

Hill Country Roundup

A COLLECTION OF HISTORIC
STRUCTURES MAKES
ITSELF AT HOME IN TEXAS

Landscape Design by Rosa Finsley and Jon Ahrens
Text by Christopher Hall/Photography by Robert Reck



In his epic novel *Texas*, James Michener describes in one extended passage the 1845 migration of German settlers to the Hill Country of central Texas, near what would become the town of Fredericksburg. Leaving Austin, wrote Michener, the settlers “found themselves surrounded by low, wooded

hills of the most enchanting variety, graced by exquisite valleys hiding streamlets. The scene changed constantly as they moved westward, now opening out into vistas, now closing in so that they could see only short distances ahead.”

The countryside around Fredericksburg is still as

Michener portrayed it, a land “rich in hills and tumbling streams,” and it was here, in 1994, that Jack and Diana Gotcher began to build their ranch house. At the time, however, they had no idea that the project would last seven years. Nor could they know the unique form their home would eventually take, a com-

“It’s big but intimate,” Diana Gotcher says of the house she and her husband, Jack, share in Fredericksburg, Texas. Diane Lohman, a consultant on the project, created the floor plan, which links several historic structures with one built in 1994. OPPOSITE: A Dutch barn forms the living area. Clarence House paisley fabric. ABOVE: A rear porch.

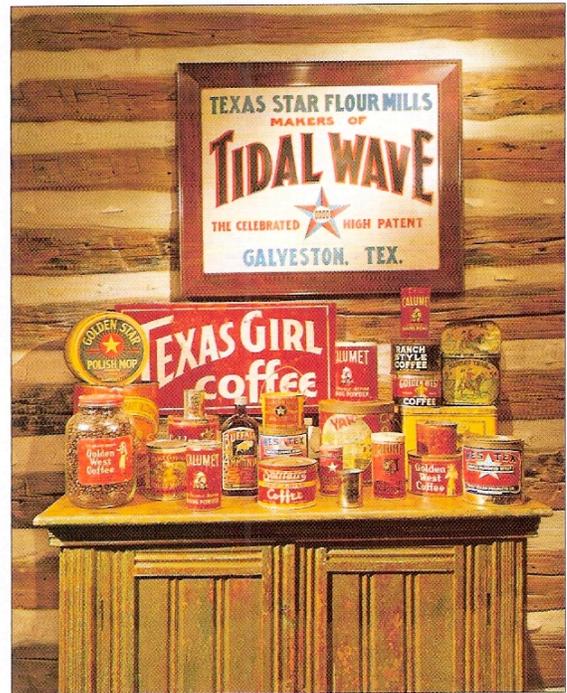
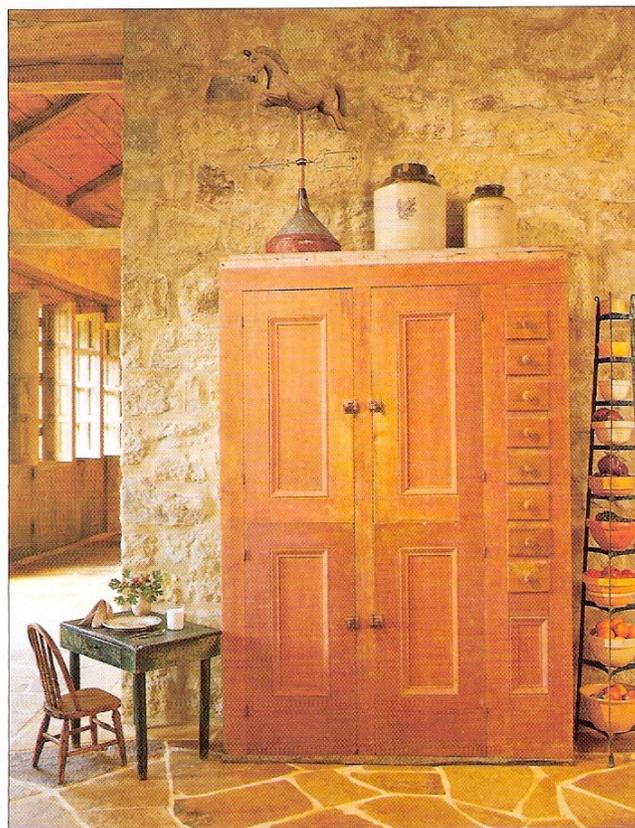




ABOVE: A set of French leather chairs is grouped near a fireplace in the sitting and dining area next to the kitchen. RIGHT: A circa 1830s painted cupboard from Maine dominates a wall. Flanking it are a child's table and chair and an iron pot rack. The horse weathervane is antique.

position of historic buildings brought to the site and gracefully adapted for life in the 21st century.

"When we first moved here, we built a limestone-faced guesthouse to live in while we decided on a main house," says Diana Gotcher. "Jack and I wanted a place for our family to gather." The couple acquired a 19th-century double-crib log cabin, envisioning it as a guest room and bath somehow connected to a main residence. But they had trouble deciding what, exactly, to build on the 450-acre site, a plateau that gently falls away in a grassy slope and a series of rock ledges to a creek.

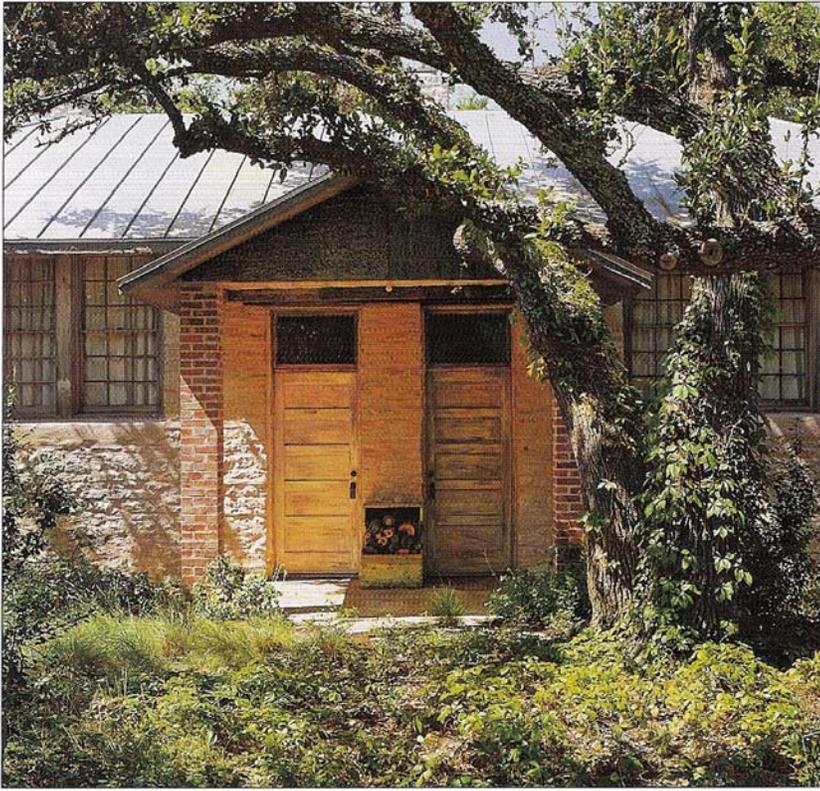


ABOVE: Vintage containers and a sign top a Mexican cabinet. OPPOSITE: "We spend a majority of our time there, bird-watching and enjoying the longhorns in the back pasture," Diana Gotcher says of a porch off the master bedroom. Ralph Lauren Home drapery fabric.

The turning point came during a trip to Vermont, where they met an antiques dealer who lived in a converted 18th-century New World Dutch barn. The dealer had a similar, though disassembled, barn for sale, and the couple were smitten. They bought it and later purchased a second double-crib, a late-19th-century log cabin, and a 1900s two-room schoolhouse from Long Cove, Texas. "I told Diana she was crazy when she bought the schoolhouse," recalls Jack Gotcher. "It was just a pile of rocks, but she could visualize what it would be."

Having assembled a stock of historic buildings, the Gotchers consulted with local home design specialist Diane Lohman to develop a scheme for melding them into a single residence. "Diane is very good at taking old structures and placing them together in a way that fits," explains Diana



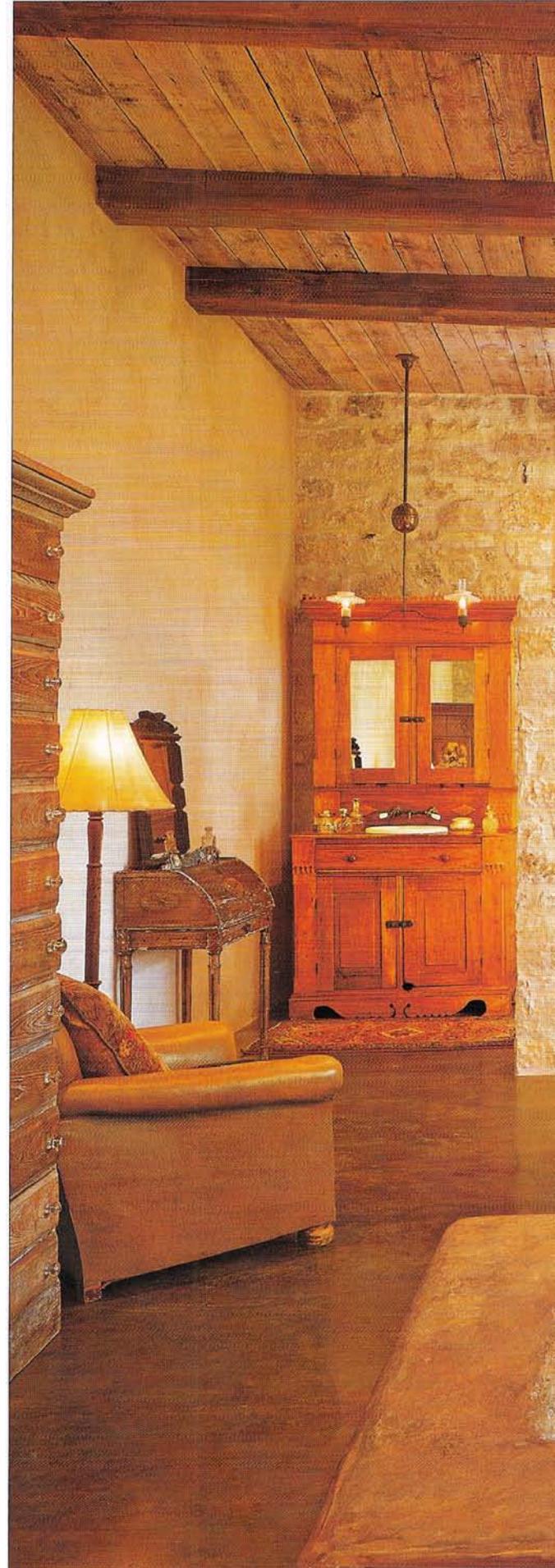


"I told Diana she was crazy when she bought the schoolhouse. It was a pile of rocks, but she could visualize what it would be."



Top: A 1900s schoolhouse from Long Cove, Texas, is home to the master bedroom. The entrance was rebuilt using original stones and bricks. ABOVE: The chalkboard walls were torn out and replaced with ones covered in lath and plaster. The bed is from Ralph Lauren Home.

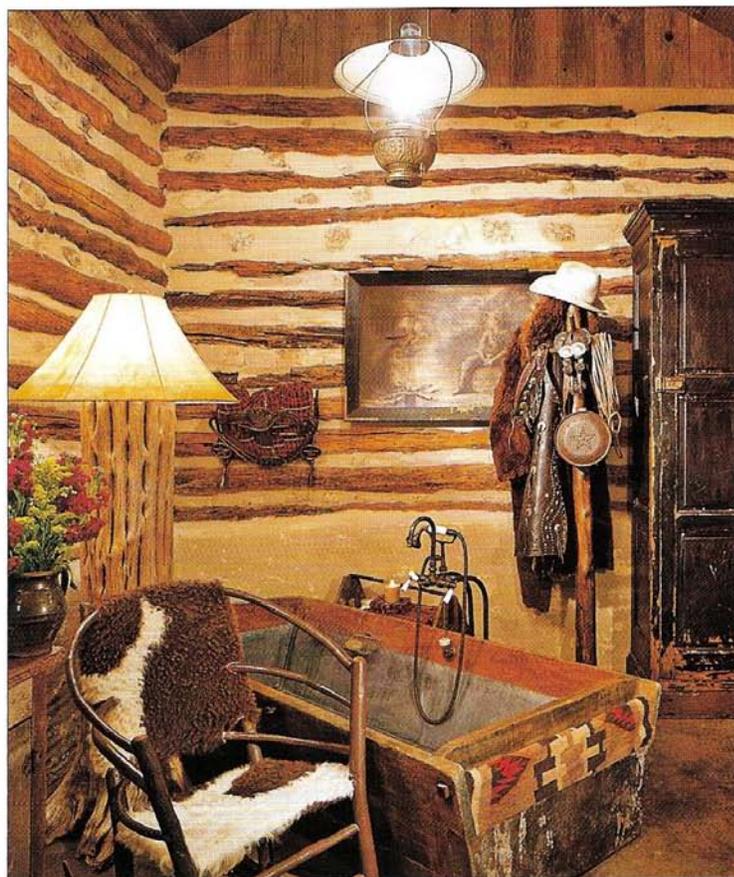
RIGHT: The bath "occupies one of the two classrooms," Diana Gotcher explains. "A limestone partition screens the recessed shower and vanity areas in the rear." At left is a cypress chest of drawers from Louisiana. A kerosene light fixture hangs above the concrete tub.







ABOVE: A double-crib log cabin, from Rico, Texas, "provides guests with a cozy sleeping chamber," says Jack Gotcher. "You can see the artistry of saddle notching in the exposed joinery." Bootjacks and Meyer pottery fill the cupboard. Ralph Lauren Rome bed pillows and shams.



RIGHT: In the bath, an antique hog scaldler serves as a tub; a Native American rug becomes a bath mat. At left is a saguaro floor lamp. FAR RIGHT: Rosa Finsley and Jon Ahrens, who landscaped the property, planted wine cups, daisies, lantana and snake herb at the pool's edge.



Gotcher. "We wanted a house that would be warm and inviting, a place where people could visit and feel at home." Lohman came up with a plan that links the old buildings and the original guesthouse in a linear formation along the edge of the plateau. Each

structure is topped with a traditional Hill Country standing-seam metal roof.

At the center of the house is the Vermont Dutch barn. Massive wood posts and beams support a 27-foot-high cathedral ceiling finished in old barn boards planed by Jack

Gotcher, and the exterior walls of Texas limestone recall the fachwerk, or half-timbered, structures built in Fredericksburg by the 19th-century German settlers. A freestanding stone fireplace divides the space into living and dining areas, which are warmly fur-



nished, as is the rest of the house, with American and European antiques and with the couple's extraordinary collections of Texana, Hill Country furniture, folk art, and cowboy and Indian artifacts.

To one side of the barn, a kitchen featuring antique

hand-hewn beams appears to be simply a later addition, and a hallway leads to the two-room schoolhouse, which is now the master bedroom. The removable wall bisecting the schoolhouse was replaced with a double rock wall to separate the bedroom from the bath.

Existing door and window openings were reconstructed, the two coat rooms became walk-in closets, and the concrete floors were made to look worn, a nod to the school's original concrete floor. Just off the bedroom is one of several porches overlooking

the creek, the pool and the back pasture. "We spend a lot of time outside in the temperate months," says Diana Gotcher. "There's a beautiful transformation in the spring, and the porch is a favorite spot for breakfast. **In** the win-

continued on page 254

HILL COUNTRY ROUNDUP

continued from page 211

ter, we get quite a few migrating birds. It's my favorite season here."

On the other side of the barn, stone steps lead from the living area to the double-crib cabins, which were transformed into a pair of unique guest quarters. Bedrooms and baths occupy the cribs. One bath boasts an antique hog scald for a tub, and the pass-throughs became sitting rooms. Beyond the double-cribs lies a cozy study, which was fashioned from a log cabin chinked with limestone in typical Hill Country German style. And beyond that is the Gotchers' original guesthouse.

The fact that the different structures harmonize so well is due in part to the landscaping. Designed by Rosa Finsley, a leading Texas expert in native plants, and Jon Ahrens, it seems to envelop the house, blurring the boundary between what was planted and what was already there. "The Gotchers wanted the house to look like it had been nestled into the site for many years," says Finsley, "and they were very careful to preserve the vegetation." Native oak and pecan trees shade patios, and the path to the front door winds through a new buffalo-grass

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meadow fringed in spring with Texas bluebonnets. The swimming pool is perched on a stone ledge, enhanced with relocated boulders. Surrounding it are beds of daisies, lantana, snake herb and wine cups.

Jack and Diana Gotcher will tell you they didn't set out to build their dream house. "We never envisioned ourselves in a place like this," says Diana Gotcher. "We always thought we'd be in an adobe-style house, but what fits here is rock and log. Our home evolved simply because we gave it time to evolve." And the result, according to Jack Gotcher, has been satisfying: "It says a lot about this house, this land, that even though our kids are grown and have busy lives of their own, they still love to spend time here." □