

A Converted Farmhouse with Forever Charm

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEFF COLLINS

After years of spending weekends and summers at their little cabin on Big Pine Lake in Aitkin County, Bob and Sharon Navarre knew where they wanted to end up when Bob retired. It was New Year's Day 2017, when they noticed a "For Sale" sign just down the shoreline from their cabin. Bob called the real estate agent and asked if they could take a look at it. "Not now," he replied, "I'm going fishing." After the third phone call, the agent agreed to give them a showing.

What they found—and immediately purchased— was a "diamond in the rough," a four-bedroom house built around 1910. Included were a few outbuildings, four outhouses, about thirty acres, and one hundred and five feet of level, sandy lakeshore. The place was in need of updates; it had been the homestead of one of the Hazelton families—early settlers in Aitkin County—in the town once known as Cutler, Minnesota.

During the first two years of ownership, the Navarres didn't do any work on the house. Whenever they came up to their cabin, they would simply mow the lawn and check things out. Part of this time, friends stayed



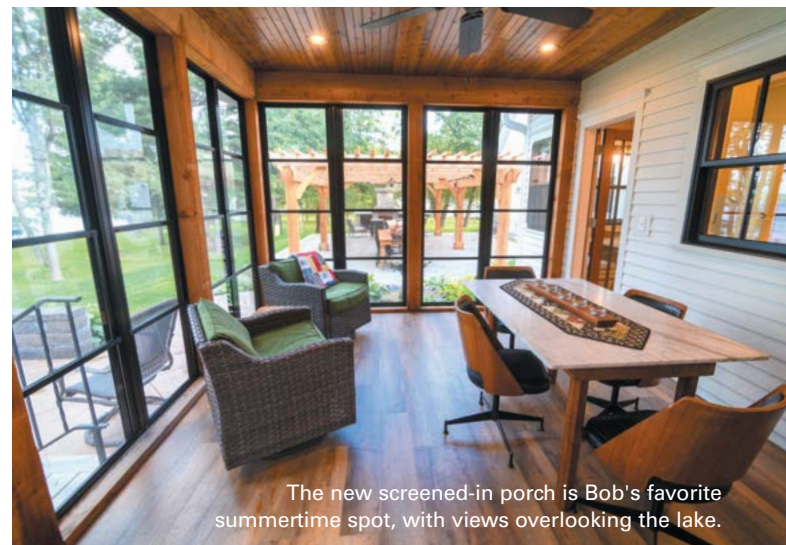
The den, which doubles as Sharon's crafting room, was the original dining room. Flea market finds, like this old tool chest, keep the historic feel of the home alive.



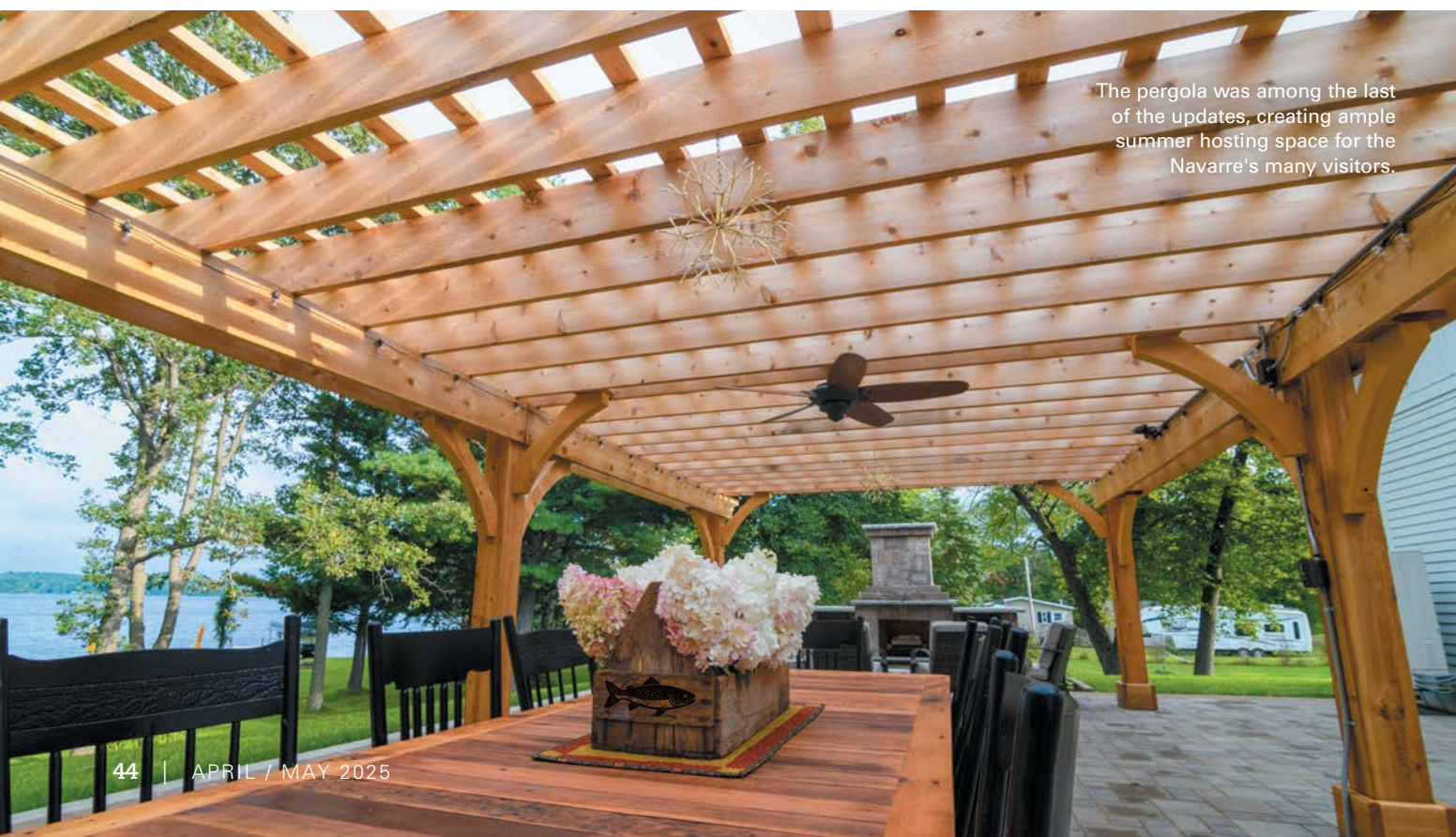
The facade of the farmhouse, with its fresh face lift and a new adjoining garage, provides a welcoming view from the road.



A front porch was added to the house and is enjoyed on a daily basis.



The new screened-in porch is Bob's favorite summertime spot, with views overlooking the lake.



The pergola was among the last of the updates, creating ample summer hosting space for the Navarre's many visitors.



Grandt Builders restored the original staircase and added a new newel to match the style of the original house.



This goose was Bob's first Christmas gift to Sharon and now welcomes people into the living room to gather around the fireplace.

at the house a couple of months while theirs was being built. Friend Jodi Wegge stresses that she is not one to believe in ghosts and that kind of hocus pocus, but she thought the place might be haunted. She mentions having heard footsteps on the stairs in the middle of the night and a conversation in the kitchen when she knew no one was there. "Nothing scary," says Wegge, "just friendly stuff." The Navarres have experienced none of that.

The house was more of a rebuild than a restore, but the Navarres, who knew the scale of work required going into it, didn't want a total demo. In 2019, they called four contractors. One never showed, two said tear it down, and Dale Grandt of Grandt Builders in Aitkin said, "We can make this work." That was music to Sharon's ears. "We just couldn't tear it down. When you think of the history of the place and the people involved, we just couldn't."

Dale and Carol Grandt have been in business since 2005. "I like to preserve whatever I can," says the high-end residential builder Dale Grandt, and that fit right in with the Navarres' philosophy. "It was an old Victorian-style house, and things were pretty crooked," he laughs.

There was a lot of shifting and leveling and shoring up to do. A basement had been installed back in the 1970s, and the main floor was left with less than enough support. A marble would have rolled from one side of the room to the other then, and the stairway needed a little attention, but it's like a new house now.

There are two new additions, all new windows, a new roof, new electrical done by Jeff Boyd Electric, and new plumbing by McGuire Mechanical, both located in Aitkin.

After consulting with Grandt Builders, the first thing the Navarres did was move a pole shed. They called local mover Leighton Straight of Straight House Movers, and the shed was moved across the road in no time.

"And then we gutted the place," says Sharon. It became a family affair. She got her brothers, nieces, and nephews together, gave them masks, hammers, and pry bars, and they went at it. The walls were old lath and plaster. They left the walls upstairs, opened up a wall downstairs to get rid of the chimney, and opened up a couple of doorways for better access to the new kitchen addition.

They found a patched hole in a wall where the previous owner had to get to his cement-block chimney because it plugged up one winter. He dropped an anvil down the chimney to unplug it. However, the anvil got caught partway down and had to be removed by opening both the wall and the side of the chimney. The chimney and anvil are long gone, but the patch (now also gone) was there to tell the story.

When removing the wide pine-plank floorboards, they discovered some old newspapers that had been laid out for insulation. One of the sports pages showed Bobby Jones winning a golf tournament. (He won the Grand Slam in 1930.) With the paper removed, floorboards were saved, refinished, and reused.

They turned one of the four bedrooms upstairs into a bathroom. They put an addition onto the house for a primary bedroom. "Downsizing was part of the plan but that didn't happen," grins Sharon. With three kids and four granddaughters, the place is busy with visitors and family. They kept their old cabin, a few hundred feet down the shoreline, for overflow.

In addition to the old pine floorboards that were reused, the light fixture in the bathroom is from the old house, along with the etched glass piece that is part of the pantry door. Most of the furnishings in the house were brought from their previous home in Shakopee. The dining room table that Sharon refinished seats up to sixteen people.

Sharon got her hands dirty during the restoration. She is especially proud of the front and rear entry doors. She refinished both. The front door was old and paint-splattered. The finished product is a beautiful tiger oak door with beveled glass and egg-and-dart detailing. Grandt Builders built the door jamb so the door fit. The old oak rear entry door is something Sharon had lying around, hoping one day to

find a use for it. "Nothing fancy except for the beautiful etched glass deer-in-the-woods scene. I'm a collector," Sharon admits. "What can I say?"

She laughed when talking about the new window over the kitchen sink. She was not present for the installation but soon noticed that she couldn't see through it. Sharon is not tall. The window had to be lowered (as did the bathroom medicine cabinet). Again, Grandt Builders had a chance to shine. "They are awesome to work with," she adds.

A front porch was added to the house, and the last two projects were the back patio and pergola, which completed the restoration. Maybe. "Never say never," says Sharon, who has repainted the dining room walls five times to get the right shade of gray. "You're never really done," she admits.

Bob retired in January of this year after flying for thirty-nine years. That's over 25,000 hours, a lot of it for Delta. He started flying in high school and got his license at age eighteen. Now, Bob enjoys the screened porch in the summertime; in the winter he's in the breakfast nook. Both overlook the lake. Sharon joins him when she's not painting walls.

"We have no regrets," say the Navarres. They're on beautiful Big Pine Lake and only two hours away from the Twin Cities, so the kids show up often. They talked for years about their retirement home, and they found it. Bob articulates what they both feel: "It was pure luck finding this place." 📍



The custom kitchen was designed and built by Traditional Cabinetry of Brainerd.



The original kitchen is now a cozy music room.



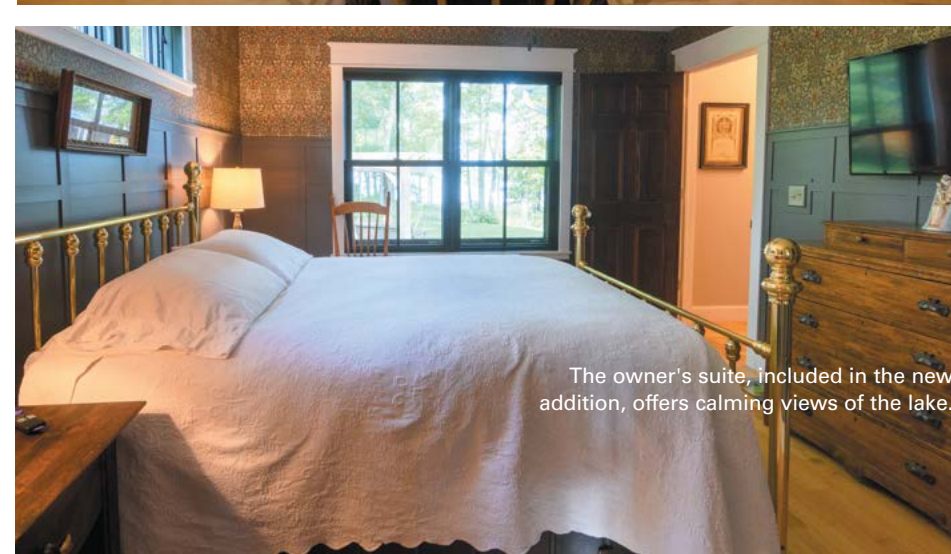
Every farmhouse needs a farmhouse table. This one seats up to sixteen people.



A transom window in the original house was re-purposed as the kitchen pantry door.



The kitchen breakfast nook gets plenty of natural light.



The owner's suite, included in the new addition, offers calming views of the lake.