

BlueRidge COUNTRY

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Three Classic
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Gardens are terraced behind the Dodson home to open up unobstructed views of western North Carolina's Lake Toxaway (right).

Three families have created perfect homes in the mountains, each finding its own way of including and preserving the natural beauty and unique history of the home's surroundings.

BY CARA ELLEN MODISSETT

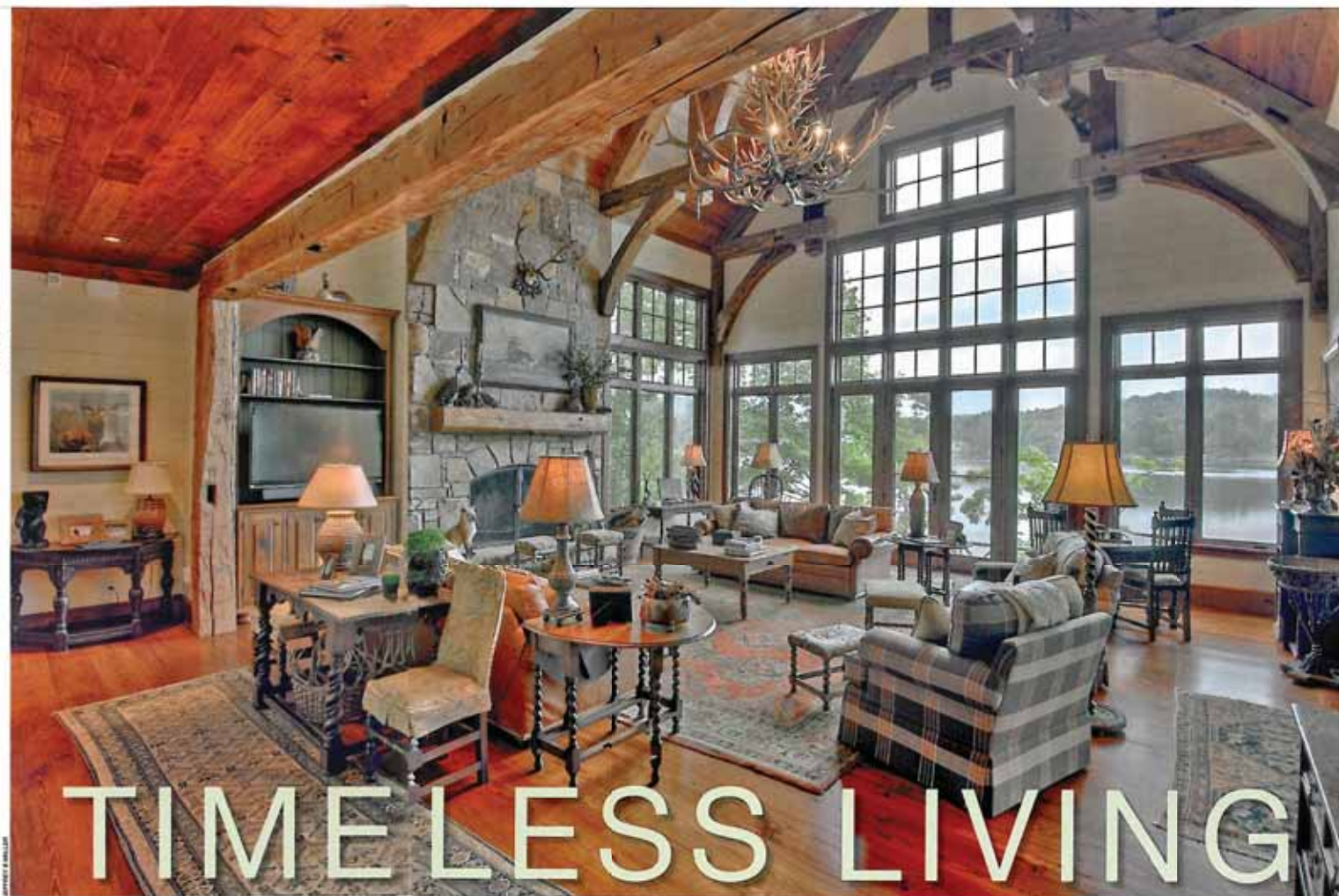
LAKE TOXAWAY, N.C. It's a May-through-October home, a perch on the lake where the first visit means coming back to blooming daisies and hydrangeas, a view of the sparkling water from nearly every room. It's windows open to breezes, days kayaking on the lake, evenings next to the patio fireplace with friends. It's buying groceries from the farmers' market, hiking in the state park and living on the porch every minute in between.

"We started renting a house on the lake every August," says Jean Dodson. That was years ago, when she and husband Tom took their oldest son, John (now 33) to summer camp. The first year, they stayed

a few nights at the Greystone Inn in Lake Toxaway, and after that they came back every August.

For Jean, originally from South Carolina and Tom, from Virginia, Toxaway was "just a really special lake." They kept looking, not finding a house they liked, until finally "the timing was right" — they bought land right on the water with a "tear-down" house, and found Harris Architects, in Brevard, N.C.

Architects Doug Harris and Ellen Pratt Harris stumbled into western North Carolina themselves. "My mother-in-law saw an ad," says Doug, for a position with an architecture firm, and the couple moved to the mountains from the Washington, D.C. area.



"Two mid-career architects moving to a town of about 5,000 or 6,000 people certainly surprised our friends," says Doug, "and it surprised us as well."

With a young son (now 19) and a daughter (now 15) on the way, the Harrises found western North Carolina appealing as designers and as a family.

"This area's not too far away from everything being done on a handshake," says Doug. Ellen's emphasis on historic restoration informs the new houses they design, an approach that fits well in the mountains, where owners and buyers are looking for houses that blend into the landscape, that have a sense of age and history, even when they have none.

"A lot of people are looking for a house that has a timeless look to it," says Doug. "I think we have a real firm understanding of how a house used to be built." They focus on structure and sustainability, "not just a lot of old stuff that's plastered on the outside."

That made Harris Architects a great fit for the Dodsons. "I wanted to build a house that could have been there for a long time," says Jean. The end result: a structure that looks out over the water from high ceilings and large expanses of glass, set in poplar bark-paneled siding and mortared North Carolina field stone, framed by reclaimed lumber and ventilated by mountain air.



Rush and Sharon Mauney saved their late-19th-century, north Georgia home from destruction in a fire drill.

**MOVING TO THE MOUNTAINS:
WHAT TWO REALTORS SAY**

The downturn in the economy has hit home sales in the mountains. "In the glory days, probably 80 percent of our business was done in the fourth quarter," says Chip Freeman, a broker with Lake Toxaway Company for 24 years. "We were even busy in January and February.

"We got through '08 and '09," he says, and things are looking up – "we had a really busy fourth quarter of last year." That activity didn't translate to lots of transactions, but it's starting to. Buyers are "cautiously optimistic."

The region is diverse with options – "gated communities, private golf and equestrian estates, areas that are in great resort towns with skiing, biking, hiking, upscale restaurants and art and theatre venues, to more rural type settings," says Candi Catoe, owner/realtor with Altitude Realty, based in Banner Elk. "Buyers are very savvy these days" and research via internet, but it's important to find a realtor who can navigate that diversity.

The real estate bubble didn't burst quite so dramatically in the mountains, says Catoe, who

doesn't think that property values were terribly overinflated, but right now "certainly there are some fabulous deals with regard to both existing homes along with lots and land where top notch contractors are available for custom building."

"When the market does recover, I think our prices will settle," says Freeman.

What are buyers looking for? A view of the ridges, big spaces, large windows and decks, rustic "mountain style," yes, but also something less glamorous – "The most important thing people are looking for is value."

Freeman emphasizes the research too, especially in less stable times when developments and companies might disappear. If you're looking for a community, make sure the infrastructure is there.

At the same time, don't wait forever. His biggest piece of advice? Pay attention to QTR – "Quality Time Remaining," he calls it.

"You've got all these family memories you want to start making," he says. "If you find something you like, buy it and start enjoying it." –CEM

The Dodsons, who live full-time in Florida, spend a few weeks every month spring through fall at the house, and all of August and October. "We're always on the lake," says Jean. "We have lots of company."

The house is furnished with antiques from Tom and Jean's travels, especially pieces from the Highlands/Cashiers, N.C. area.

Given that the lake is the home's centerpiece, it's perhaps appropriate that the house in a way had to be built from the lake out. The goal: build the house as low as possible, to take advantage of the views, but high enough to be accessible to road and driveway. A terraced garden doesn't intrude on views from the windows, and the whole place feels like something between old farm house and summer camp.

"Up there for me," says Jean, "it's about vacation."

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NORTH GEORGIA. Rush and Sharon Mauney's home might be the house with nine lives. Built around 1894, the house was first located a block off Cleveland's courthouse square, one of a number of houses that housed merchants' families. In the years following, it served as a residence and boarding house for court weeks; for a while the Baptist college in town used it for offices and dormitories. Then it hosted a Methodist youth center and thrift sales. It would have played its last role in 1978, the subject of a fire drill, and that would have been the end, except Rush wanted it.

Unmarried then, with a B.E.A. in interior design and art, he bought it and moved it a few blocks away, to a lot with four old maple trees, so it would look like it had been there a long time.

The maple trees unfortunately died of old age, but the house is still there, in Cleveland's downtown, with a lot that sounds like country – a creek and a spring, vegetable garden, gazebo and swimming pool.

The vegetable garden is Sharon's domain. She and Rush are both from the area. Sharon's family has lived in this area for at least five generations, and she now owns and runs the farm that's been in her family for that long, located about seven miles from their