

# Sporting Life at Fort McKee

*Unexpected Refinements for a Cabin in New York State*

INTERIOR DESIGN BY ARTHUR E. SMITH

TEXT BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER VITALE

"WE HAD HUNTED and fished all over the world, so we had been in a lot of log cabins. We had been in a lot of castles, too, but our favorite was the log cabin," explains Phyllis McKee. Although she has residences in Greenwich, Connecticut, and Manhattan, Phyllis McKee and her late husband, Joseph, had a lodgepole pine cabin designed and built on twenty acres in New York's Dutchess County. Completed in late 1989, it

is named Fort McKee, and a Civil War-period iron cannon is displayed with pride in the front yard.

The house is surrounded by hundreds of acres of undeveloped, unspoiled timberland where the McKees could pursue their sporting interests. They did not, however, want to live like Smokey the Bear. In the tradition of the nineteenth-century hunting lodges, they expected warmth and civilized comforts upon their re-

turn from the woods. To achieve the right balance of rugged splendor, Phyllis McKee went to Arthur Smith, in Manhattan, who for years had worked with the venerable Billy Baldwin. Smith, who is running short of firsts in his lengthy career, was intrigued. "I've done boats, planes, villas, apartments and penthouses but *never* a log cabin," he says. "The size of the job doesn't matter if I like someone. There was an instant rapport with



"It's calming but has brass and depth, and it complements the architecture," says Arthur Smith of his design for Phyllis McKee's log cabin in Dutchess County, New York. ABOVE: Built by Lawrence Delaney, the house has a traditionally rustic exterior that has been updated by the addition of several large casement windows and a spacious front deck.

"I didn't want to detract from the architecture but to harmonize with it—it seems integral to the concept of the weekend lodge," the designer says. OPPOSITE: In an alcove under the Great Room's staircase, a painted chest is arranged with an antler chair. The antique Austrian "bear box" is from A Smith Antiques; Clarence House *faux-panther* velour.

ready for her participation. The architecture of the two-story structure, which the husband describes as "a third-rate tract house," needed some attention. Gomez suggested bringing in the firm of R. M. Kliment & Frances Halsband, with which she had collaborated on a similar project, to reconfigure the spaces.

"The place was dark, small and cramped," recalls Halsband. "It looked dowdy." "We wanted to make it quiet and elegant but comfortable," says Gomez. The joint effort between the owners, the designer and the architects resulted in an airy new living room added to the rear of the house, facing the water. With its dependence on a traditional architectural vocabulary of gables, fanlights, sash windows, wood trim and paneling, the dramatic addition actually looks as if it might predate the original house.

A sitting area occupies center stage of the new living room, essentially a pavilion that sits at an angle to the rest of the spaces and provides those inside with a three-way view of the water. "It's the closest we could get to an outdoor room," explains Halsband. The architects animated the interior of the pavilion's walls and sixteen-and-a-half-foot ceiling with artfully crafted carpentry. Wood paneling and trim, including a dado of vertical siding around the base of the walls and a fascia of horizontal and vertical boarding around the top, give the space the look of a small

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OPPOSITE: Interior designer Mariette Himes Gomez saw the guesthouse and suggested that Kliment and Halsband restructure it. "The windows flood the living room with light, and the simply furnished interior creates a relaxed yet traditional atmosphere," observes Kliment.



BELOW: Gomez introduced an open feeling to the space with sofas covered in pale Manuel Canovas fabric. The Persian carpet is from Rosecore. ABOVE: In the dining area of the pavilion, wheel-back chairs, with Clarence House upholstery fabric, surround a pedestal table.





"The space is given warmth by the mostly stylized animal motif," he explains. In the Great Room, upholstered furniture is accented by an antler-and-brass table and an English drop-leaf table. Twig tables and brass lamp from A Smith Antiques, antler chandeliers from Crystal Farm, cotton print for chairs, ottomans and window treatment, and sofa plaid, from Ralph Lauren, Stark leopard-design carpet.

Mrs. McKee. She's a sportswoman and also very chic."

Smith rejects the current label of "designer" in favor of the more traditional word *decorator*. "It was good enough for Billy Baldwin, and it's good enough for me," he insists. To him, part of being a decorator is keeping down the size of his office staff so that there is a feeling of intimacy. He prides himself on maintaining a personal touch and therefore will only accept clients with whom he can

develop a good working relationship.

For the log cabin, the assignment was to enhance what is quirky and charming about life in the woods without simulating summer camp. "I like following the Billy Baldwin philosophy: simplicity, suitability and sympathy with the owner and the architecture," says Smith.

The primary challenge was the cabin itself. "I didn't want to overwhelm the architecture," he explains. He helped select the honey tone of



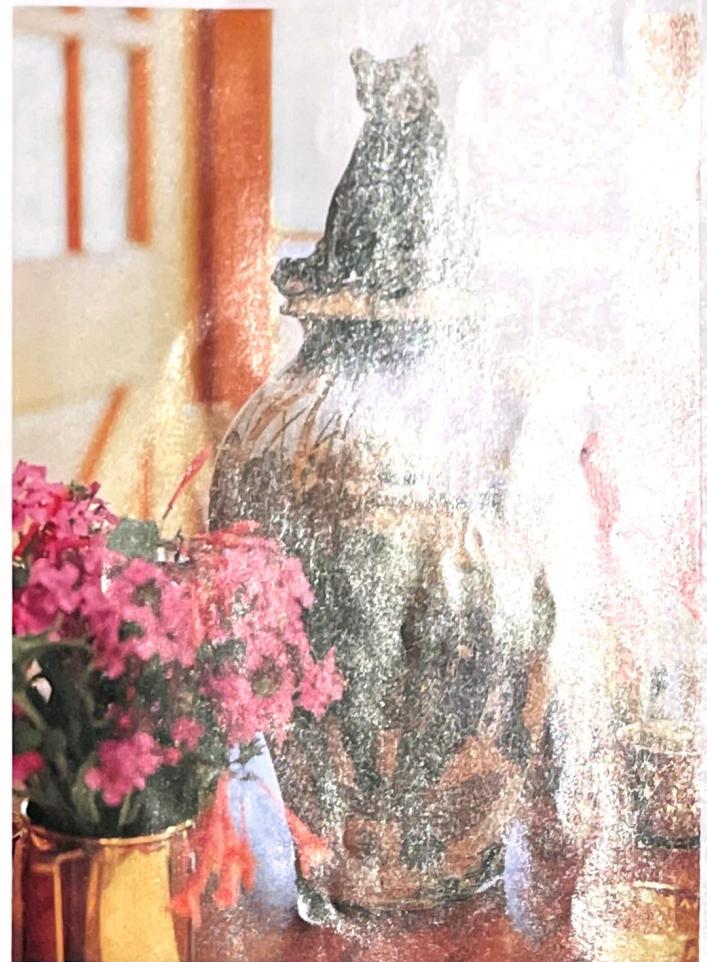
the Walls, floors and ceilings. But the tone is not consistent in intensity. "The patterns of the logs, the color and patterns of the stone for the fireplaces—I wanted them to blend in and hold their own."

"The house is full of contrasts," Smith continues. "It's all about combining the delicate with the rough." That theme is announced in the entrance hall, where a wood hallstand with deer-antler hooks shares space with a gilt-framed mirror, a nine-

from Colorado and a massive stone fireplace lending undeniable grandeur in the manner of the stately Adirondack lodges built during the nineteenth century. "We had to be careful not to be cute," says Smith. "It's not dainty. There's a boldness to the design." Unable to find a sufficiently large antique carpet, he commissioned a Bessarabian-style leopard-print carpet "to create an island of comfort and luxury in the room." He chose a red-and-tan linen

"I think my favorite aspect of the design is that it's direct without being cute," Smith says. BELOW LEFT: The dining area within the Great Room features an understated wood table surrounded by rush-seated ladderback chairs. Phyllis McKee commissioned the woven wall hanging of animal figures specifically for the space. Throughout the cabin, the interior logs have been stained a radiant honey hue.

BELOW: "Both of us are quite taken with the salt-glazed pottery," he says. "The artist draws on the piece, which adds texture—it's gutsy." A covered jar stands on the dining table amid antique brass beakers filled with wildflowers.



teenth-century oak side table bears an English pot in the shape of a tree stump, and a pair of brass candlestick lamps are topped with plaid shades. "It's not my usual vocabulary," says Smith, "but it seemed perfect there." The rug is personalized with an image of Fort McKee at one end and Phyllis McKee's black Labrador retriever, Andy, at the other.

The Great Room lives up to its name, with deer-antler chandeliers

damask for chairs and ottomans and put a Scottish wool plaid on the sofa.

Rustic jug or brass candlestick lamps are topped with raw silk lampshades edged with braid woven in red, gold and blue. A low table with a base made of antlers sits in front of the sofa, and a nineteenth-century English twig table stands between the chairs. The pine armoire is lined with red linen fabric so that it may be opened and used as a bar.

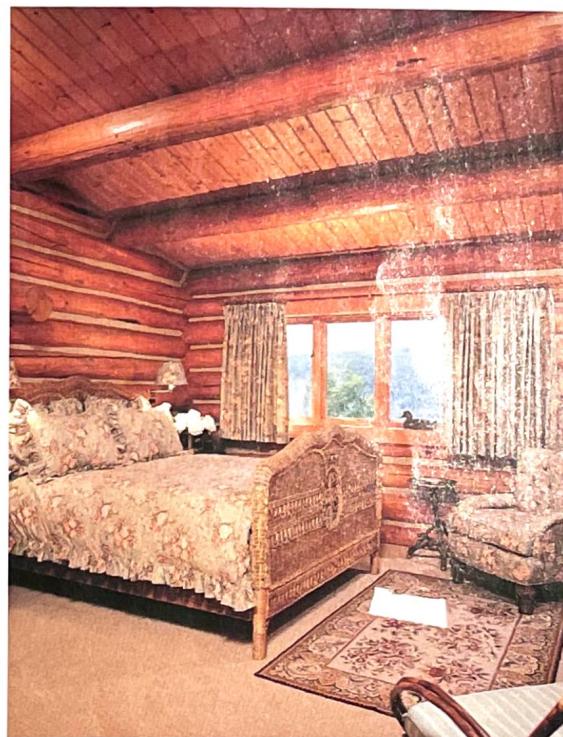
"The Baldwin approach is to order the room with a lot of upholstered furniture, then complete the design with antiques and modern conveniences," says Smith. "I warned the client to be aware of the monastic quality of the room, because it was not going to be filled up. With so much space, it's more difficult. It's not what you put in but what you leave out that's important. That goes back to my signature: symmetry and

"I wanted a modern-day version of a lodge à la Theodore Roosevelt."



"The cabin isn't filled with objects, but the ones that are there really count," Smith says. LEFT: A twig side table is paired with a twig chair in a guest bedroom. The basket at left is of birch bark. Antique Adirondack antler lamp with bears is from Newel Art Galleries.

BELOW: The same guest bedroom features a 19th-century-style wicker bedstead that is complemented by a small English brass-and-root table and a tufted chair. Wall-to-wall sisal and antique needlepoint rug from Stark.



sparseness. I don't call it minimal, I call it what's necessary."

The leopard print is echoed by panther velour upholstery on an extravagant antler chair in a seating area near the staircase. Accents include a cabinet that has a painted fishing scene, a lamp with a plaid shade and a base made from a minia-

ture English letter box, and a chain-stitch rug. An Austrian carved "bear box" comes from the decorator's shop, A Smith Antiques. "I wanted a modern-day version of a lodge à la Theodore Roosevelt," says Smith. "I didn't want to go too far in making it into a museum piece, however." An Austrian cuckoo clock hangs in the

stairwell where "you don't have to walk into it."

The dining area is within the Great Room—comprising a simple circular table and American rush-seated chairs. Although Smith often uses works of art in the houses he decorates, in this case, he believes the architecture primarily provided the art. His client commissioned a wall hanging depicting abstract animal figures. On tables in the dining and living areas are salt-glazed pottery jars, with ani-

OPPOSITE: "My ideas for the master bedroom were stimulated by contrast," says the designer. "I loved diverging from the rusticity with lace and classic furnishings." Juxtaposed with a cedar-and-maple bed frame, a pine mirror hangs above an antique pine table that has wells filled with begonias. Chain-stitch rug, damask on chaise longue, and cotton print on bed and window shades from Ralph Lauren.

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mals on their lids, by Eileen Murphy.

The master bedroom, on the ground level, continues Smith's aesthetic of opposites. A crystal chandelier hangs in front of the stone fireplace, illuminating an intimate seating area. Another antique "bear box" is perched on the mantel. The chaise longue is upholstered in white wool damask, and a chair is covered in a floral print of white, mauve and moss that is also used on the window shades. Looking out on the forest are windows framed in white lace. A bleached-log bed is dressed in the same floral print. An antique pine table is surmounted by a mirror in an ornately carved pine frame. "The house had to be done for winter weather but still look and be cool in the summer," adds Smith.

In one of the two guest bedrooms upstairs, Smith arranged a twig chair and console table with an antique Adirondack antler lamp with bears and a fringed shade. "That crazy fringed lampshade started the whole idea of making something special of lampshades," says Smith. A carved

**Smith helped select the honey tone of the logs for the walls, floors and ceilings.**

bear on the mirror frame looks down from the wall. Covering the wicker bed is a pale-green-and-pink floral print, also used on an upholstered chair, draperies and lampshades.

In the end, one of the most impressive spaces is the front deck, with its rough-hewn furniture and view of rolling hills to the west. "The house is about being a part of the outside, not trying to bring the outside in," says Smith. "Mrs. McKee takes long walks with the dog in the late afternoon in the forest, then she comes back for coffee. She can fully *use* the house, and that's why she loves it." □



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