



"For the longest time, I knew that a mobile home had it all – except the aesthetics," says Point Reyes Station woodworker Stephen Marshall.

By Mike Litchfield,
Point Reyes Station

It would look perfectly at home on a prairie, next to an apple tree in a Thornton Wilder play, or tucked among the wind-racked cypresses out on Pierce Point. In fact, you could easily move Steve Marshall's 19th-century inspired farmhouse to any choice piece of land – including your own back yard – because the house is mounted on a trailer.

In addition to being mobile, the little house is seriously cute, even sitting on the asphalt outside Foresters Hall in Point Reyes Station. The morning I happened by, I was hell-bent to get to Toby's but had to have a look. I poked around for maybe 10 minutes, during which time several women also wandered through. Judging from the sounds they made – sounds that my beloved makes when she sees chocolate or cute shoes – they loved the house. And despite my pre-caffinated crankiness, even I had to admit it was well done.

Outside, there's a nice balance of white paint and natural wood. The proportions are beautiful. The porch is wide and inviting. Every handrail, stair tread and board edge is lovingly chamfered. Copper pipe balusters glow warmly, as do copper-clad door and windowsills. It's as tight as a boat. You couldn't slip an ace between the clapboards and trim, and the stainless steel screws on the porch decking line up like marching bands. This mania for detail even extends to the sage-green paint – shades of Martha Stewart! – used as accents inside and out, including a hand-lettered sign that says,

**LITTLE
HOUSE
ON THE
TRAILER**
For Sale
\$60,000

The price also includes red road reflectors at each corner and a California license plate. Priced to move, so to speak.

If anything, the little house's interior is even more ambitious. In roughly 200 square feet, Marshall has accommodated a large room with wainscoting, chair rails and crown molding, with the same eye for color and joinery as the exterior; a conventional RV propane heater set in a period mantelpiece, with a surround of punched tin "tiles"; a small all-in-one kitchen unit with a sink, undercounter refrigerator, two electric surface burners and a small pantry; an incinerating toilet which doesn't require a septic system; and, out the back door, an outdoor shower. Yet for all the stuff inside the little house, it feels roomy and bright. Much of the credit for that goes to its 10 ft. high cathedral ceiling—something you don't often see in an RV—and a generous number of windows. But the show-stopper is the house's fir flooring. Recycled from the cookhouse of a land-grant farm in Novato, the fir has the color of honey and the feeling of home.

When I finally met Steve Marshall, later that week, it was no surprise that he's been a cabinetmaker for more than 30 years. He even sounds like a woodworker, thoughtful and exact in his speech. So what prompted such a methodical man to build such a charming oddity, a turn-of-the-century farmhouse on wheels?

"I guess I arrived at the concept from several directions," Marshall said. "First of all I wanted the house to feel right. The

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architecture of, say, Point Reyes in 1910 defines so much of this area. It was the peak of the railroad era, yet it was also a period in which life hadn't changed all that much from a hundred years before it. There was a sense of continuity. So when I arrived here in 1973, after dropping out of Stanford and working as a carpenter for several years, it really felt like I'd come home."

"And the trailer...?" I prodded.

"Well," he continued, "that probably grew out the years I knocked around, learning my craft. A group of disaffected students such as myself put up a community of experimental homes – mostly geodesic domes – in the Portola Valley area. Domes are nomadic, affordable things that give people freedom, but as permanent structures they leave a lot to be desired.

"For the longest time, I knew that a mobile home had it all – except the aesthetics. For a while I lived in a dome next to a 1952 mobile home. I was quite happy. The dome gave me this big space and all my utilities were contained, compactly, in the mobile home. So I wondered about applying different surface treatments to the mobile home – windows, nice doors, wood trim and other civilizing touches. When I moved to Point Reyes Station and started buying lots and building real houses, my fascination with mobile homes receded, but it was probably bubbling in the background all the while."



"So what brought it to the surface?"

Steve Marshall thought a minute and said, "Economics. A few years back I bought Foresters Hall, a white elephant that I was able to renovate and turn into housing; it is now an apartment house with mixed use. But it took all that I had and more. So my next project needed to be something that I could afford to do."

"The second part of that answer is the economics – and logistics – of building in West Marin. It's unbelievable what builders and homeowners have to go through to build anything. A simple addition, for example, can easily cost \$100,000 or \$150,000 and what with all the permit compliance, can take two years to complete. On the other hand, my crew and I can turn around a little house in six weeks once the homeowners decide what finish details they want. It's completely customizable. And since it's delivered complete to the site, there's no on-site construction to rile up the neighbors.

"Plus there's a element of freedom that's appealing. If you want a writing studio or a home office, or a place to put up company, or a satellite building to park your kid in for several years before he or she goes off to college...it's a great solution. Later on, if you want to move it to another part of your property or even sell it, you're free to do so."

It was hard to fault Marshall's enthusi-

asm or his logic. But what about building codes, zoning and all that? In addition, I was still struggling with the notion of moving it. The mantel, the fir flooring, the blue sofa I was sprawled on – it all seemed so homey.

"Moving it is easy," Marshall noted. "There are a litany of things the county requires, but the move was simpler than I imagined. Permits included, it took about \$2,000 and a half day to move and set up the house. Technically, the little house is a recreational vehicle, but because the house and trailer together weigh less than 10,000 pounds, you don't even need a commercial chauffeur's license to move it."

"As far as local zoning codes, anyone can park an RV on their property. Living in the vehicle, while proscribed by local codes, is something of a gray area in practice. As long as it's not an occupied residence, it's legal, but out in the sticks usually nobody is looking. The closer you are to civilization, the more you're at the pleasure of your neighbors. So while the law is specific, its application varies from neighborhood to neighborhood. Ultimately, it has to do with respect for your neighbor: If you are not imposing on them and you're moving in something they find pleasing, chances are good that things will work out."

Steve Marshall's opinion is probably a fair take on the way things work out in the country. As The Citizen's deadline loomed, I was unable to get hold of anyone at county

offices who could offer a definitive opinion. But one local resource familiar with county ordinances shared a few off-the-record concerns. "Anything with the whiff of a permanent residence, such as an integral kitchen unit, immediately raises red flags to me. Likewise, incinerating toilets, which

can perform erratically if not scrupulously maintained – the county bans them outright in legal residences. You've got to realize that ours is a complaint-driven system, and homeowners get busted for the most trivial things. Before I committed to this dwelling, I'd want to have a long talk with the county."

Seems like reasonable advice. So, for the time being, till a homeowner's intended use can be squared with county ordinances, Stephen Marshall's Little House on the Trailer is a house in search of a home.

If you or your home is in search of a built-to-order house, contact Stephen Marshall at 663-1061, smarshall10@gmail.com. For more info: TheLittleHouseontheTrailer.com

Mike Litchfield, a Point Reyes resident and author of nine books on home design

and renovation, is host of KWMR's "Heading Home," which airs every other Saturday at 10 am. On April 26, Mike's guests will be Jerry Lunsford, discussing the Dance Palace's photovoltaic workshop, and The Little House's Stephen Marshall.

Habitat is a recurring section about our homes and gardens – produced entirely by the Citizen's marketing staff.

Here in West Marin, "home" can mean a house, cabin, trailer, ranch, or even a re-modeled chicken coup. Home often includes artwork made by us or our friends, photos of the landscape, friends and pets, and a food-producing garden outside the back door.

The garden may also be home to creative found sculptures, beautiful rocks, native plants, a few rabbits, raccoons, red-tailed hawks, black-tailed deer, out here the list goes on. We build a kinship with nature in our gardens.

Special sections often contain features produced by our advertising staff. If you or your business would like to participate in a special section, please contact Linda Petersen at 663-8232 or lpetersen@westmarincitizen.com.

LITTLE HOUSE ON THE TRAILER



A 19th century country house
~: on wheels ~:



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