

# *The Cabin's Story*

Once upon a time, a little cabin nestled amongst the loden-cloaked spruces and coin-gilded aspens of a canyon in northern Colorado. Its glory days were long past. It had been birthed upon the mountainside during the bright summer of 1929, the fair handiwork of a young miner named Harold with the help of his friends, the other miners. You see, Harold was lonely. He toiled six



days a week at the mine; only on Sundays did he trudge the seven long miles down canyon into town, where he spent the sweet afternoon with his lovely wife, Gladys, and young son, Harold Jr., before climbing back up again in the evening. Harold built the cabin so that he could bring his family to the mining camp with him, finishing it in the crisp, early fall before another snowy canyon winter made trekking in and out uncertain.

Harold Jr. grew from age 7 to 17 while living in the little cabin. Things were pretty rustic when they first moved there. They hauled buckets of water up the hill from the creek to fill the claw-foot tub and kitchen sink; they used an outhouse; light was by kerosene lantern; heat was from the fireplace and the wood cookstove; and cold storage was in the root cellar sunk into the hill. The auto road stopped two miles below them, and the last part of the journey had to be made on foot or mule along the rocky creekside path. It wasn't until the WPA came through during the Depression that they could blast through the narrow canyon and finish the road thirteen more miles up to the next mountain hamlet. But once that was done, electricity followed on its heels, and modernization came fast. In 1939, Harold Sr. and Gladys built a bigger, flagstone house further up the hill, and the family moved into that. The peach, apple, and walnut trees were soon forgotten. The little cabin began its long retirement.

The original cedar shake roof weathered to a silver-grey, and the chocolate-brown paint on the siding began to crack. Harold Jr. went to college and became a lawyer, and moved to California. The cabin received its own electricity, a well pump connected to the old creek cistern (which was preserved in a culvert underneath the canyon road), and indoor plumbing by the end of WWII, and for a time, it served as a guesthouse when Harold Jr., his wife Margaret, and the grandkids came to visit. A decade or so later, Harold Sr. replaced the now-leaking cedar shake roof with a new green metal one, added propane service, and began to rent the little cabin for retirement income. By the time their grandson Harry was back in Colorado studying medicine, Harold Sr. and Gladys had passed on,





and the little cabin was badly in need of some upkeep. The mint-green paint on the cabin's trim was nearly gone, and the brown on the shingle siding was losing its battle against the weather. Harold Jr. wanted to rent out both the cabin and the flagstone house, so he enlisted Harry's help in doing some repairs.

replacing it with fiberglass. They ripped out a lot of the old drywall and replaced it with sheets of wood paneling. They installed track lighting in the living room and painted cupboards and trim the ubiquitous avocado of the time. They covered the old pine plank floor with new plywood and

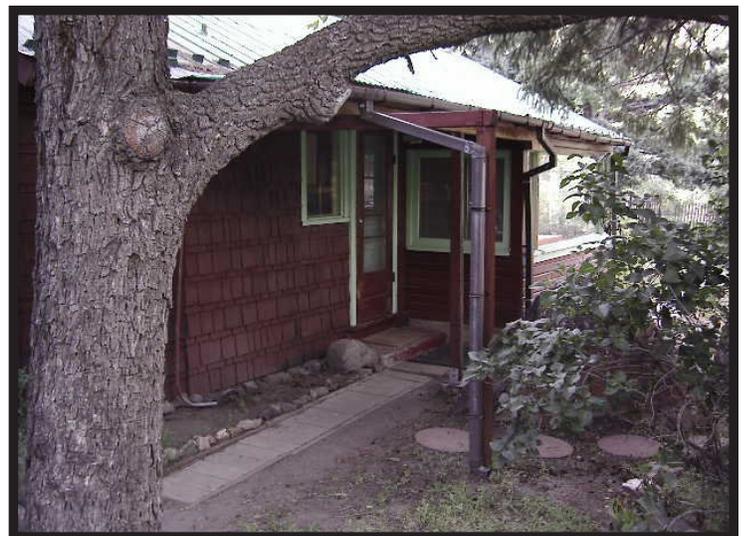
carpeted the whole place with a sculptured brown/gold loop over a layer of glued-down foam. They removed a leaking window in the east wall of the living room and replaced it with a 54" square picture window. They finally painted the cabin a different color after nearly fifty years—this time a dark barn red. Refreshed and revived, the cabin embarked upon another three-and-a-half decades as a rental.



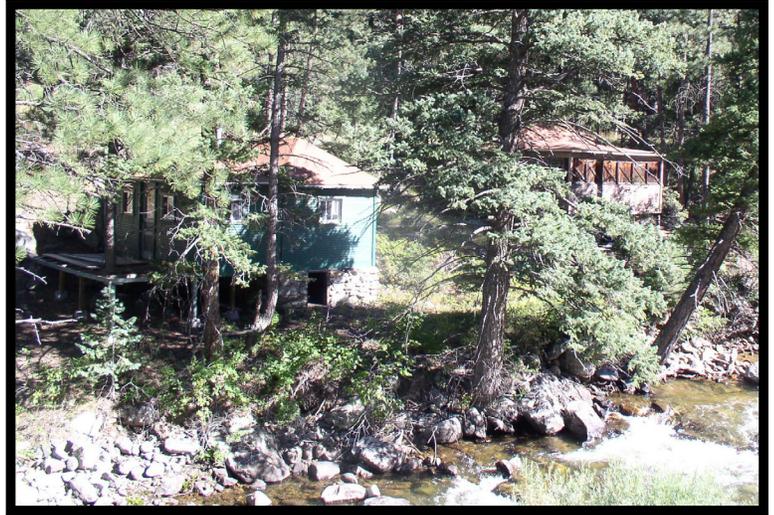
July of 1989 dawned hot and baking. The spectre of global warming was beginning to rear its head, though few knew it yet. The forest was a tinderbox. A careless sightseer tossed a lit cigarette out his car window at Black Tiger Gulch, only an eighth of

a mile downstream from the little cabin. Chinook winds caught the spark like the opening of a blast furnace and the forest erupted in flames. Local firefighters called in state and federal help to battle the blaze as it denuded the mountainside around the properties. By the time the worst wildfire in Colorado history was contained, it had destroyed 44 homes and burned 2100 acres, but miraculously, both the cabin and the flagstone house had been spared. The fire had burned to within 100 yards of the little cabin, but huddled against the hillside, it—and its fruit trees—had survived.

The millennium rolled over, and Harold Jr. was getting old. He had long since retired and was living with his daughter Heather in California. Throughout the waning years of the 20th century, he'd visit his rental properties every summer, staying in an old trailer and meticulously repairing the stone terrace walls, every one of which he or his father had built by hand. But he was wearing out. The cabin was showing its age, and so was he. Harold's hair was snow-white and the little cabin's paint was peeling again. In 2005, he sold both houses to a man who just wanted to rent them for income and really had no interest in even keeping them in good repair.



For five years, Jim Turner just collected rent. When a big rock rolled down the hill and onto the cabin's roof, busting the rain gutter so that it channeled its runoff right over the foundation and into a bedroom wall, he ignored it, letting the wall grow mold and rot. When the roof began to leak around the chimney, he put visqueen and a bucket on the mantel. When more leaks appeared in the kitchen and hall, he gave the tenants more buckets. He refused to fix the pellet stove. The renters moved out. The chokecherries took over. Turner couldn't pay his mortgage. The cabin went into foreclosure.



The little cabin Harold Sr. so lovingly built for Gladys was vacant, and headed for the same fate—abandonment—as the sad, windowless shells on the other side of the creek...those little hollow relicts of the nearly-forgotten mining camp of nigh a century ago.



January 2011. Lynne and Allison were starting to get discouraged. The divorce meant that they needed to sell the house in town and get a smaller place, but they weren't having any luck finding one. Twelve ferrets, two arowanas and a dog meant that a condo was a longshot; they really needed a detached house with a strong floor and a yard, but those within the city limits were all just too expensive, given their new financial situation. Houses were a lot cheaper in the surrounding areas, but once you live in Boulder, you never want to leave.

Another evening, another Zillow search. Lynne entered the least-constraining parameters: area—Boulder County; size—any; bedrooms—1+; property type—any; price—under \$200K. “Let's hope something comes up tonight,” she sighed to her daughter. Return.

Cheapest first. Vacant land; useless. Now a few condos, starting around \$120K for a one bedroom, but none on the ground floor that can support a 150 gallon fishtank. One townhouse out in Superior, but its garage takes up the ground floor—no good again. The tiny fixer-upper in Old Town Lafayette that needs all new plumbing and wiring plus a new roof is still listed at \$150K. I suppose one of these days we ought to look at it, though the photos aren't encouraging. But wait! What's this? I haven't seen this one before! How could I have missed it? A little cabin in the foothills on 10 acres! Built in 1929, needs new septic, short sale, buyer must have cash or 30% down, and only \$160K—well, that's us! Small—800 sq. ft., two



bedrooms—and looks a bit run down, but that’s ok. I’m pretty good at fixing things up; it’ll be fun. You don’t get a spiffy new mansion for that price, and we don’t need one. Allison, what do you think of this place? Looks kinda cute in the pictures. Should we get Leslie to show it to us?

And so, after five months of trying negotiations with Big Soulless Bank, the little cabin came to have loving caretakers again. It was christened “Golden Acorn Ferret Cabilow” on May 20, 2011 and the Great Renovation began. In the beginning, only cosmetic and structural fixes were planned, like fixing the roof and well, putting in bamboo floors, refacing cabinets, painting, tiling, wallpapering, and such. But the first winter brought such high propane bills and such terrible ice dams that it was clear that a major energy-efficiency overhaul was in order as well. This would also let us make a personal dent in global warming by drastically cutting our fossil fuel usage. The propane furnace was retired in favor of a new pellet stove; solar panels were installed on the roof; an energy audit was done to guide insulation efforts; and dozens of tubes of caulk and cans of foam were bought to seal the many cracks and leaks that were heating the Great Outdoors. Attic insulation was tripled, and doubling of wall insulation began. Failing windows were replaced. Records were kept

on fuel usage, heating degree days, etc. so that energy performance could be tracked. Little by little, the Btus and kWhs declined, and are continuing to do so as the work progresses. And we are proud of the impact our reduced carbon footprint is having on the planet.

Perhaps the little cabin’s glory days aren’t long past after all. Maybe, just maybe, it has a 21st century calling as a beacon of light for energy-reduction retrofitting. Hopefully, through the Thousand Home Challenge, it can inspire others to rejuvenate old dwellings that would otherwise lie on the road to ruin.

