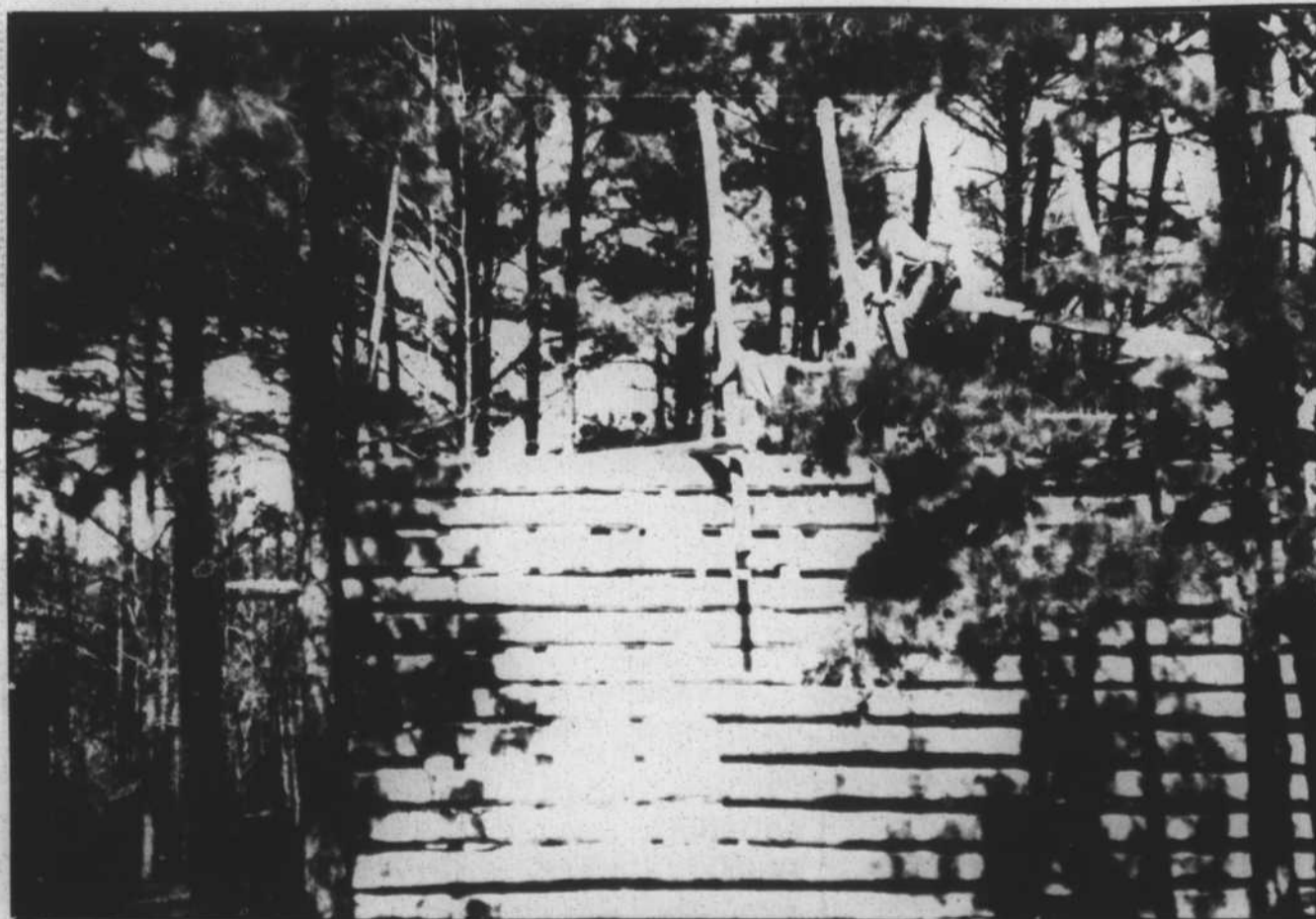
They have been known to knife their canoe through Fishing Creek, and camp high on a rock over the Roanoke or pitch their tent on the island of Ocracoke, where they might even take their horses, and their huskies, Jason and Shocca.

The life they live with their baby girl, Benjamin Mariah has many characteristics reminiscent of the frontier spirit.

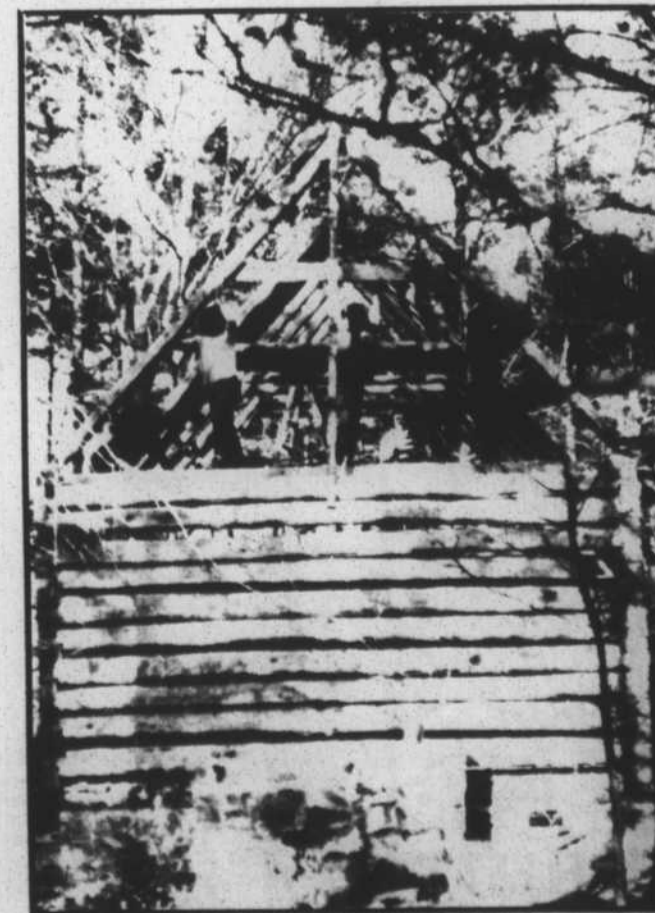


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the cabin. Finally, he hooked the chain hoist to the pulley, and the logs were lifted in place.



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