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THE SERENITY OF BIG SKY

Southern California was
never like this

by Margaret A. Haapoja

Photos by J.K. Lawrence

When Neil and Michelle Purcell, Jr. left the hustle and bustle of Laguna Beach, Calif., to build their dream home in Big Sky, Mont., they traded the beauty of the Pacific Ocean for the quiet serenity of the Gallatin River Canyon. Neil retired in 1996 after 36 years in law enforcement, the last 16 as Chief of Police in Laguna Beach, so he was ready for peace and quiet. Born and raised in Newport Beach, he spent his entire life in southern California. "To come up here was a big culture shock for me," he says, "but it's one that I don't regret. The state's slogan is 'Big Sky Country,' and there's something about the Gallatin Canyon that is absolutely overwhelming. I find this area just as beautiful as the coast of southern California. It's just one more of God's beautiful creations."

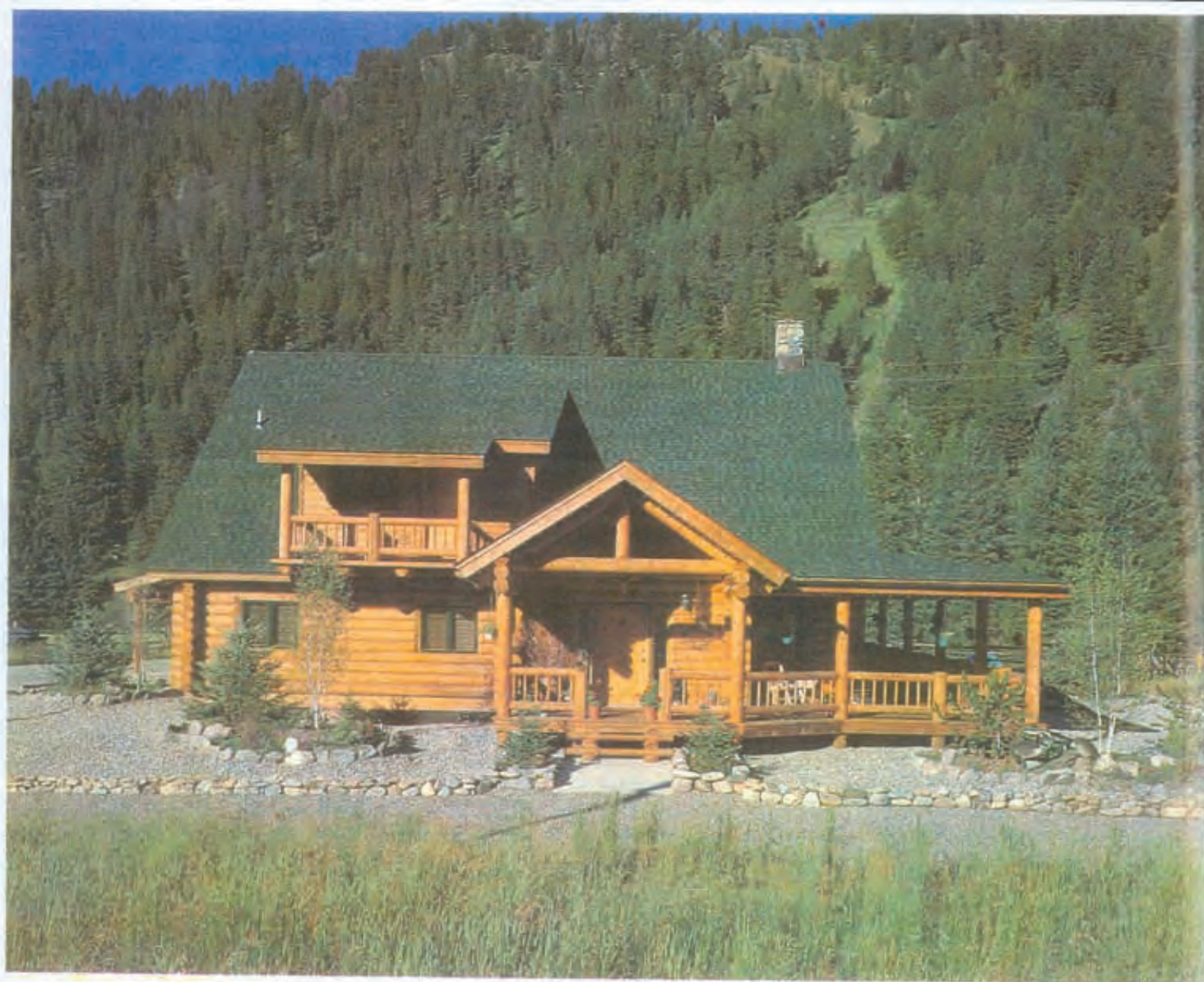
Michelle, a watercolor artist who had her own gallery before the move, finds inspiration in the natural environment near their new home.

"I paint on buffalo and bear skulls now," she says, "and I'm painting elk and moose on the log furniture Neil designs. The wildlife here really spurs me on." For the past nine years, she has also been breeding and training quarterhorses.

The Purcells began researching a retirement location in 1988. Neil suggested they take three years to decide, and they planned to investigate Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. Michelle, who calls herself a "Navy brat," was born in Idaho.

She remembers returning to that state every three years between tours of duty. "We'd go through Yellowstone on the way home to see our relatives," she says, "and Yellowstone Park was my favorite spot in the nation." It was only natural, then, that the first place they





ABOVE: The Gallatin River, one of the nation's most popular fly-fishing streams, flows past the Purcell home.

ABOVE RIGHT: A collection of Canadian Mounted Police prints by Arnold Friberg adorn the bedroom wall.

BELOW RIGHT: Contractor Mark Hackbarth crafted the opening archway with his chainsaw.

looked was the Gallatin Canyon within view of Lone Mountain and the Spanish Peaks. "We weren't here 24 hours," says Michelle, "when we said, 'Find us a piece of property.'"

The couple purchased a two-acre lot in a 67-acre development skirted by the Gallatin River and surrounded by National Forest. Then they began spending time on the site summer and winter, getting to know the area. "The more we came up, the harder it was to go back home," says Neil. "We feel very blessed to make this lifestyle change when we're still young enough to enjoy it."

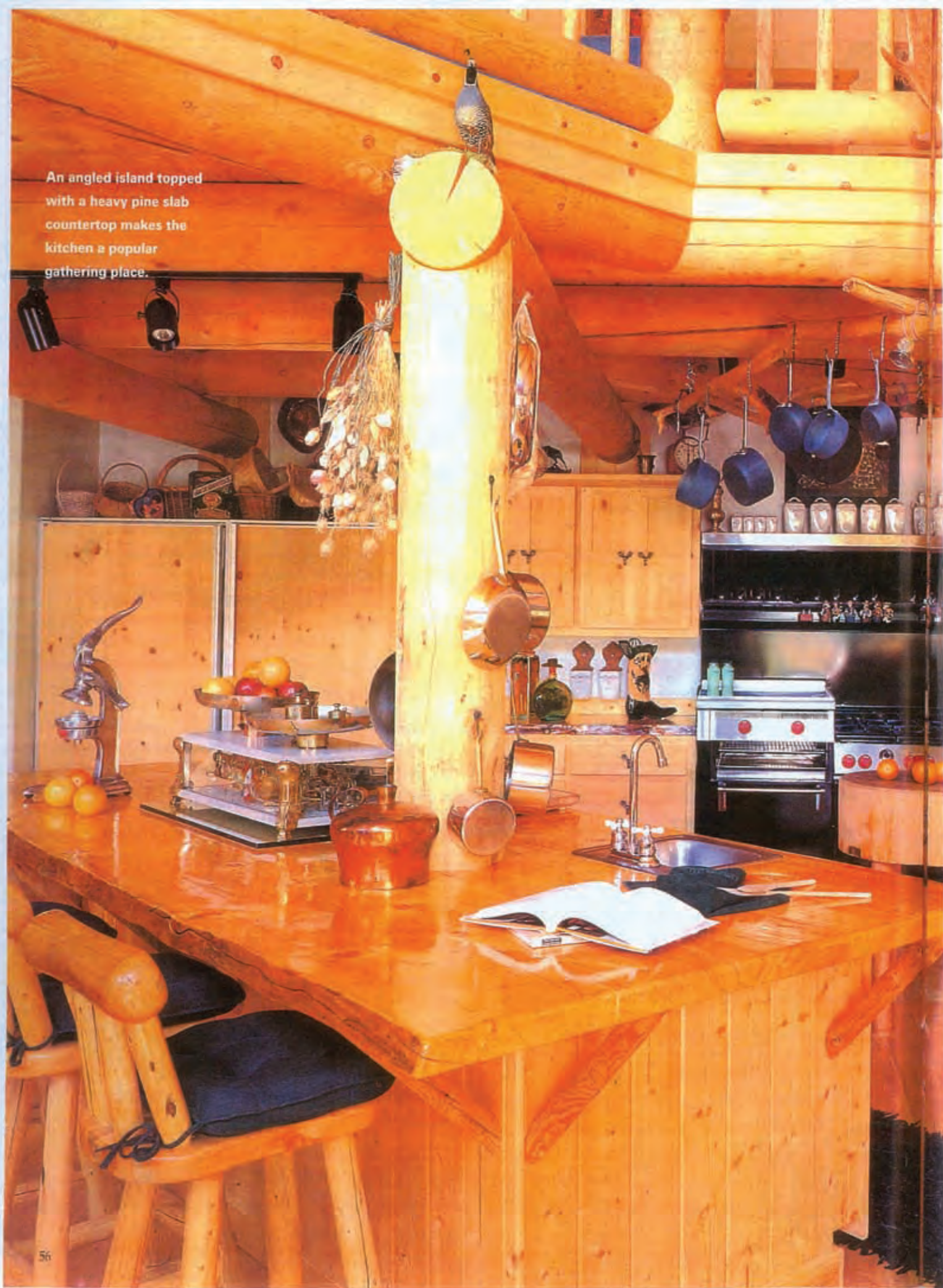
After visiting various log home companies and looking at many log homes, Neil and Michelle settled on Bear Creek Log Homes, a small company in Gallatin Gateway, Mont., just 24 miles from their home site. Co-owner Steve Petri recommended as a builder Mark Hackbarth, a young contractor who specializes in log home construction. "I never heard one complaint

from the owners of Bear Creek homes," says Neil. "I liked the quality of their logs, their cuts and their willingness to work with my design. The word 'can't' wasn't in their vocabulary. When they made the structural plans, they were exactly what I'd been dreaming and drawing for five years. It was a wonderful experience."

The Purcells' home, like all Bear Creek homes, is built of standing dead lodgepole pine harvested from the surrounding mountains. Since they were no longer living, the trees' harvest makes room for new growth without offending environmentalists. These lodgepole pine are tall, straight-grained and naturally air-dried with a moisture content of less than 15 percent. "We really wanted the pine look," says Neil, "even our cabinets, which were built by Mark Hackbarth, are of pine, and so are the slab countertops."

Neil and Michelle designed the home to be as open, light and airy as possible. With

An angled island topped with a heavy pine slab countertop makes the kitchen a popular gathering place.



THIS HOME IS REAL MONTANA TO ME," SAYS NEIL. "IT GIVES US A SENSE OF WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE FOR THE PIONEERS THAT SETTLED THIS AREA."

five children and six grandchildren plus plenty of friends to entertain, they wanted a spacious home. "I designed it with that in mind," says Neil. "big rooms, open rooms. That's the reason we have 1,200 square feet of covered, wraparound porch. I wanted to bring the outside in and the inside out." Eight-foot-wide windows in the great room frame vistas of the mountains toward West Yellowstone. The generously sized kitchen allows Michelle, who is a gourmet chef according to Neil, ample space. "We wanted something big enough so that when we cook a nice meal for our family or friends, everybody can crowd into the kitchen," says Neil. "This flows," adds Michelle. "I can be cooking and talking to Neil while he sits by the fire."

Their 1,000-square-foot master bedroom suite in the loft contains two king-sized beds, a sitting area, an artist's studio and a huge bathroom. Two covered balcony decks open off each end of the room. "They were designed for the winter," explains Neil, "so you could use them without snow hitting you in the face when you want to stand out there with a cup of coffee."

Neil's pride and joy is the unique fire-place fashioned for them by Mark Hackbarth. Rising 28 feet to the ceiling of the great room, it is made of river rock. Neil and





Michelle themselves selected some of the stones for color and shape from the Gallatin River that borders their property. "I think it made Neil pretty happy when I told him we'll do something that you won't see in any other house," says Hackbarth. He incorporated a 14-foot length of a fallen tree as the mantel and surprised the Purcells by positioning a heart-shaped rock above the firebox.

To minimize the effects of the Montana climate, the Purcells positioned their home for maximum southern exposure. They chose clad, energy-efficient windows with slightly tinted glass. Their hot water baseboard heating system keeps the house warm and cozy. "We set the thermostat at 68, but it seems a lot warmer than that," says Neil. After living in southern California where they needed air conditioning to cool their house and filter the pollutants from the air, they're pleased how cool their log home is in the summer. "You can go outside in July and August," says Neil, "and when you walk back in, you'd swear you have air conditioning, it's so comfortable."

The Purcells incorporated a few design features in anticipation of their later years. "I wanted easy access upstairs," says Neil, "so the staircase is wider than normal. If something happened to one of us, we can put in one of the small staircase elevators." They also widened the hallways for wheelchair accessibility, and they made sure there were no more than two steps from the garage into the house.

Most but not all of the interior walls are log. "Artwork looks better on drywall," is Michelle's opinion. When the Purcells looked at log homes before they began building, they felt some of them had too much log. "We wanted to break it up a little," says Neil, "our object was to keep it light, open and airy."

The exterior is finished with a product called Log Guard in honey brown. "What we'll usually do is a base coat with color.

Then we'll apply a second coat of color with UV (ultraviolet) inhibitors and after that a clear third coat that also has UV inhibitors," says Hackbarth. "That way we're actually doubling up on the UV and we're getting a longer lasting finish."

Michelle used her artist's eye to decorate the house in a Western and wildlife motif. A massive buffalo head looks down from the top of the fireplace. Two distinctive hanging lamps featuring cowboys and Indians chasing one another around rawhide shades light the long dining-room table made by Neil himself. Ironically, the couple found the fixtures in Trails West Gallery in Laguna Beach. "Everything up here is antler-type," says Michelle, "and they look nice, but we wanted something different."

Michelle located a Montana artist who works in iron to create the elk, buffalo and moose ornaments that hold up denim window treatments with lariat rope. Part of Michelle's cowboy collection decorates the kitchen—a painting, a statue and a cookie jar. A mountain man's leather clothing, circa 1900, adorns the archway that leads into the great room.

Whether they're riding horses in the back country, fly-fishing on the Gallatin River or designing new furniture and artwork, the Purcells are content in their new log home. Although they once planned to spend half the year in Montana and the rest back in Laguna Beach, they've sold their former home in California. "We've always lived in a traditional house, but the warmth wasn't there. This home is real Montana to me," says Neil. "It looks like it's where it belongs. It gives us a sense of what life was like for the pioneers that settled this area. It's a warm, warm feeling to be surrounded by all this wood." ❖

LOG HOME MANUFACTURER: Bear Creek Log Homes, Gallatin Gateway, Montana; **BUILDER:** Hackbarth Construction, Gallatin Gateway, Montana.

A massive river rock fireplace with rounded surface and half-round mantel serves as a focal point in the great room. **RIGHT:** Hanging light fixtures called 'The Chase' illuminate Neil's handcrafted dining-room table.

