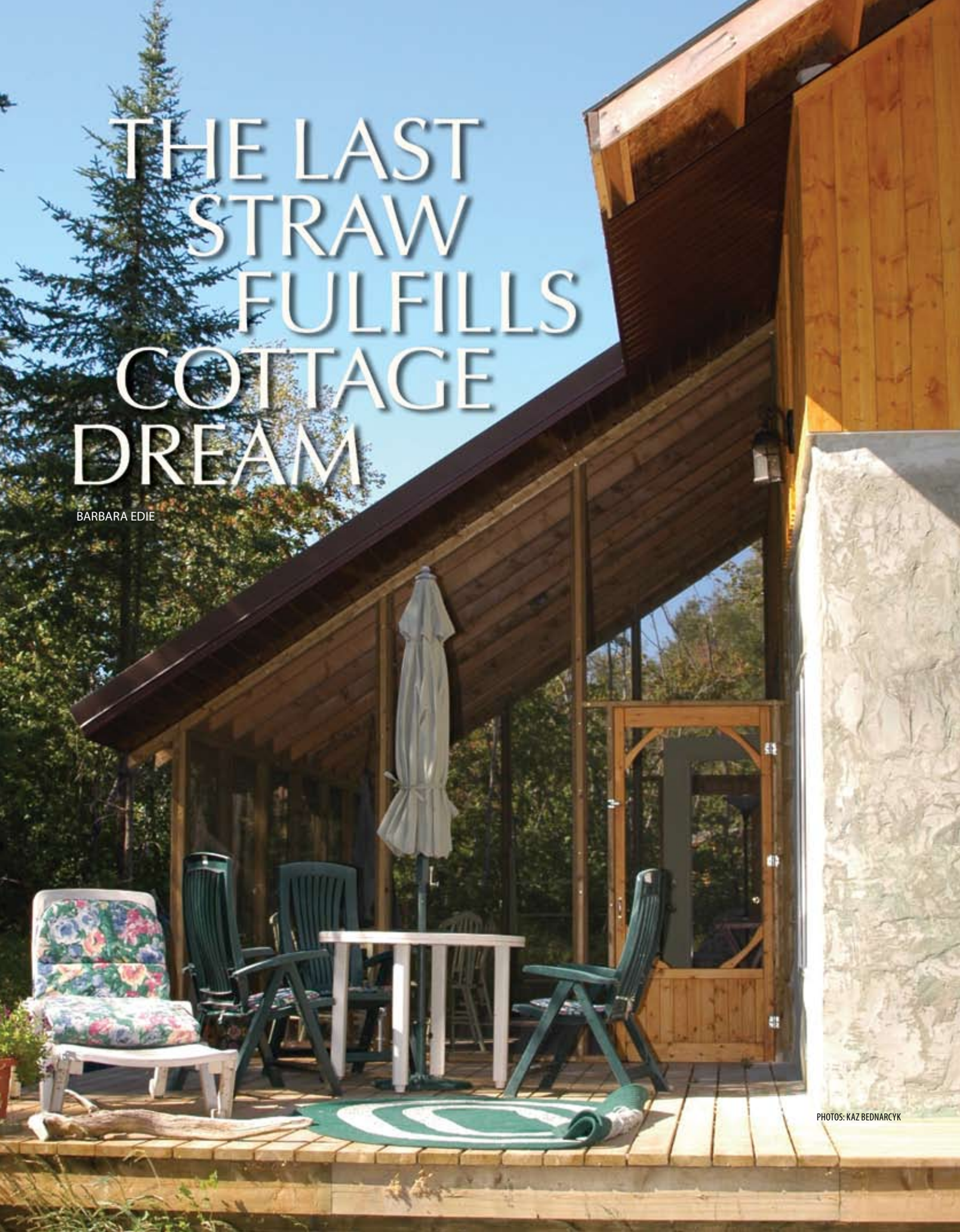


# THE LAST STRAW FULFILLS COTTAGE DREAM

BARBARA EDIE



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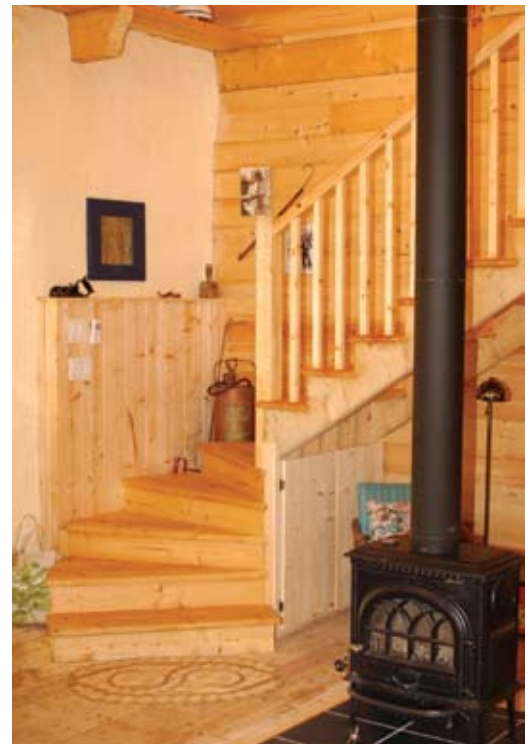


With wide smiles and a relaxed pose, Bill Martin and Sharon Mulder recount the adventure that became “The Last Straw” – their aptly named cottage built of straw bales and a lot of sweat equity. Located on a spacious pie-shaped lot, complete with 190 feet of Lake Winnipeg waterfront and dense forest in a quiet development called Little Deer, this house of straw feels solid, grounded and warm.

“We have our condo in Gimli, but this feels more like home,” says Mulder. “This *is* home.” The building project answered both Mulder’s and Martin’s dreams – hers to own a cottage and his to build a straw bale house. It was the perfect solution ... and the perfect lakeside abode.

As you enter this eco-friendly, post and beam cottage it immediately reflects the beauty of authentic straw bale construction – non-uniform surfaces, deep windowsills and gentle curves.

The bales create an interesting background for the house says Martin, with its round corners, non-straight lines and open spaces. The straw bale construction appealed to the owners, who are firm believers in natural, organic elements. The Last Straw has foot and a half thick bale walls with window seats, pale stucco walls painted with eco-friendly dispersion paint, rustic beams from local timber and polished pine floors. The natural wood and stuccoed walls create an earthy, adobe style. The effect is an instant connection between





Sharon Mulder, Bill Martin and Willow.

concrete dyed with ferrous sulphate. It will take more than a huff and a puff to blow this house down.

The cottage's footprint is just 30 feet x 34 feet, and the environmentally-healthy home is filled with natural products and materials, from energy saving light bulbs to an efficient wood stove fuelled by local firewood. High ceiling fans move heat through out the space, and increase efficiency in heating and cooling. There is no need for air conditioning. The cottage is "on the grid" and baseboard heaters provide additional warmth.

The cottage is toasty warm in winter and cool in summer adds Mulder, who wonders why more people in Manitoba aren't building straw homes or cottages.

"People are intimidated by building their own house but it can be done," says Martin, with research, planning and a lot of hard work. "It's the ultimate DIY project," he adds. "You are *it*. You have stuffed every piece of straw into every corner and crevice... and by the end of it you are exhausted."

indoor and outdoor worlds. "It's the kind of look we wanted," adds Mulder, "a warm, inviting, sensuous house with curves and texture."

A open-concept design allows the light-filled kitchen, dining and living rooms to flow together in one large space under a two-storey ceiling. A main-floor bedroom is tucked in adjacent to the living area, while an open staircase carries you to the loft and two upstairs bedrooms, including a spacious master suite. A generous balcony off the master bedroom overlooks the evergreens and Lake Winnipeg – a favourite spot for reflection or morning coffee.

At the foot of the staircase is a "truth window," a tradition in every straw bale cottage where the straw wall evident behind the glass proves its authenticity.

A large screened-in gazebo that extends off the living area also affords outdoor enjoy-

ment, in a pest-free environment.

The energy efficiency and other benefits of straw bales also attracted the owners to this type of construction. Straw bales are one of the best insulators around. A straw wall – one bale thick – with every nook and cranny stuffed with straw, has no gaps and can provide an insulating value of about R40.

Mulder and Martin chose a "basic box" plan and had a designer make some adjustments to add interest and economy. The two-storey building is constructed of straw bales on the lower level and conventional construction on top. Insulation in the upper ceiling matches the R value of straw bales below, says Mulder, R30 to R50, about two to three times the R value of normal construction.

Bale walls need to breathe, so the interior walls are painted with a special silicate dispersion product; the exterior walls are



The Last Straw is now a Manitoba Bed & Breakfast, open year-round.

It is located approximately 60 km north of Riverton on Highway 234, at Lot 74 in Little Deer Cottage Subdivision (Calders Dock). For more information call: (204) 642-4440 or (204) 276-2899.

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Martin and Mulder hired professionals to help with some aspects of the design, construction and trades work, but handled the project management and much of the manual work themselves.

In this labour of love, the emphasis was on “labour” says Martin. In preparation for the project, he read about 20 books on building straw bale cottages, looked at websites, went to a straw bale workshop and visited a couple of straw bale houses in rural Manitoba

They looked after the logistics of locating, delivering and unloading the 260 bales (60-80 pounds each) required for the build, all of which had to be dry and delivered by transport truck to the remote lakeside lot. They hired a straw bale expert from the Interlake to fine-tune the building process, and recruited anywhere from six to 15 people at various stages of the build, to do everything from placing the bales to mudding the walls. Local trades people were hired to build the staircase, and handle the electrical requirements.

“It was really a group effort ... like an old-

fashioned barn raising,” says Mulder. People from the workshop came to help with the project at Little Deer, as well as friends and family. “It became a labour of love for a whole bunch of people, who each claimed their wall or corner,” she adds.

Straw bale construction is very hands-on and weather dependent. You can only build with good-quality bales that have always been kept dry before and during construction, Martin explains. “Keeping the bales dry was



the hardest part of the whole experience," he notes. "We had five days to unload the bales, the roof wasn't on the cottage yet and so we had to cover them with tarps."

Managing the timing and logistics are all more critical with straw bales. "You can't work in the rain," Martin adds. "You have to start early enough to build the foundation, frame and roof – including finding the tarps and manpower to place and stucco the bales – as soon as possible."

The fear of rain is ever-present throughout the construction process, Mulder reiterates. "You worry because it's all uncharted territory ... have we forgotten anything? Especially before the stucco goes on."

Fear of wet bales and endless details aside, straw bale homes offer significant cost savings. There's no insulation, no gyprock and no siding says Martin, who estimates that a straw bale home can be built for \$65-70 per square foot.

Added to the economic and environmental benefits is the satisfaction of fulfilling a dream. Bringing in the bales brought back fond memories for Martin of the farm he was raised on, and he's now enjoying the comfort of straw bales in a whole new way. "It was all encompassing... but that's what you look back on, that's what is so wonderful. It was a total commitment. I love it here."

For Mulder, the silent beauty of the undulating walls that surround her made the entire experience worthwhile. "It's very quiet because of the mass of the walls ... you feel like they embrace you. It's warm, and you're being hugged all the time." ■



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