

A Wing and a Prayer

From a single, prophetic butterfly to a spiritual full-circle, David and Sharon Rasmussen find their calling in the hills of Gordonsville *By Mark E. Johnson*

A divine omen. What else could explain it? The tiny butterfly had settled onto Sharon Rasmussen's finger and, inexplicably, remained there for more than half an hour.

"We decided that something or someone was trying to tell us we should buy the place," says David, recalling the spring day in 1996 when he and his wife, Sharon, were picnicking on a remote Gordonsville farm they were considering purchasing. "I'm glad we paid attention. That's when we started referring to the farm as 'Butterfly Hollow,' in honor of that one little butterfly."

The remote 85-acre property, tucked away at the end of a gravel path that originates beside beefalo producer Larry Bussell's house and corral, was exactly what the Rasmussens were looking for. It was secluded, had a garden spot, was within 50 miles of Nashville, and came with a 100-year-old farmhouse.

"And as a bonus, it was completely surrounded by 600 acres of the Bussells' horse and cattle farm," says Sharon. "It had the best of everything, including wonderful neighbors."

At the time, David was a software installer and Sharon was a payroll administrator for a Nashville record

label. The couple had decided that the balance between labor and leisure in their lives had definitely swung in the wrong direction.

"So we decided to change our lifestyle and find a way to make ends meet by doing something we both love, although we weren't sure what that was yet," David explains. "Then, we were inspired by a book — 'The Good Life' by Helen and Scott Nearing — that chronicled the lives of these folks back in the '30s who left the city and became self-sufficient in the country. It gave us an arrowhead of sorts to follow in our own lives."

The couple decided it was time to get out of debt, start living below their means, and exit the "rat race."

David rearranged his work schedule, going to three days per week. This gave the DeKalb County native the remaining four days to spend traveling the Middle Tennessee countryside to visit farms for sale.

"Sharon and I looked at more than 30 run-down or abandoned properties during a six-month period," David says. "The day I first saw Butterfly Hollow, I had my nephew, Michael, along for the ride. We kept driving back and forth past the road thinking, 'That can't be it. That's little more than a farm-access path.' About the third time by, we saw my [future]



While renovating the house, from left, Carl Rasmussen and Linnie Boaté — David's uncle and mother — help Sharon remove old plank siding which was later reused as subflooring.



David and Sharon Rasmussen relax with a glass of sassafras tea on the front porch of the turn-of-the-century farmhouse they restored in the 1990s.

neighbor Larry standing out by his barn. Michael convinced me to drive up and ask him if we had the right place, but I felt like I was trespassing on Larry's property. He said, 'No, that's OK. This is a county road and there's a farm for sale up there. Go ahead and help yourself.'"

David videotaped the farm so Sharon could see it, and a few days later, they were back with a picnic basket and a hammock. After the incident with the friendly butterfly, the deal was sealed. However, two weeks later, when the couple drove up the gravel road to their new property, deed in hand, they received the shock of their lives.

"We could tell something was different as we started in," says David, smiling at the recollection. "There were places in the road where the gravel had seemingly disappeared. It was covered in a rippling and fluttering expanse of tan, gold, brown, and white. As we drove on, these expanses exploded into clouds of thousands of butterflies! As we made our way further into the hollow, the population kept getting thicker, and when we got out of the truck, half a dozen butterflies immediately landed on Sharon's head."

After naming their new farm "But-

terfly Hollow" in honor of a solitary insect two weeks earlier, David and Sharon now found themselves covered, literally, in butterflies.

"It was if that first little guy had sent out a telegram to his whole village, notifying them of the place we had named after him!" says Sharon. "There were millions of them."

The couple soon learned that the proliferation of hackberry trees, manure from the surrounding pastures, and a giant mulberry tree beside the farmhouse has created a virtual utopia for the lifecycle of hackberry and tawny emperor butterflies.

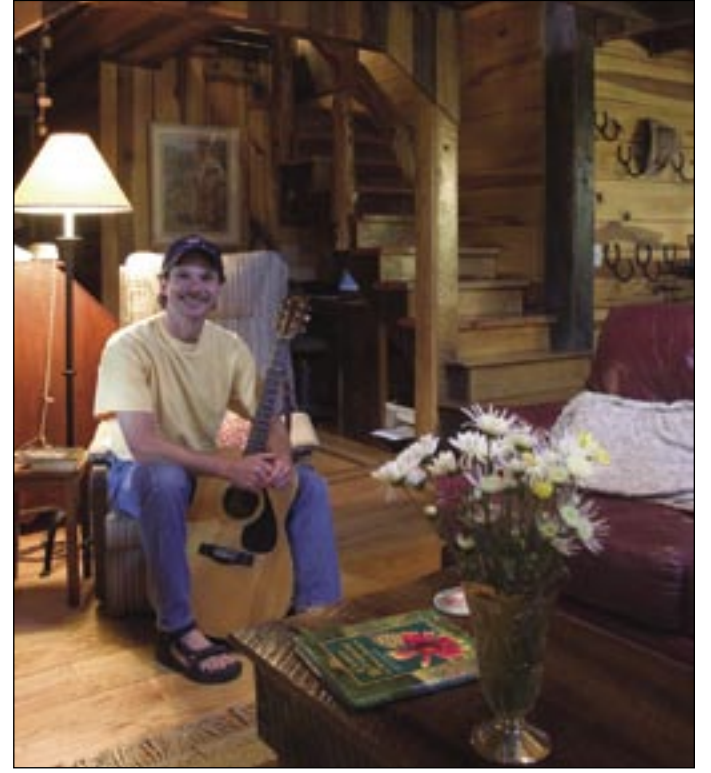
"To be honest, my first thought when I saw them was, 'So that's why this place was so cheap: It's infested with butterflies!'" laughs David. "They're like clockwork, arriving every year at the end of May. But after a couple of weeks, they fade away into manageable numbers."

After recovering from the shock and novelty of their fluttering neighbors, the Rasmussens moved into the existing mobile home on the farm so they could do some renovations to the farmhouse. They soon discovered it needed much more work than previously suspected.

"When we first moved in, we thought, 'We can fix up that old



LEFT: The house, as it appears today, contains two guest rooms — named “Wash’s Tree House” and “Lily’s Attic” in honor of the original owner and his daughter — along with a suite where the Rasmussens reside. In addition to providing traditional bed-and-breakfast amenities, the couple also shares the facilities for small, intimate weddings and personal and corporate retreats. RIGHT: An accomplished musician, David takes a break from “pickin’” his guitar in the living room.



house,” says Sharon. “But after looking closely, we realized it would be a 90-percent overhaul. So the decision was made to just take the old house down.”

But upon inspecting their deed, the Rasmussens realized that the original owner of the property, Wash Crawford, had deeded it to his daughter, Lily, and had placed a “life estate” on the home, which forbade any subsequent owners from destroying it while Lily was still alive. And she was alive, in her upper 90s, living in a nearby retirement home.

“Lily’s daughter, Jane, began visiting us and telling stories about the place,” says David. “I guess that’s when we started to really form an attachment to the old house and the families who once called it home.”

With encouragement from Sharon’s handyman father, Don Eldridge, the Rasmussens decided, without any previous carpentry experience, to make a leap of faith and renovate the house themselves. The entire process took more than four and a half years with the couple proceeding as they had the cash to pay for the supplies.

“One of the first projects was to remove the interior walls,” says David. “We heard that Wash and [wife] Hattie had stored some of their money in Mason jars in the spring house, and we kept imagining opening that one plank and finding a jar of old coins or important papers underneath. No such luck. But we did find that the walls were filled with things like shoes, nuts, leaves, overalls, buttons, license plates, medicine bottles, and marbles.”

On April 8, 2000, after hundreds of hours of backbreaking labor with the help of friends, family, and neighbors, the couple spent their first night in their newly restored treasure. Here’s what David wrote about that night in one of his many farm journals:

As the sun was setting, Sharon was slicing up some potatoes while I began building a fire. We lit the kerosene lamps, turned on some Ella Fitzgerald, and opened a bottle of champagne that my sister sent us. I don’t know when the moment happened, but somewhere in this night our world changed.

Now safely tucked away in their “new” farmhouse, the Rasmussens had time to think about their next order of business — making an income from the farm.

“Oh, we had all kinds of schemes written in our notebooks,” David admits. “Some, for example, were growing Christmas trees, chestnut trees, raising beefalo cattle with Larry, breeding horses, all kinds of stuff. But you know what our first income actually was? Salads!”

David says he and Sharon had created a sizable garden with salad fixings, and he would often take one to work with him for lunch.

“It was a pretty good-sized company, and the ladies would say, ‘Whoa! What kind of salad is that?’” laughs David. “So during salad season, I began taking orders, and Butterfly Hollow became a mini truck farm!”

Aside from becoming an expert salad farmer, David also learned how to write and design Web sites during those first few years. He decided to create a Web site to share his restoration photos and journals with family across the country. But a funny thing happened along the way.

“Well, in addition to our family finding it, the world did, too!” David smiles. “It was completely unintentional, but we began receiving e-mails from people everywhere. They’d say, ‘We’ve bought an old farmhouse and are wanting to restore it. We’re coming through Tennessee this summer, and we’d like to camp on your place and pick your brain.’ All of these good people started com-

ing into our lives in a virtual sense, and that got us thinking that maybe we should share the place.”

So that fall of 2000, the Rasmussens welcomed their first bed-and-breakfast guests.

“They didn’t know they were the first,” admits Sharon with a giggle. “They just thought they were coming to a bed-and-breakfast. We were figuring it out as we went along.”

The business slowly became successful, as the Internet and word-of-mouth steadily brought new guests to Butterfly Hollow. David was able to quit his job in Nashville and devote himself full time to the upkeep of their 85 acres while Sharon continued working three days a week in nearby Smithville. In 2003, another path in the Rasmussens’ journey revealed itself when the couple was approached about hosting a wedding at the farm.

“At first, we declined, because we were picturing lots of cars, tents, and people,” recalls David. “We’re not really set up to handle that here. But the people contacted us again and said, ‘What we’re really looking for is a place that’s quiet, relaxing, and in nature. It would just be the two of us.’ Of course, we thought that was great. We were very honored.”

So the first of many weddings took place, and Butterfly Hollow has now often become a favorite destination for betrothed couples.

“Having small wedding celebrations here has brought the entire journey full-circle for us,” says David. “It kind of completed the story of Sharon and me, us getting out of debt, finding an old farm, and finishing more than four years of restoration while staying together through it all. Love brought this once-abandoned valley and farmhouse back to life, and now it feels so fitting when we share it with others.”

Butterfly Hollow operates as a bed-and-breakfast and is available

for country weddings and personal and corporate retreats from March through the end of November. Business is flourishing, with the Rasmussens’ reservation book usually filled three to four months in advance.

The couple, devoted customers of Smith Farmers Cooperative, keeps most of January and February reserved for themselves, but David says they are always ready to go when March rolls around again.

“By then, we’ve read through our guest books, looked through our pictures, and recalled all the things we’ve shared and learned from people,” he explains. “We just feel blessed with the opportunity to be able to do this. It almost feels like a ministry of sorts. It’s much bigger than me and Sharon. It’s like we’re just the gardeners, the people here keeping the grass mowed and the flowers blooming. There’s nothing more we could ask for in life.”

For more information about Butterfly Hollow, call Sharon and David Rasmussen at (615) 683-4163 or visit online at www.butterflyhollow.com. Photos of the restoration of the farmhouse and David’s farm journals can also be viewed on the Web site www.butterflyhollowfarm.com.



Sharon strolls through a cloud of hackberry butterflies during a late May hatch.