

# STORY IN STONE

Decades of dedication made Newaygo County

house a rock hound's dream



TOM RADEMACHER

The year is 1927, and while anglers coax fish from the cerulean waters of Newaygo County's Hess Lake, Burton D. Smith is onshore, engaged in a special pursuit of his own.

It is something that he would work at for 40 years, using tools no more sophisticated than a hammer, nails and a mixing stick.

But what his hands have rendered is perhaps as much a testament to the working man and woman as any modern Labor Day celebration.

Beginning that day in 1927 — and not stopping until 1967, the year before he died at the age of 90 — Burton Smith spent part of virtually every week fashioning a home that its present owners believe is not only a geologist's dream but truly one of a kind.

"People don't just visit our house," says Tina Rosato, who lives here with husband Phil Evanzo.

"They read it."



April 1996  
Hess Lake home was bought by Phil Evanzo and T. Rosato who extensively remodeled the home's interior.

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Though the couple never met Burton Smith, they were able to resurrect fragments of his life from two grandchildren — Laurelyne Harris of Saginaw County and Noel Daniels of Arizona.

According to them, Smith had enlisted to fight in the Spanish-American War of 1898 as a 17-year-old. He was fluent in Spanish, and the Army needed translators.

He was captured, though, and served time as a POW in the Philippines. To torture Smith, his captors forced him to eat bamboo slivers, knowing that to ingest them would create lifelong gastrointestinal problems.

After his release, Smith made his way to Michigan, met and married his wife, Maude, and bought the Hess Lake home in 1917.

A decade later, it would begin to undergo a transformation, thanks to Smith, who made his living as an accountant for, among others, many of the muck farmers in the area.

Because of the torture he had endured, he wasn't able to spend his free time engaging in vigorous activity, so he decided to change his home's complexion, one day at a time.

He struck on the idea of collecting stones — from lakes, rivers, outcroppings — wherever. And he hardly contained his search to Newaygo

The home sports some other idiosyncrasies, as well, including a basement wall insulated with 88 Revvator refrigerator doors.

Smith's grandson, Noel Daniels, 49, recalls his grandfather as a splendid artist, and in more than one medium.

"He was very good in oils," Daniels says, noting that Smith painted an exquisite copy of "Frederic Remington's 'The Dash for Timbers,'" to name just one.

"He taught himself how to do things," says Daniels, who served six years as finance director for the Grand Rapids Symphony before moving west in 1996 to work as business manager for the Phoenix Theatre.

His sister, Laurelyne, 53,

## STONES

Blocks were preserved during renovation

Continued from A1

County.

Instead, he solicited help from friends, relatives and acquaintances who would travel not only the States, but to other countries, other continents.

Meanwhile, he set to work building simple frames of wood to serve as cement forms. They measured from just under to well over a square foot.

Smith would set each frame into a flat surface, then pour a thin layer of sand. Next, he imbedded pebbles — laid as a mirror image — to spell out the geographic source of the larger stones that also would be put into the frame.

With everything in place, Smith would hand-mix cement, pour it over his rocky arrangement, then allow the whole piece to dry.

The end result, after knocking the frame from the concrete and brushing off the sand, was a block from which protruded the rocks, as well as the words wrought from pebbles.

Course by course, Smith mortared his homemade blocks to the exterior of the Hess Lake home.

Today, the entire first floor bears his painstaking work, as does the sun porch, two fireplaces and the three-story chimney.

To view his handiwork is to tour the globe. Stones announce themselves from Lost River, N.H.; Schenobunn, Germany; Austria; Labrador; New Guinea; France; Wales; Harrington, England; Puget Sound; Iceland; the Black Hills; Ontario — as well as too many Michigan locations to mention.

recalls her grandfather as "a character" yet "brilliant."

She adds that upon returning from the POW camp with a slight tremor, Smith was forced to switch his dominant hand from right to left. Still, he was able to master painting. And she remembers that his handwriting was "like calligraphy."

Neither grandchild knows exactly what prompted Smith to cast so many blocks of cement and stone. "I think he just experimented with the process," says Daniels, "and looked to what others (masons and farmers) in the area had done."

Regardless the source of inspiration, Rosato and Evanzo couldn't walk away from the home when they visited the site in April of 1996.

"We had come up here not intending to buy anything," she remembers.

"But we bought that very day. We fell in love with the story," Evanzo, 61 and a retired postmaster from Comstock Park,

has extensively remodeled the home's interior. But he sidestepped Smith's work at nearly every turn.

"I did everything I could to keep the exposed stone clear," he recalls. "The only place I took stones away is when I installed sliding glass doors."

Even then, Evanzo was careful to re-use those stones, moving them to the water's edge, where he laid in a modest seawall.

Perhaps equally remarkable to Smith's feat is the apparent fact that, until now, his work had never been the object of a formal news report.

"No (journalists) have shown any amazement at this, as far as we can tell," says Rosato, 54, formerly a free-lance writer with the Grand Rapids Foundation.

Mostly true. However, Laurelyne Harris recalls that many years ago, Life magazine approached the family about doing a story on the home.

Smith would have nothing of it. According to Harris, her grandparents answered the magazine's request by responding, "Fools' names and faces appear in public places."

Rosato and Evanzo say they've been more than willing to share what they call their "sleepy little treasure."

"Just the other day," says Rosato, "a car drove past, and we heard it makes screeching."

"They couldn't believe it. They were amazed. They stayed a half hour."

Cottage Verse  
"TRUST in the Lord forever  
for the Lord, is the Rock eternal  
Isaiah 26: 4

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