

Lake *and* Home Magazine

Exciting things
are happening
in
Alexandria
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A Matter *of the* Heart

Family cabin on
Big LaSalle Lake

A Gull Lake Masterpiece
Casual Country Elegance

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*A
Matter
of the
Heart*

Cabin brings Ley family together



A friend painted the picture above the fireplace. The loveseat and chair in the great room are Stickley, finds from a second-hand store in Maryland.

*by
Sheri Davich*

*photography
Scott Amundson*

The area around Park Rapids is “Heart O’ Lakes” country. The high school sports teams are part of the Heart O’ Lakes conference. The Heartland Trail, an old railroad bed turned bikeway, offers glimpses of some of the most stunning lake vistas in the state as it winds from Park Rapids to Walker and beyond. Those who have had the opportunity to spend a day on the trail know that the Heart O’ Lakes area has no equal.

Jim and Brenda Ley of Elkton, Md., discovered this during annual family camping reunions near Itasca State Park. Brenda is a Minnesotan. She grew up in Eagle Bend, near Wadena, one of five children in a close-knit farm family. Husband Jim grew up in Philadelphia and met Brenda while both attended now-defunct Pillsbury Bible College in Owatonna. Jim is an honorary Minnesotan based on marriage and his good taste in vacation home locales.

Bitten by the cabin bug and blessed with some flexibility in their work schedules back East, the Leys purchased eight acres with 300 feet of lake frontage on Big LaSalle Lake in 2003. Big LaSalle, named after the French explorer Rene-Robert de La Salle, was thought at one time to be the source of the Mississippi River. The headwaters are actually at nearby Lake Itasca but, for the Leys, Big LaSalle is the source, a means back to the heart of



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family and Minnesota lake country.

In building their lake home, they conferred with architect Amy Dirkes of Nor-Son Inc. of Baxter. The home was completed in 2007.

"Jeremy Bjorge, Nor-Son project manager, was great at keeping us in the loop. That's important when building a home long distance – in our case, half a continent away!" Brenda says. Adds Jim, "We wanted the house to look like it had been here 80 years rather than 10. Like it was a part of the landscape and had a history. We made the perfect choice. We feel we were led to Nor-Son. It was meant to be."

They term their lake home "The Cabin." "Our friends from Maryland have asked us 'So, do you have running water? Indoor facilities?'" Brenda laughs. "We reassure them that yes, we have some amenities." The term cabin has different connotations to different folks. In Minnesota, cabin covers a lot of ground.

Jim's focus was inside, specifically the square footage where people were going to gather. Budget-wise, his goal was to spend more in those areas and conserve in the bedrooms and private spaces.

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Brenda favors the outdoors. She loves to gather wildflowers while walking the two-plus miles of primitive road leading back to the cabin. She spreads and sorts them on the kitchen center island and overflows vases with color and sunshine.

The farm is no longer in Brenda's family, sold about the same time the cabin came into being, but the family asked the new owners if they could pick stones to join those collected over the years. The stones were intended for a fireplace, but that was not meant to be so they did the next best thing. They built a retaining wall, bringing a piece of the family farmstead to the lake.

They did bring some of their "out East" culture with them, too. Much of their furniture was brought from there. The loveseat and chair in the great room are Stickleby, finds from a second-hand store in Maryland. Brenda believed them to be



The master bedroom is simple, yet elegant with an attached porch that has a commanding view of the lake.

circa 1950s, underpriced but with an unappealing material.

“We were ready to walk out the door – that funky fabric! At the last moment we turned around. We changed our minds. We had them recovered, and we’re so pleased with them.” They were the first two pieces bought for the home. Other stand-out pieces include the dining room furniture, Amish-made and purchased outside Strasburg, Penn.

The color choices in the great room draw from time the Leys spent in Tanzania – aqua, rust. A friend painted the picture above their fireplace. They acknowledge it is not your typical Northwoods vibe, but there is a bear skin rug, purchased in Wadena. It doesn’t get more Northwoods than that.

“The Cabin” is truly an extended family project. Their children, Madeline and Jim Jr., grew up during the planning and assisted in clearing the property for the home. Brenda’s sister sewed duvet covers and curtains. The chores – washing bedding, cleaning, outside maintenance – are shared by all.

The Ley garage stores boats and other up north toys that for the most part belong to family members other than Leys. They share the work. They share the fun.

Brenda’s parents now live in Wadena and spend a great deal of time at the cabin, providing peace of mind for Jim and Brenda as it alleviates the worry of being away for long periods. And besides, what a shame it would be for this home to sit, lonesome and still. It is accustomed to music. Jim and Brenda both play piano. Daughter Madeline attended a music conservatory. Jim Jr. and one of his cousins built a campfire ring in the back where he can be found strumming his guitar or his father plays his accordion.

Madeline is now in college in Chicago, and their son is in 10th grade. Brenda and the children spend five weeks each summer up north, and Jim joins them when he can. There is a family reunion to look forward to each year. Friends visit toward the end of the season. In September there is a guys’ fishing trip.

And the holidays! Last year it was Thanksgiving. The year before, Christmas. They even brave some Easters in what they refer to as



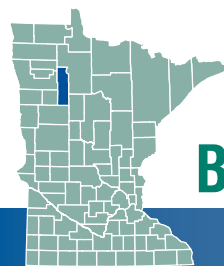
All outdoor activity at the lake can be seen from the screened porch – 40 feet long by 10 feet wide, high, built to provide as much lake view as possible.

“mud season.” No explanation required. The 4th of July is spectacular with sometimes up to three different fireworks displays over the lake at one time.

All outdoor activity at the lake can be seen from the screened porch – 40 feet long by 10 feet wide, high, built to provide as much lake view as possible. The screening was a “must have.” Brenda knows the importance of

mosquito protection, which just proves you can take a lakes woman off the farm and out of the Heart O’ Lakes (temporarily), but you cannot take away her affinity for the lake or her Midwestern sensibility. They are rooted deep and heart-felt. 4

Sheri Davich is a writer from Breezy Point.



Big LaSalle Lake

Clearwater County

Size	235 Acres
Max Depth	48 ft.



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