



Rural Life

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The Truth About Farmhouses

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I admit it: I'm a fool for any decorating magazine that features a farmhouse. And it's not just because I like decorating magazines and I live in a farmhouse.

It's also because I am highly dubious that any farmhouse idyllic enough to be on the cover of a magazine is (a) a real farmhouse or (b) inhabited by a real farmer.

Let me put it this way. I have seen many magazine farmhouses, and I have seen many farmhouses. Rarely the twain shall meet.

Frankly, most farmhouses you see on the newsstand are merely someone's fantasy of a farmhouse. The typical scenario involves a big wooden house, porch swings, tin roofs, high ceilings, claw-foot tubs, hardwood floors and porcelain sinks. Most of the time, you can bet the farm that a hefty bankroll and interior decorators helped create that fabulous farmhouse look. The more primitive and authentic and distressed everything looks, the more it costs.

Rarely is anyone who resides in these picture-perfect farmhouses associated with agriculture in

any form, shape or fashion. This is usually the case even if the house is located on land that the owner dreamily refers to as a farm or if the home once housed an actual farmer.

That's because, generally speaking, real farmers don't live in farmhouses like the ones in *Southern Living*.

Most of the farmhouses around here were built in the 1970s, when the dairy-farming industry was in its heyday. The average dairy farmer was young and prosperous enough to build a new house. These practical-minded folk had no time or patience for old wooden houses requiring constant maintenance. They didn't want to go back to the era of sloping floors or rooms with 12-foot ceilings that cost a mint to heat and cool. They liked the same comfort, convenience and utility bills that everyone else in the 1970s liked: practical brick houses on concrete slabs with low ceilings, small windows and wall-to-wall carpet.

Our own house is a sort of strange hybrid between these '70s ranch houses and an old wooden house. The original version was a plain box constructed entirely of heart-pine lumber with tongue-and-groove floors, ceilings and wood lathe walls. We've never researched its exact provenance, but we do know it was built before the 1950s, when my husband's grandfather purchased the farm. One story is that it was built from the recycled lumber of a much older house that was torn down on the property.

In some ways, however, our farmhouse more closely resembles a 1970s ranch than anyone's idea of a 60-plus-year-old farmhouse. The 9-foot ceilings are not particularly tall for a house of that era. The roof is low-pitched and shingled, not tin. The house did not even have a front porch until my father-in-law added one.

As I like to say, our house has little of the charm and all of the problems of an old house.

In the original section (my in-laws constructed a large addition in the 1970s), one bedroom has no closet, while the other two have microscopic ones. Imagining how my husband's parents raised seven children here with virtually no storage for their stuff boggles my mind. Most rooms lack an overhead light fixture, or if they have one, it is likely not operated by a wall switch. (Pull chains are not just a decorative touch in our house.) Instead, the wall switches control the wall sockets. (I still haven't figured out why anyone would want to turn wall sockets on and off.) We have no hallways, so it is impossible to access a bathroom without passing through a bedroom.

That makes it awkward for houseguests who need to go in the middle of the night. No hallways means that every room has two or three doorways, creating a major headache when it comes to arranging furniture. Our roofline sags slightly because the house is apparently sinking. There is scarcely a square angle or a level floor in the entire joint.

Somehow, we didn't even get hardwood floors out of the deal. Only our subfloor, more of that tongue-and-groove heart-pine, is wooden. No doubt, it could be beautiful if restored. However, it is buried under a layer of carpet, plywood and 1950s linoleum. Once, during a kitchen renovation, I managed to get a peek at the subfloor and saw daylight shining between the boards. Mind you, I love vintage wooden floors – but not enough to sleep in a ski parka. So even if we did pull up the carpet and manage to remove the fossilized linoleum and glue (probably unleashing a toxic cloud of lead and asbestos in the process) without destroying the heart-pine planks underneath, we would still face the issue of how to insulate our lovely, authentic, freezing floors.

In a typical raised wooden house, this problem could easily be solved by adding insulation under the subfloor. Here again, we face a unique quandary. Instead of being 3 or 4 feet off the ground like most old houses, ours is barely 2. Our crawl space is more like a slither-on-your-belly-like-a-reptile space. This is one reason I haven't even bothered trying to find out what someone would charge us to lie in the dirt, in a tight, dark space while insulating a surface a few inches above his face. It might be cheaper to build a whole new house.

Besides, we probably couldn't talk anyone into descending into that dark netherworld, anyway. I suspect there are snakes down there. I know for a fact there are mice, lizards, spiders, roaches and a whole lot of cat poop. One time, our dog came down with mange, which first manifested itself as a small bald spot on the top of her head. Before we realized it was mange, however, we sincerely believed she had gotten the bald spot – get this – by skinning her head while chasing armadillos under the house at night. (Just FYI: If you think your dog's bald spot is from chasing armadillos under the house, but it's really mange, you might be a redneck.)

Or maybe you just live in a real farmhouse, in which case you probably don't have a mudroom: a special place just for removing, cleaning and storing wet, muddy shoes and boots. To be honest, it always irks me to see a mudroom in one of these fancy-schmancy magazine farmhouses. It's not only because I doubt whether anyone in those houses ever really needs a mudroom but also because our house (where farmers and farm boys get absolutely filthy all

the time) doesn't have one. As far as I'm concerned, if you have never had to vacuum the inside of your washing machine, you don't deserve a mudroom.

But hey, I'm not complaining. I am thankful for our home, despite its quirks. Not to mention that, unlike those gorgeous designer farmhouses, it comes complete with a real farm, a real farmer, real farm boys, a real family history and a real lifestyle that those folks in the magazines can never buy.

They are living the fantasy, but I'm livin' the dream.

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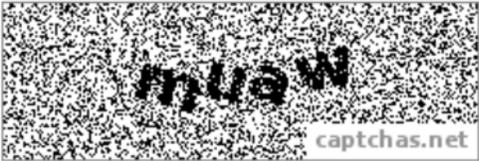
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