Hole Lot of Love

BY WENDY K. PROBST

PHOTOS BY BEN BENVIE

Some places call to us, and when we find them, they put their mojo on us, dig in deep, and don't ever let go. True love happened twice at an old cabin only one-half mile from the A.T., and 71 years later, that love still grows.

In 1939, the chilly winter solstice air was no deterrent for a young, newlywed couple searching for a temporary home in the sparsely populated Sugar Run Valley of southwest Virginia. Drawn there by a healthy elk population, Roy Wood, a young biologist, brought his bride of seven months, Tillie, to find temporary living quarters where he could study the bellowing beasts in order to finish his master's thesis from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute. Though obviously a good sport, Tillie was displeased with the first rental home available, so they headed further up the valley to discover a 60-year-old cabin with no solid floor, running water, or modern amenity of any other kind. They were instantly bewitched. The following spring they moved to the cabin to rough it out for the next year — for a total rental fee of five dollars. By the mid 1940s Roy and Tillie had managed to purchase the cabin and surrounding 83-acres, first with the help of their Sugar Run neighbor, Harlow Hoback, who later sold his half of the land to them as well. Forty years of duty to career for both Roy — who spent those years in the government preserving forests, parks, and wildlife — and Tillie — who taught biology and held a masters degree in Mycology — left them with little time to visit the cabin.

In 1983, they returned to the cabin for a full summer of restoration and repair work, and brought their two granddaughters, Neville and Jere. In 1986 the cabin officially became Wood's Hole Hostel, providing respite and hearty sustenance to hikers on their A.T. pilgrimage. Sadly, and to Tillie's devastation, Roy passed away just one year later. As family legend goes, the last thing he did was to finish laying a heart-shaped rock at the base of the cabin's new front porch; he died in his sleep that night. Tillie eventually found solace and deep happiness in continuing to return and run the hostel for the next 22 years, right up to the last year of her life.

Today, a young newlywed couple once again owns that 83-acres and bewitching cabin. The cabin's pull was strong for the entire Wood family, but no one experienced that pull more than Tillie's youngest granddaughter Neville. "Duty, timing, love for this place, and the relationship I had with my grandmother. All of the above led to our proprietorship," says Neville who lives and works alongside her husband Michael at Wood's Hole. After spending 22 blissful summers living and working with her grandmother at the cabin, Neville inherited Wood's Hole with the simple promise of preserving its history, and hosting family gatherings. "As I grew older, I began to recognize what this place was and how important it was to my grandmother," she says. "Without fault, I became the likely candidate because of my deep roots.

From far left: Roy, Tillie (and their puppy Pip) on the front step of the old chestnut log cabin — their first and favorite home; Neville and Michael met at the hostel — now their *home — and were married there last August; five-year-old Neville oversees her granddad Roy during a 1983 kitchen renovation.*

From top: herb markers; Michael's daily watering ritual; sitting down to a homemade, family-style meal.

[My] family supported this transition because they wanted to see the tradition carried on as well." But Neville had a vision that even her grandmother couldn't have imagined.

Neville met Michael when he stayed at the hostel during his '05 thru-hike. "My hike involved spending a lot of time experiencing the culture and social aspect of the A.T.," Michael says. And while they admit it was not love at first site, the two had very common interests, and one major common thread; each dreamt of creating a community retreat center. "A place for people to share, grow, learn, and experience together," Neville explains. "We had no idea at the time that the Wood's Hole was the place." During a visit to the property in 2008 to check on renovation work, Neville became unsettled. "[She] didn't take well to the renovation with all the change that occurred. The main cabin had been gutted, and the yard was barren of grass, with piles of dirt and rubble," says Michael. "Her place of childhood memories was dismantled, never to be the same. She had been coming to spend summers here since she was three. We went for a walk to let Neville digest the change. She was in tears. I swept her off her feet, literally, into my arms and told her that we could make this work, and that it was an open palette to live life the way we dreamed. I then asked her to marry me and without hesitation she said 'yes.'"

Under Michael and Neville's vision, Wood's Hole has morphed into a vibrant, nurturing place of solace, not only for hikers, but guests who come to experience the restful and nourishing vibe—complete with meals prepared with produce from the organic gardens. "Our neighbors and family friends, the Hendersons's, own a farm that supplies us with our pork, beef, and free-range eggs," says Neville. "We also drive over to the Amish Community where they have a small grocery from which we purchase many of our bulk and dry goods. We supplement what comes from our garden with what comes from [their] garden. We will spend much of this late summer and fall canning tomatoes, peppers, and more in preparation for next spring's hiker season." Michael is also a beekeeper, and both are licensed massage therapist, offering various styles of massage therapy sessions to their guests, as well yoga and mediation sessions, reflexology, a whirlpool tub, and sunlight sauna. And of course hot showers, mail drops, and shuttle services to and from the Trail. "We expanded the

Hiker and guest "Suby" helps prep for dinner. Neville (below) and Michael usually ask for assistance in the kitchen.

hostel first by opening up the indoor rooms for those looking for something more than a mattress in the bunkhouse, then we added laundry [facilities] and bought an outdoor wood-fueled furnace to better heat the cabin in the cold winter months; and heat as many showers as there are people …this is a huge hit for everyone," says Neville.

Both Neville and Michael chose the "healing arts" as a way to further fulfill their inner needs, but neither arrived to this decision on a straight path. "This was a long hard decision for me, finding my passion in life that is," says Neville, who studied art in college, but was not able to find a way to market her work. "I discovered massage therapy and the benefits when I took a pilgrimage to India by myself in 2001," she says. "Yoga has been another path of personal growth; I have been able to offer yoga classes to hikers as they pass through. Some have never done yoga before and are amazed at the way they feel when done." After receiving his B.S. in Biochemistry from Penn State University, Michael spent eight years managing laboratories in the pharmaceutical industry, four in cancer research in Boston, and four in cardiovascular research in San Francisco. "Though I loved life in the big city, I wanted to get back to nature and my roots, says Michael. "The timing was right and I was looking for an adventure, so I packed up my stuff, did a six-week road trip from California back east and headed for the Trail….I've been involved in various aspects of the healing arts since I was 18. When I decided that my belief system didn't line up with that of the corporate world it [was] a natural change."

Another part of the Wood's Hole experience, is the family style meals, prepared by Neville and Michael themselves from scratch every morning and evening—usually with prep and clean-up help from hikers. "There are a few reasons we do family style meals," says Neville. "First and foremost, it was how my grandmother did it. She enjoyed the gathering of everyone at the table, sharing a meal, and getting to know the hikers. It's the only thing I knew when we opened the hostel. When we offered our first dinner it was on the spontaneity of a hiker's request. We came up with what seemed like a fair donation, asked for a little help, and *voila'*, we had a beautiful dinner." The meals always begin with a moment of thanks and silence, followed by an introduction from each person at the table. "This encourages a moment of positive thinking to sink into our evening… the meals are my favorite part of their visit." says Neville. She says that overnight guests are often intrigued by thru-hikers, and enjoy learning about their experiences.

16-year old Tessa enjoys greeting guests when she is not sleeping; hostel guest "Snow White" takes a cue from Tessa.

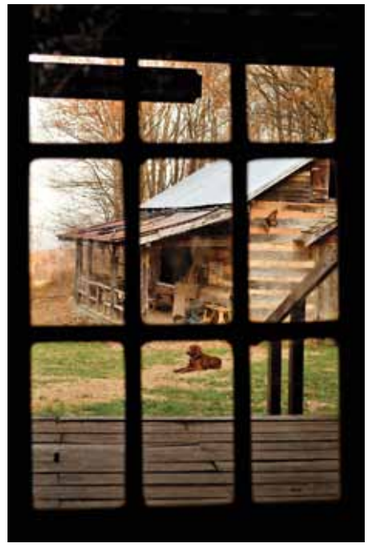
Michael was assisted in building the raised-bed gardens, but did all of the planting, upkeep, and harvesting himself this year. Though they appear to have super-hero energy, Michael and Neville happily encourage their guests to help out, much like Roy and Tillie did in the past. "We like to think we do it all ourselves, but we get a lot of help from the hikers. A lot," says Neville. "We really encourage a community experience by asking folks to help. One of the wonderful aspects of running a hostel is that we get to meet all types of people, with all types of backgrounds. Occasionally folks come along that give us some wonderful advice. There is a wealth of knowledge and discussion at our fingertips." There are currently 28 raised-bed gardens on the property, and plans to finish 20 more this fall. Michael especially enjoys working in the gardens, and utilizes his scientific mind to perfect soil and compost ratios, and layering methods.

As an obvious renaissance man, Michael's talents don't stop at gardening. He has built bookshelves, pantry doors, and an entire barn out the wood left over from the most recent renovation—all with the help of several hikers. "So many hikers will say, 'it felt so good to be working with my upper body," says Neville. "I think hikers walk away from here feeling educated by our bees, the organic gardens, and the beginnings to our alternative energy." Plans are in place for further sustainability at Wood's Hole, including an irrigation system to water all the gardens (the water already is gravity fed rather than electrically powered), adding more wind, solar, and water generated power, and raising pigs, and goats. "We already have a pig pen built and are looking at buying goats to help us clear some of the fields," says Neville. "Thanks to our neighbors who are farmers, we have knowledge right next door."

The mile and a half of land between Wood's Hole and their "next door" neighbors' farm acts as a buffer along the Trail, and is currently in danger of being sold to the highest bidder. Neville and Michael hope to see the land placed in a conservation easement, as their land is, in order to protect it. "Developing this stretch of land would destroy the primitive feeling that you get as you enter these woods," says Michael. "You literally feel like you step back 100 years when driving up our valley." Their own property was put into easement by the request of Neville's grandmother, and mother, Mary Jo. "Conservation easements are usually for larger tracts of land…because we were preserving a hostel on the Appalachian Trail and the 83 acres that surrounded us, the New River Land Trust was very excited about helping us conserve our land," says Neville. Small land trusts like the New River Land Trust have been successful in protecting land in southwest Virginia by working with the Virginia Outdoor Foundation who ultimately holds title to easements to ensure adequate long-term protection.

"One of the best parts about writing the conservation easement was it allowed us to sit down and scheme up the buildings we would like to have for a broader dream, says Neville. "Because the busy thru-hiker season is only three to four months out of the year, we need something more to sustain us. We envision creating an intimate educational retreat center—a place where folks can come and learn anything from organic gardening to painting landscapes," says Neville. Because they are open year-round, the couple also tends to enjoy the slower times, especially in the deep winter months—so far, a favored time to have guests because of the cozy community feel it gives them. Yet, even the most social couples need a break now and then. "This was something we learned this year, says Neville. "In order to survive a busy season, we really *need* to give ourselves 'zero days,' where we can just go out to the movies or go hang out by a river."

Working together as a business team and a newlywed couple has had its trials. Grateful for learning invaluable lessons from her grandmother, like organizing the kitchen, prepping before morning, and having a sense of routine, did not prepare Neville for doing it all with her husband. "Michael and I had never worked like this in the kitchen before," she explains. "We both love to cook, but found ourselves under tense situations, to the point where one morning I relieved our tensions by throwing grits at him at the breakfast table. Honestly, this worked. We were able to laugh at ourselves. We have made a lot of strides since our first season. There are still kinks, but the first year is definitely the hardest—as they all say."



Lest we forget the hostel is also Neville and Michael's home, their two chocolate labs, Aumakua, and Imhotep, and 16-year old German short-hair pointer, Tessa—as well as three cats: Midnight, Mae Mae, and Bleu—are also part of the scene at Wood's Hole. Friendly, well-behaved "guest" dogs are welcome at the hostel. And of course, it wouldn't be home without family get-togethers. Each having their own close connection to Wood's Hole (both Neville's uncle Jere and uncle Ben were instrumental in the renovation), the entire Wood family enjoys gathering at the property every Fourth of July. And both of their families were there to celebrate when Neville and Michael were married at the hostel last August.

Love for each other and love for place created, and has sustained Wood's Hole Hostel for 25 years and running. Neville and Michael feel fortunate to be able to combine their shared passions with what is now also their occupation. "We work together and separately… sometimes it just helps to look over or outside and see Michael driving away at a project. We motivate each other, undoubtedly," says Neville. "We meet many hikers [who] say, 'I would love to run a hostel on the Appalachian Trail,'" she continues. "There are two thoughts to what we do while running a hostel. One is that we are on a permanent vacation. Another is that we work very hard, 24 hours a day, and we have absolutely no time to ourselves. Both are true. We have a vision that carries us through each day and that is to share with others a lifestyle that is back to the roots, back to nature; I think that if Benton MacKaye were alive today, he would be very proud of the community my grandparents created and we are building upon. I feel as though Wood's Hole embodies what he envisioned for the Trail."

Neville and Michael's two chocolate labs, Imhotep and Aumakua, enjoy entertaining guests as well.

For more information visit:

www.woodsholehostel.com