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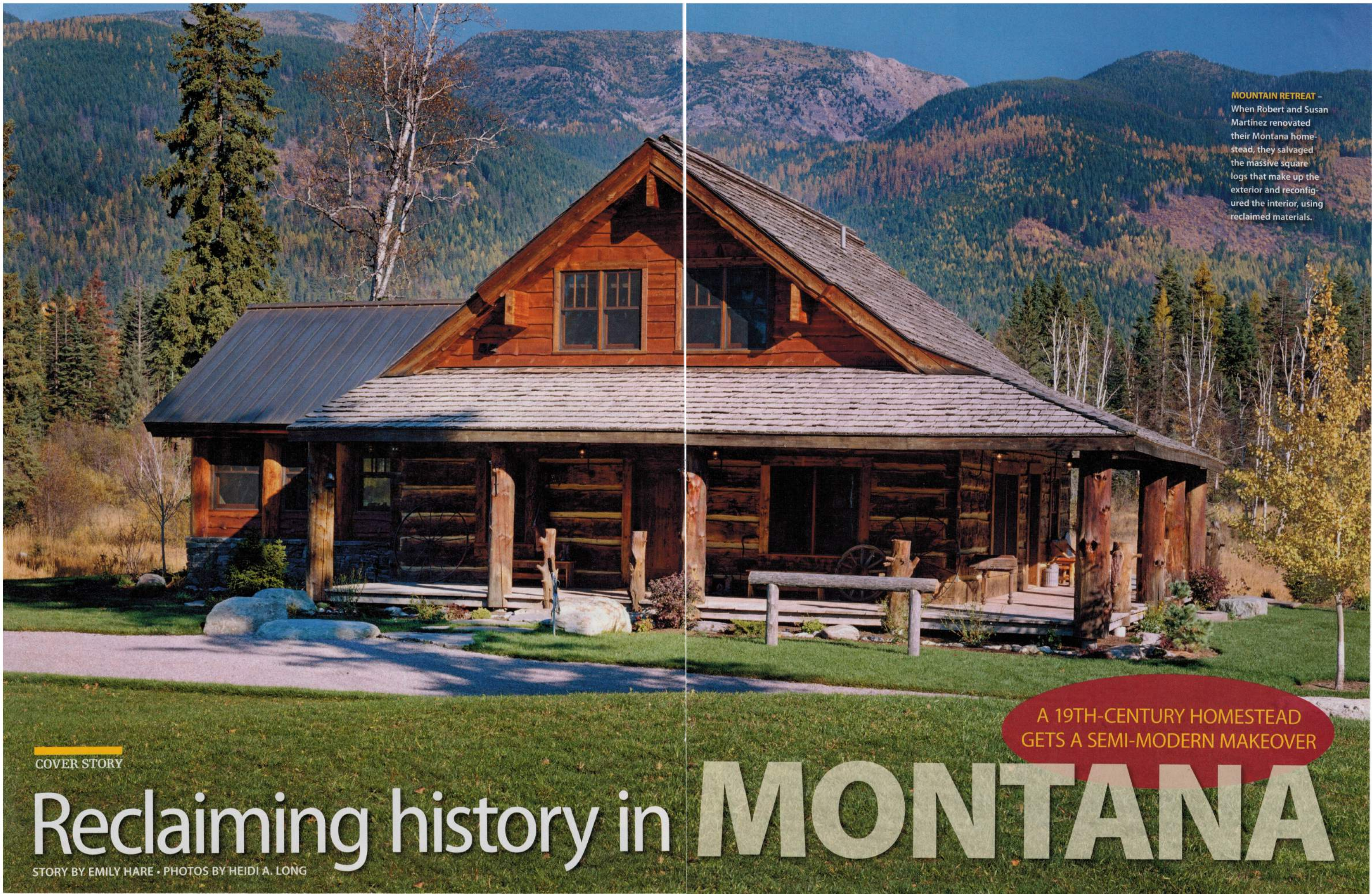
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MOUNTAIN RETREAT – When Robert and Susan Martinez renovated their Montana homestead, they salvaged the massive square logs that make up the exterior and reconfigured the interior, using reclaimed materials.

COVER STORY

Reclaiming history in

STORY BY EMILY HARE • PHOTOS BY HEIDI A. LONG

A 19TH-CENTURY HOMESTEAD GETS A SEMI-MODERN MAKEOVER

MONTANA



AUTHENTIC TOUCHES – Lichen-covered stones and reclaimed timber make the new fireplace look like it's always been there. A log-and-stick railing made from reclaimed wood adorns the relocated stairway. Rustic bunk beds are a perfect fit for the cabin and its young visitors.



Robert Martinez wanted tranquility and wide-open spaces, but those luxuries weren't to be found near his primary residence in Miami, Fla. So, he followed in the footsteps of so many like-minded Americans before him, and headed west.

In Bigfork, Mont., Robert found what he'd been looking for. Nestled on 50 rural acres in the Flathead Valley was a small homestead, built in the 1890s. The cabin's previous owner, a bronze sculptor, had moved it to this site for use as a studio. Despite the homestead's good bones, years of water damage and abuse had taken their toll on its interior.

But Robert saw more than a huge renovation project. Breathtaking backyard views of the Swan Mountain Range and the Flathead National Forest caught his eye instead. With no other homes visible from the cabin, it was a scenic, serene escape from his Miami lifestyle, and everything Robert had dreamed of.

So Robert bought the homestead, even though his wife of 24 years, Susan, was less thrilled with the idea of vacationing only in Montana. Over time, however, she grew to appreciate its mystique, romance and charm. "Now she loves it more than I do," says Robert.

Long-distance overhaul

Immediately after acquiring the property, Robert began the renovation process. With his primary residence nearly 3,000 miles away, he knew he had to enlist the help of architects, contractors, designers and landscapers in the Bigfork area. Through countless phone calls and emails, and only a few personal visits, his vision came to life.

Robert's first priority was to preserve the original exterior structure, constructed from massive square logs harvested over a century ago. Many of the logs are more than 12 inches in diameter.

"Some of the walls are only six or seven of these logs stacked on top of each other," says Brad Reedstrom, the project's lead contractor from Bigfork Builders. "In most of today's log homes, it would take 10 to 15 logs to achieve the same height."

For the interior, Robert wanted to incorporate modern conveniences while maintaining the feeling of an old homestead, giving the



THE PERFECT BLEND – Robert Martinez's ultimate goal was to incorporate modern conveniences while maintaining an old homestead feel. Following suit, the kitchen is a mix of modern appliances and reclaimed materials.



ENGAGING THE WILDERNESS – By day, the homestead’s wraparound porch offers magnificent mountain views. At night, the Martinez family alternates between stargazing from the deck and campfires by the creek.

impression that it had always been there.

The interior was gutted, leaving only the structure’s shell and foundation. Instead of adding square footage, Richard Graves of Kibo Group Architecture opened up the existing space by creating a whole new floor plan. The end result maximized use of the cabin’s 1,800 square feet: three bedrooms and one-and-a-half baths, as well as a living room, kitchen, pantry and office.

One of the biggest changes involved moving the staircase from the center of the cabin to a more efficient location near the kitchen. A rustic railing was constructed from sturdy lodge poles and gnarled sticks recovered from eastern Montana’s river bottoms.

Natural and reclaimed materials

To preserve authenticity, Bigfork Builders used reclaimed materials almost exclusively. Wood for the floors and beams was salvaged from local barns. Only the kitchen’s knotty alder cabinets were constructed from new wood.

“When you’re doing something like this, which is more historic in nature, so many of the choices aren’t really just the architecture,” says Robert. “It’s more [about] the specific pieces of wood that you choose. When you add up all of these choices, you really define the project.”

One of these defining pieces is a sink base in the small powder room. Made from a larch log that Brad himself found in the Swan Valley woods, it makes efficient use of the tight space.

“A typical countertop would be too wide and it would come into the doorway,” says Brad. “So we went out and found the perfect log that was narrow on both ends but wide in the middle, then turned that into the vanity top and put a vessel sink on the top of it.”

Another change Robert insisted on was the addition of a fireplace in the living room. Placed in the corner to maximize space, the fireplace is made of carefully selected Montana stones covered in lichen and moss. This weathered look makes it appear to be an original feature of the homestead. A large, reclaimed timber serves as the mantel.

Interior designer Hunter Dominick put the final touches on the cabin, incorporating western themes and infusions of color into the décor. To achieve a modern look that contrasted with the historic structure, she chose sleeker materials – leather and glass – for furniture and backsplashes.

To the exterior, a balcony was added off the master bedroom, complete with a log-and-stick railing to mimic the interior staircase.



NATURAL BATHS – Rustic-looking fixtures in both bathrooms lend authenticity to the homestead.

A leather-and-tile backsplash is a sleek contrast to the sink base fashioned from a hand-selected larch log.



All doors and windows were replaced, and new chinking revamped the old logs.

One of Robert’s favorite features is Bear Creek, which runs through the property. Landscape artists complemented the creek by dressing up the homestead with well-placed rocks, trees and low-maintenance plants.

Passion for the cabin

Although Robert couldn’t get to Montana very often to oversee the 6-month project, he was very involved in the decision-making.

“In Miami, when my wife wants to redecorate a room or remodel the house or something, I really have very little interest in what’s done and I just don’t get involved at all,” says Robert. “But in Montana, I’m very interested because I have much more interest and passion for my [cabin].”

The huge renovation finally reached completion just a week before the Martinez family arrived for their summer vacation. From the outside, the structure looks much like the same old homestead they first purchased. On the inside, however, it’s the inspired blend of antique and contemporary styles that makes this getaway special. For Robert, it’s a dream come true.

“When you look at the cabin from the

outside, it looks like a really quaint, stereotypical log cabin,” says Robert. “Then, when you go inside, it still fits with what the exterior is, but yet it’s very comfortable, and you have all the conveniences.”

During their rare winter visits to the cabin, Robert, Susan, and their three children love experiencing the snow they can’t get in southern Florida. When summer comes around, they spend as much time as possible in Montana, riding horses, hiking, and boating on nearby Flathead Lake.

While they’re at the cabin, they’re content to relax, listen to chirping birds, and observe other wildlife like deer, bear, and wild turkeys. Nights are filled with campfires by the creek and stargazing from the wraparound deck.

“Montana has beautiful nights,” says Robert. “On clear nights, you can see more stars than you’ve ever seen in your life. So we’ll listen to the creek, and we’ll sit out back and just look at the stars. It’s just a really, really special place to be.” ■

As a child, Emily Hare vacationed with her family near the mountains of Montana. Ever since, she, too, has dreamed of wide-open spaces. But, at this point, says the Milwaukee resident, a simple backyard would suffice.

“Some of the walls are only six or seven of these logs stacked on top of each other. In most of today’s log homes, it would take 10 to 15 logs to achieve the same height.”

RESOURCES ►

- Brad Reedstrom and Andy Fischer, Bigfork Builders, (406) 837-3373, www.bigforkbuilders.com
- Hunter Dominick, Hunter & Company Interior Design, (406) 862-1402, www.hunterinterior.com
- Richard Graves, Kibo Group Architecture, PC, (406) 542-5050, www.kibogroup.com
- Doepker Landscape Inc., (406) 755-2372