

Summer Cabin in the Land O' Lakes

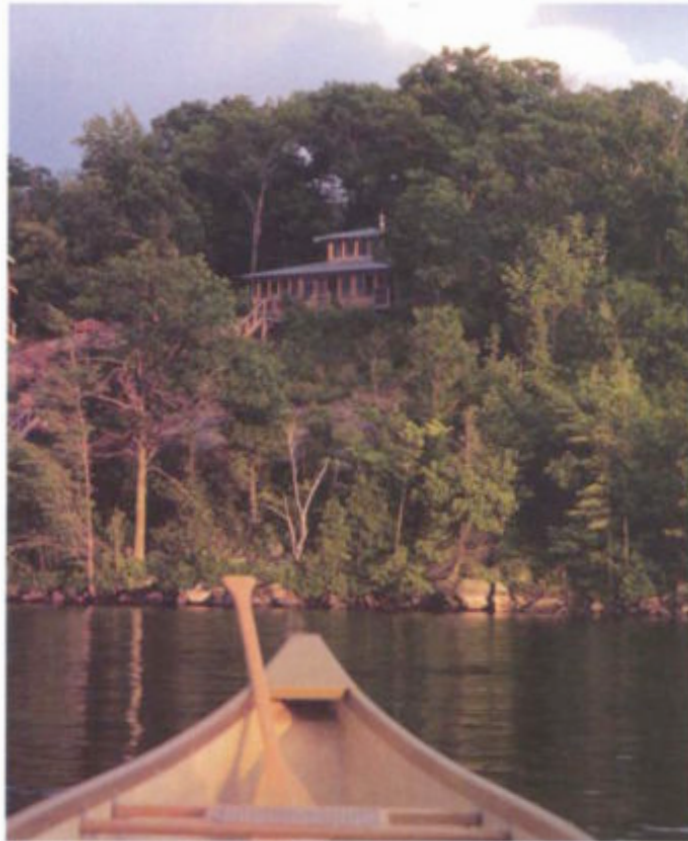
Just three months from drawing board to final finish, this house was built on an island where all of the materials had to come over by barge

by Jonathan Rousham

The Trans-Canada Highway between Ottawa and Toronto passes through an area of rough granite hills and countless lakes known as the Land O' Lakes. The shores of these lakes are dotted with small seasonal cottages that serve as vacation homes for people from all over North America. Marla Isaacs and her husband, Larry Hirschhorn, had spent many summer vacations with their children renting cabins in this region. Wanting a place of their own, they purchased an island site on Bob's Lake in the fall of 1991.

In early June 1992 I got a message from Marla asking if I could design and build them a summer cottage. And did I think I could have the project completed by the end of the summer? Three days later, I was on a boat with Marla and Larry on our way to check out their island site.

June 14: A steep rock face means a building and design challenge—The site was located atop a granite slab that faced the shore, 70 ft. up and 100 ft. back from the water. After climbing the rock face and tramping through the brush that crowned the hill, we found the



Perched high on a rocky island. Up 70 ft. and back 100 ft. from the water's edge, this summer cottage looks like a tree house overlooking the lake. Accessible only by water, the island is easily reached via canoe.

best location for a cottage to make the most of the lake view. After a brief discussion of what my clients were looking for in a summer cottage, I began to form the aesthetic and structural concepts in my head as I boarded the boat and headed back to the mainland.

Time and budget constraints dictated simplicity. The house was for summer use, so with no insulation required, wall and ceiling construction could be less complicated, with exposed framing and exterior sheathing providing the inside-wall finish as well. A light structure on concrete piers seemed appropriate, although it would need to weather Canadian winters.

Marla and Larry wanted a large, open interior with maximum views of the lake. My solution was to design a simple post-and-beam structure that would have lots of windows (floor plans, p. 88). A central clerestory section would be wrapped by a low-slope hipped steel roof with wide overhangs. As a summer retreat, the cottage would be informal and lighthearted, reminiscent of a childhood tree house (photo left).

Less than two weeks after the initial meeting, Marla and Larry reviewed my preliminary drawings and gave me the green light to finalize plans and to make arrangements to begin construction August 3.

Week 1: Drizzling rain, no crew and a barge full of lumber—On the morning of August 3, I arrived at Bob's Lake with tools and camping equipment and with a smattering of light rain on the windshield of my van. In the past five weeks, I'd completed the construction drawings, secured a crew and arranged for the necessary building permits and site approvals.

I slipped my canoe into the lake and paddled to the island, where I hoped to find my crew

there with chainsaws sputtering, ready for a workout. Instead, the site was silent with no sign of man or machine, so I paddled to the other side of the lake to meet the clients. Marla and Larry hadn't arrived, and with materials for the cottage due to be delivered at noon, I paddled back to the marina to meet the truck.

I had a barge trucked in to transport all of the materials (except the windows and roofing) in one shot. By the time the barge arrived, I had paddled back and forth across the lake in the rain three times, searching in vain for clients and crew. The materials arrived on time, and feeling sorry for this sore and soggy crewless creature, everyone at the dock pitched in to transfer the two 5-ton truckloads of materials onto the barge, along with my tools and canoe. By 2 p. m., the sun was shining, and the barge was parked beside the island.

The next morning, I awoke in my tent to brilliant sunshine, and before I finished my coffee, the crew arrived and immediately began clearing the site. By noon the site was ready, and the crew split into two teams, the first one hauling material from the barge to the top of the hill.

Getting the materials up the granite face was an ordeal of strength and endurance. Even with the help of the tracked hauler that we rented, it took three crew members almost two whole days to move the house package to the site, including 85 bags of cement, the cement mixer, the water pump and all of our tools.

In the midst of this material migration, Ric, the crew leader, and I laid out and began to dig the 18 holes for the 18-in. dia. piers with the second crew. We found lovely yellow sand beneath the topsoil; unfortunately, that sand was full of rocks and boulders. With a power auger, an impact hammer, a pry bar and shovels, we struggled for three days to dig the holes. On a few of the holes, we mercifully reached bedrock, where we drilled and anchored the footings. But the rest had to be buried at least 4½ ft. to get below the frost line. By Friday of that first week, we had poured the piers and waved good-bye to the empty barge.

Week 2: The post-and-beam grid takes shape—The following Monday, we donned our nail aprons and jumped to the task of building the post-and-beam frame. We were at least a day behind schedule and still hurting from the grueling work of the previous week.

The frame for the cottage consisted of eighteen 6x6 cedar posts arranged in a 32-ft. square grid pattern with a covered entrance porch jutting out on one side (drawing p. 88). Each post stood on one of the piers we'd dug and poured the week before. Near the base of each post, we notched in doubled 2x10 beams that were bolted to the posts through metal plates. These



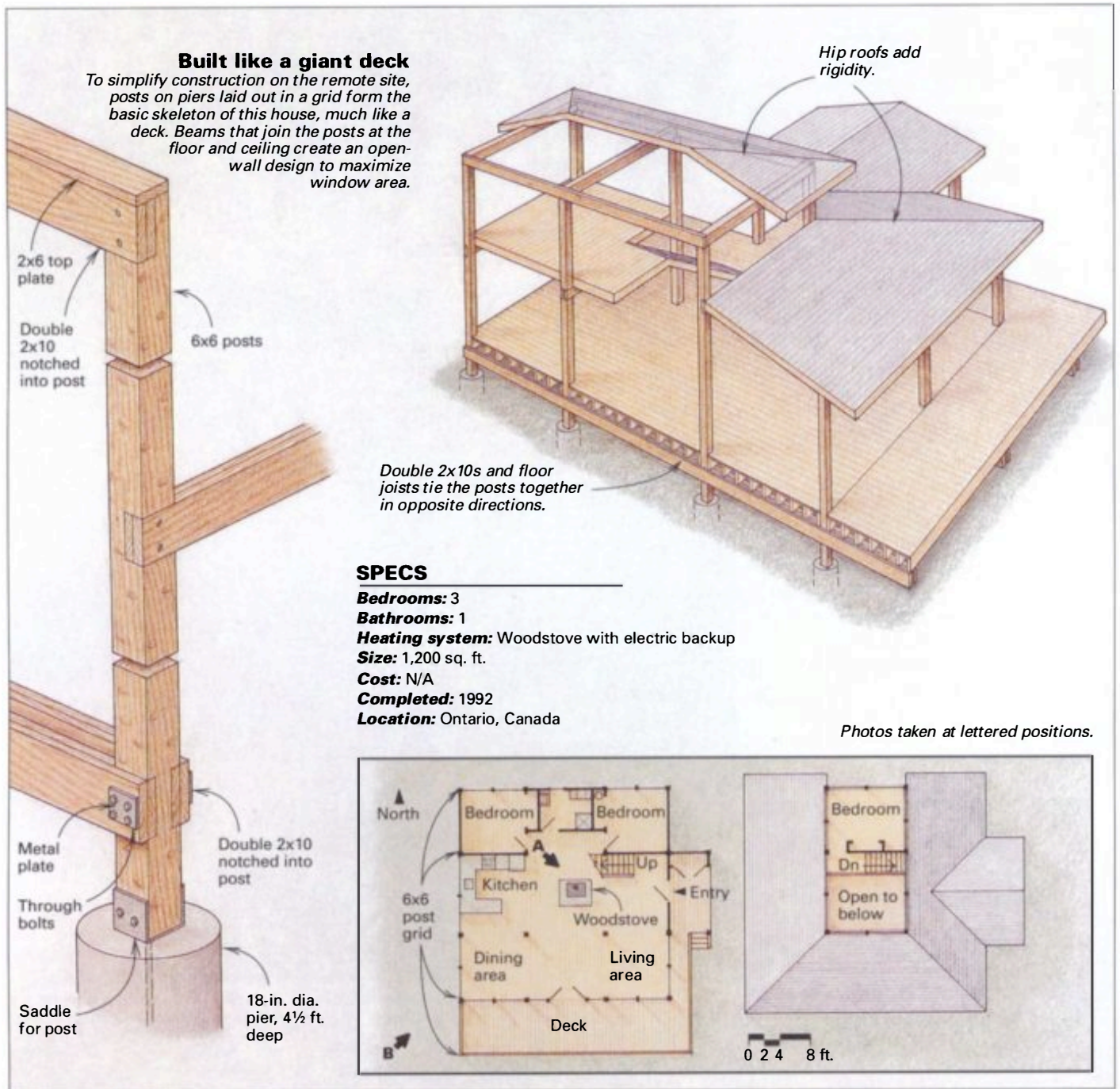
A seasonal cottage means simplified details. With no insulation in the walls or ceiling, the inside of the sheathing and the exposed framing lend a rustic feel to the cottage's light, open interior. Photo taken at A on floor plan.

beams tied the grid together front to back and supported the 2x8 floor joists, which joined the posts side to side. We cantilevered the beams from the front of the house to support the front deck. We also ran a doubled 2x10 beam notched and bolted to the tops of the posts around the perimeter of the cottage. A 2x6 top plate on top of the 2x10s added lateral stiffness.

We used 18-ft. posts for the 12-ft. by 22-ft. central section of the grid that rises 1½ stories. We started with the straightest 18-ft. 6x6 and laid it out for a story post. After marking the other posts, one team cut the notches while the other prepared the perimeter beams for assembly.

By the end of the second week, the frame was completed. With spirits buoyed by the fine weather, we had finished the floor framing, the exterior decking and the roof framing. The roof over the first floor wrapped around and butted into the central section, providing diagonal bracing that stiffened the structure considerably. Bracing also came from interior stair stringers, which were lag-bolted across a main support post and into the second-story floor beam.

Week 3: Delayed by the dock—As our third week began, it was apparent that construction of a landing at the water's edge with a floating



dock extending from it was now our top priority. We had to have an easy way to unload the windows and roofing material from the boat we were using to shuttle ourselves and our materials to and from the island.

The rock I had initially chosen as a landing was left alone to give swimmers a natural access to the water. The landing began beside this rock and was built into the nearby boulders with the end cantilevered over the water. A 16-ft. floating dock designed to be removable was attached to the landing with a dock hinge. The

finished dock seemed to anchor the cottage on the hill visually to the shore below. Unfortunately, it took the crew three days to complete the dock, much longer than I'd planned, which emphasized for the first time just how tight our schedule was becoming.

Back up the hill at the cottage, we built and installed the infill panels between the posts. Because no insulation was needed in the walls, the inside of the plywood sheathing became our interior finish (photo p. 87). We built all of our interior and exterior wall panels out of 5/8-in. fir

plywood glued and screwed to 2x2 cedar frames. These panels were then glued and screwed to the 6x6 posts. On the exterior we installed 1x2 cedar battens in a vertical pattern to cover the joints. For the roof we used 1/2-in. fir plywood on top of the 2x4 cedar rafters for the finished ceiling.

We sprayed the interior framing, paneling and ceiling with Sikkens clear sealer (Akzo Nobel, 1845 Maxwell St., P. O. Box 7062, Troy, Mich. 48007-7062; 800-833-7288 in the United States, or 800-663-6273 in Canada) before the windows



A steep climb from the driveway to the front door. Added after the house was completed, a long staircase makes the climb up the granite face easier. The builders didn't have that advantage when they were hauling materials to the top of the hill. Photo taken at B on floor plan.

and floors were installed. On Friday the 30-ga. galvanized-steel roofing arrived on the mainland, and two crew members spent the day ferrying it over and carrying it up the hill. With three weeks gone and a tremendous amount of work still left, we seemed to be hopelessly behind schedule, even with the five-day overrun period that I had secretly planned for.

Week 4: Windows, floors and the “Silver Cloud”—I arrived for the fourth week carrying the weight of our unattainable schedule as well as the windows that had been custom-made in my shop. The single-pane casement-style windows were made of cedar, and a third of the windows opened on brass hinges with cottage-style brass turn latches. By standardizing all of the windows, we also were able to pre-cut all interior and exterior cedar trim in the shop.

Fabricating the windows in my own shop not only saved a lot of money, but also allowed them to be finished in time, which wouldn't have happened with the six-week to eight-week delivery time of a typical joinery shop. The windows were ferried to the island, and miraculously, only one pane of glass was broken in the transportation process.

With the windows and roofing on site, we were able to get back to more crowd-pleasing work. First, the galvanized steel roof went on, earning our project the nickname “Silver Cloud” from the clients' children. Next, the 5/4 tongue-and-groove pine flooring was installed. Then the win-

dows went into their appointed openings, fitting beautifully, much to my relief. The place seemed to look and feel more like a real house every day.

In a frenzy at the end of week four, we worked out all of the loose ends before Marla and Larry had to return to Philadelphia. Last-minute changes were detailed, along with hastily choosing and buying the kitchen cabinets and a woodstove. On the clients' last day at the lake, a severe-storm warning was issued for the region. By 10 a. m., the crew had secured the site and was heading back to the mainland with rain falling and the first peals of thunder sounding in the distance.

Week 5: Samaritans in a motorboat—The following Monday, I returned for what would be my last regular week on site. That Thursday I was beginning a project in Ottawa, and I'd be able to come back to the island only on weekends. Ric and his able crew took over the task of finishing the detail work on the cottage, and two weeks later, most of the work was completed.

On my weekend visits, I concentrated on cleaning up the site, removing leftover materials and delivering the clients' belongings from the mainland. I also had the unenviable chore of ferrying over the kitchen appliances, which I had brought from Ottawa.

On a lovely, sunny Saturday in September, we loaded the kitchen stove onto the boat. As we pulled up to the island dock, a pontoon boat

laden with Bob's Lake merrymakers drifted by. They watched my father, who had kindly offered to help me deliver these unwieldy objects, and me struggle to unload the stove with the hill to the cottage looming above us. Suddenly, three guys from the pontoon boat jumped in the water and swam over to give a hand. When we told them we had three more appliances on the mainland, they suggested that I ferry the appliances over while they carried them up the hill. An hour later, my father and I stood on the dock waving off the waterborne Samaritans and smiling up at the gleaming appliances waiting at the top of the hill.

On the last weekend in September, Ric and I met the clients for a final review of the project and to get them settled in for their first weekend at the cottage. As Marla and Larry carried groceries and supplies up to their new retreat, Ric and I lit a fire in the woodstove and installed last-minute electrical and plumbing fixtures. Marla and Larry were delighted with their island retreat (photo above), even with a list of items yet to finish. As I made my way to my canoe for the last time, I looked up in satisfaction at the house that 12 weeks before had not even been conceived of, and now was glowing like a warm lantern on the hilltop. □

Jonathan Rousham is a designer and builder now living in Montreal, Canada. He also supervises workshops at the McGill University School of Architecture. Photos by Roe A. Osborn.