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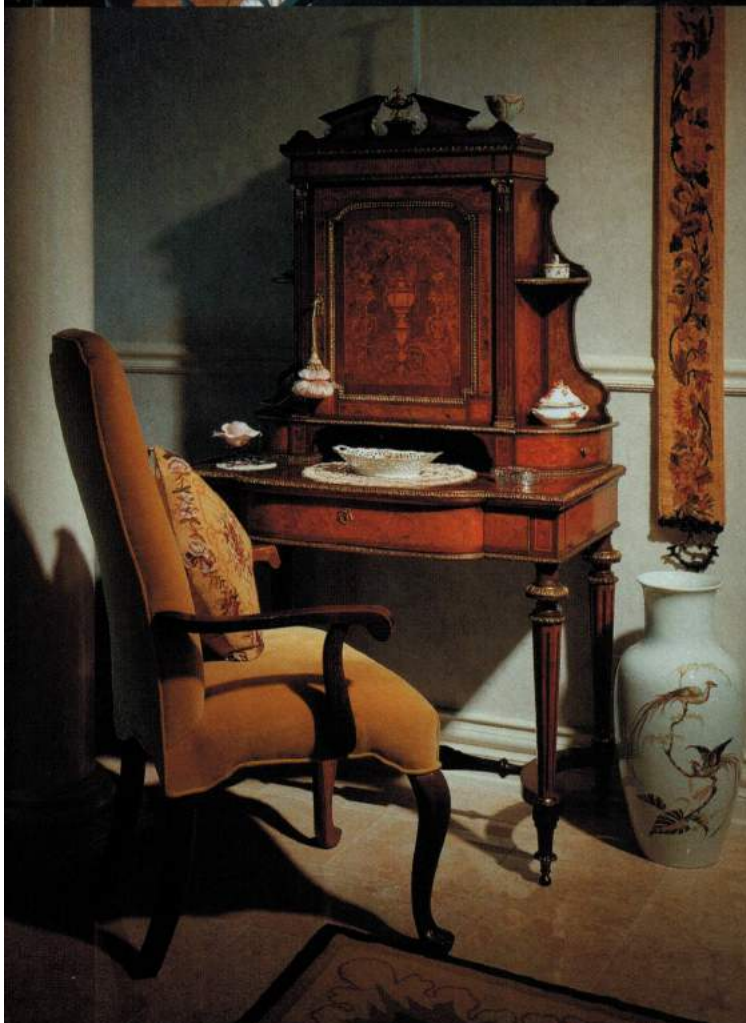
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# Gone With The Wind Goes West

Memories of the Old South  
are evoked at this masterful  
new home overlooking  
Montana's Flathead Lake  
BY ELIZABETH CLAIR FLOOD





When it came time to consider designs for their new home on Flathead Lake, Ray and Patricia Steele knew what they didn't want—a log home. "There are a lot of log homes here, but we just don't care for them," says Patricia, whose family owned a Montana cattle ranch for many years. "Log homes can be cold and dark. I've been there and done that."

The couple decided to build on a Southern plantation-style house on their property. For several years they had summered in a smaller structure near the lake shore, journeying to Mexico to escape the harsh Montana winter. Both agreed that their new lake home would be built on a much grander scale and feature a spacious and formal interior, a library, a dining room, and at least one bedroom decorated in French *toile*. The home would sit among Ray's ever expanding garden, which at last count included 59 fruit trees and thousands of flowers like daffodils, tulips, roses, lupines, and lilies. All rooms would face the pristine lake and have an unobstructed, 90-mile view that included the booming mountain town of Whitefish to the north.

Inspired by Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and numerous other early American homes along Virginia's Rapahanick River, Ray penned some preliminary drawings. "Neither of us have ever lived in the South, but we've just always liked plantation-style houses," says Ray. "They are open. They have

large spaces and tall ceilings." Proof of Ray's commitment to this style came when he learned he would have to pull up his precious putting green to accommodate the new structure. He agreed.

To implement their ideas, the Steeles turned to Dann Preston Taylor, an architect from nearby Bigfork, and Brad Reedstrom and Andy Fischer of Bigfork Builders, also of Bigfork. "Ray had a lot of sketches and ideas," says Taylor. "He wanted to do something that wasn't traditionally Montana." Although more accustomed to designing rustic homes, Taylor embraced the challenge. "I worked with Ray to make the rooms more functional, flow together, and fit on the site," he says. Taylor designed elaborate moldings and was also concerned with creating an energy-efficient home. The contractors did the same. "We got our hands on books featuring old Southern colonial homes," Reedstrom says, adding, "We really tried to create a lot of authentic details inside and out." This was particularly the case when it came time to design and build more than



10,000 lineal feet of interior crown moldings. The large, true-divided light windows were another challenge, particularly since the Steeles insisted that as many rooms as possible look out on the lake.

One of the greatest undertakings was designing and installing the freestanding, S-shaped front staircase. "The staircase came in a truck," Ray says. "It weighed 2,500 pounds and took 25 guys to squirrel



**Left:** The entrance evokes a Southern mansion with its spiral staircase, marble floors, and chandelier.  
**Center:** Meticulous gardens encircle the residence.



**Right:** The Steeles regularly enjoy entertaining in their elegant dining room, which features an early trustle table surrounded by antique chairs.





it through the doorway. We corkscrewed the thing through, and it fit perfectly. There wasn't even a sixteenth of an inch gap when the stairway was finally placed in position." (The Steeles use an elevator when they don't feel like walking the grand staircase.)

When the house was completed, the interior space looked large enough to "park a freight train in it," says Ray. Furnishing the place, however, wasn't a problem. The couple had a number of family pieces in storage and a substantial Western art collection.

"The only piece of furniture we purchased was our bed," Ray says. Having served for 20 years as the director of the C. M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana, Ray had an idea about hanging art. The couple share a love for antiques and a traditional style. For the most part, Patricia directed the decoration. She worked to place her family antiques in a formal but comfortable environment. Some of her favorite pieces include a family grand piano, an antique marquetry desk, and a needle-point bell pull made by her mother. She was particularly delighted to incorporate an English stain glass window from Boston into the decor.

Ray's favorite room is the library. Designed by Ray and built by Shirno Cabinets in Whitefish, Montana, the cabinets are made of Philippine mahogany, and they house his collection of art and history books. Ray's computer, printer, and copier

are also discreetly hidden in the cabinets. The floors are rosewood, and the bar adds obvious warmth to this room. In the corner, an antique German polyphone plays old-fashioned favorites such as "The Blue Danube" and "Love's Dream After the Ball."

With exquisite views of Flathead Lake, the couple makes frequent use of the outside decks. Other favorite rooms include the spacious kitchen and the dinette, a small breakfast room furnished with family antiques and a chandelier. Windows face out onto a garden bursting with roses, all planted and cared for by Ray.

Because of family and frequent guests there are a number of guests rooms, all with their own distinct personality. Patricia mixed exquisite fabrics from Brunschwig & Fils, Josh, and Patterson, Flynn & Martin with family treasures. All the rooms save one are formal. Heather, the Steeles' daughter, suggested they add at least one informal room. "My daughter said, 'You know, Mother, the house is so formal for the West,' so I decided to create a Ralph Lauren room." Patricia designed a room around cowboy and Indian memorabilia and selected more informal furnishings.

Although an oddity for Montana, everyone was proud of the outcome of this Southern home, which is now kindly referred to as the White House. And as the Steeles have discovered, their Western Tara is a well-received addition to Flathead Lake's eclectic mix of grand cabins and contemporary houses. ★



**Left:**  
The Steeles altered this antique double-hung stain glass window to fit into their home.



**Center:**  
Almost every room offers expansive views.



**Right:**  
Located steps away from the new home's grand entryway, the focal point of this simple hallway is a favorite sculpture by Johnny Hampton.

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