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Photos by THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Peter Lewis' tree house hideaway sits a third of the way up a 105-foot white pine in Bridgton, Maine, with bird's-eye views of his old farmhouse, its back lawn and the forest canopy. It's a quiet place with no distractions, where he can read, write, daydream or nap. His book, "Treehouse Chronicles: One Man's Dream of Life Aloft," grew out of the journal Lewis kept as the tree house project developed.

Kid's dream

'Chronicles' describes tree house

By JERRY HARKAVY

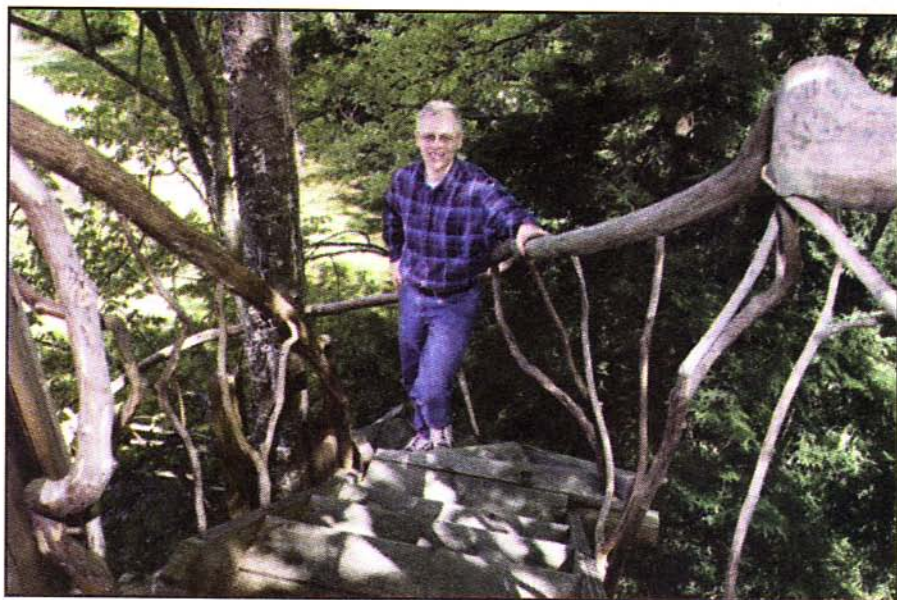
The Associated Press

Peter Lewis' hideaway sits a third of the way up a 105-foot white pine, with bird's-eye views of his old farmhouse, its back lawn and the forest canopy. It's a quiet place with no distractions, where he can read, write, daydream or nap.

"It's the place where I go when the world gets too loud. I think everybody should have a place like that," says Lewis, 46, who conceived the two-story tree house in Bridgton, Maine, as an antidote for what he calls "adult-onset adolescence" and in the process gave birth to an award-winning book.

A local landmark weighing three tons, the timber-framed hexagonal tree house is suspended by cables strung over a crotch in the 200-year-old tree. It's very different from the tree house that Lewis, at age 8 or 9, built with his dad at their home in Connecticut and tore down a few years later because "it was a kid thing."

His mid-life version is a 250-square-foot insulated retreat – five times larger than originally planned – with two porches, 21 windows, a small coal-burning stove, a futon, a desk, a spiral staircase, a retractable drawbridge whose steps lead up to the house and an



Lewis stands on the stairway that leads to the tree house he built.

upstairs chess room with chess pieces made from twigs, pine cones and acorns.

When the wind blows, the structure sways gently, a feeling not unlike standing on a floating dock. It gets interesting when the gusts exceed 40 mph, he says.

How Lewis' vision expanded beyond a garden variety tree house and created a project that drew in friends and family is detailed in "Treehouse Chronicles: One Man's Dream of Life Aloft," put out by the author's niche publishing company in Conway, N.H., whose areas of expertise include wilderness medicine and rock climbing.

The handsome volume, by Lewis and illustrator, friend and co-worker Ted Walsh, 47, was an outgrowth of the journal Lewis kept as the project unfolded. From the start, the two builders wanted to go beyond a how-to book and tell the story through the eyes of the

people involved.

"I wanted to make it a book about a bunch of people who are mostly middle-age doing something really silly just for the heck of it," Lewis said. Or as he explained in the book, "This is the story of what happens when big people decide to be kids again and they have tools and lumber."

Lewis and Walsh worked on the tree house and the book simultaneously, a process that encouraged them to include distinctive features – such as a secret door lock or the hand-carved chess set – that they might otherwise have dismissed as beyond the pale.

"The two fueled each other. We used the fact that we were doing this book to justify some of the more fun things which essentially we wanted to do," Walsh said. "But without the fun things, the book wouldn't have been nearly as whimsical or as interesting."

Tree house | Upgrades added for book's sake

CONTINUED FROM | PAGE F-10

Lewis agreed. "We didn't really need a drawbridge that's counterweighted with boulders, but it sure makes a nice part of the book," he said.

Lewis, who tapped out his \$5,000 in savings for the project, managed to build the tree house on a shoestring. The biggest expense — labor — was free, and he scrounged most of the building materials, including discarded windows, leftover steel for the roof and scrap wood for floors and stairs.

The timber-framing technique had the builders working with large pieces of wood, chisels, mallets and pegs instead of traditional lumber, hammers and nails. No bolts were placed in the tree, leaving it undamaged.

Construction took almost three years, largely because they did most of the work while suspended from ropes. Lewis and Walsh are both experienced rock climbers, as is Lewis' son, Jeremiah, a teenage daredevil who did much of the rigging from heights of up to 90 feet.

Their nemesis, the erstwhile villain of the book, is Vinny the thug squirrel, who made himself at home in the tree house, chewing insulation and gnawing on pieces of wood. He remains there to this day.

The project unfolded after Lewis, his wife and their two children moved to Maine from Colorado.

Lewis got the idea while his family was watching the movie "Apollo 13" in another room and he heard Walter Cronkite report Neil Armstrong's 1969 landing on the moon. That set Lewis' mind back to his boyhood and the day he climbed down from his old tree house with a bucket on his head like a

ON THE NET

The Treehouse Workshop:
www.treehouseworkshop.com

make-believe astronaut.

"It's kind of a common theme in our family," he said. "A screwball idea leads to who knows where."

It was Jeremiah, his father said, who pressed to make the tree house more elaborate and add a second floor.

"Even now, he thinks it's too small and not complicated enough and way too close to the ground," Lewis said.

The book was completed in 2005, a year after the tree house. It went on to win the 2006 Independent Publisher Book Award in architecture and was named a ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year Awards finalist.

The book also won praise from Peter Nelson of the Treehouse Workshop in Seattle, who designs tree houses throughout the country and has turned out four tree house books of his own. Nelson said he was impressed by the integrity of the building and the humorous, self-deprecating style with which Lewis chronicled the project.

Nelson, who has built tree houses ranging in price from \$50,000 to more than \$300,000, said the adult market for such structures is exploding, with the baby-boom generation fueling the demand.

"We're rule breakers, and we love to do things that maybe our parents didn't do," Nelson said, noting that tree houses can provide an extra bedroom, a smoking room, an office, an art studio or simply "a place to get away from the kids."

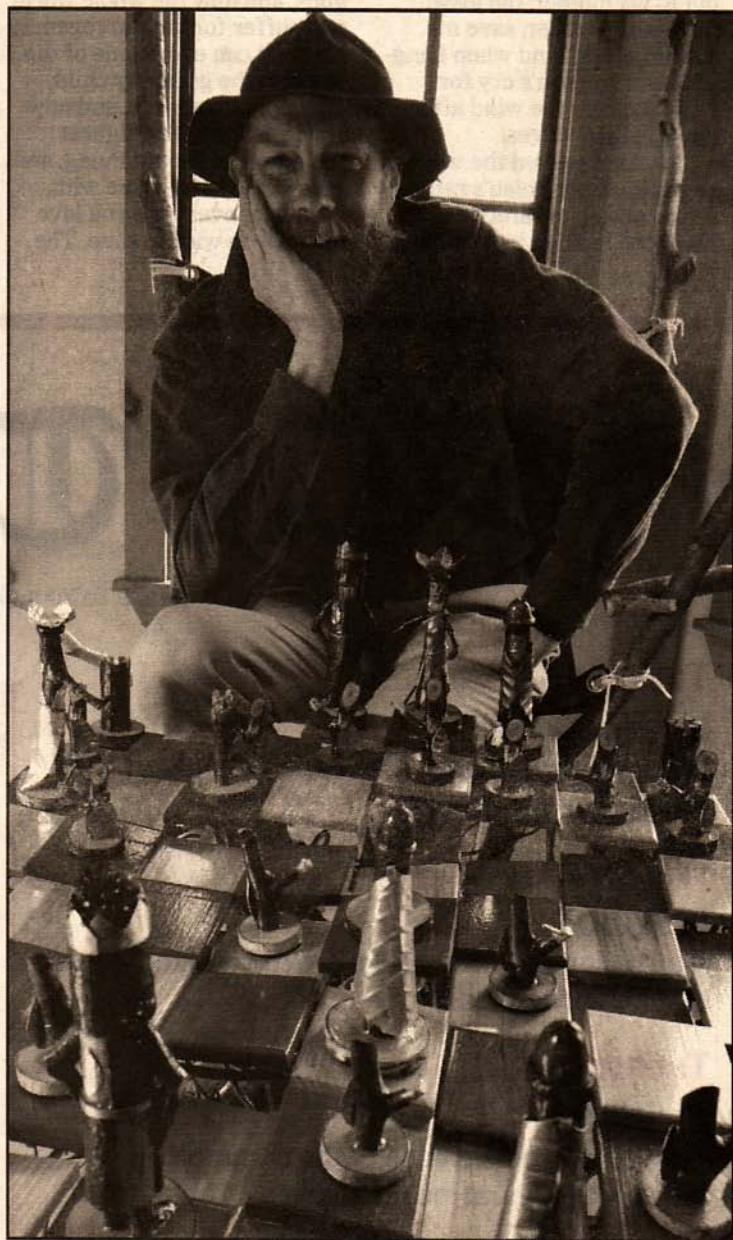


Photo by THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ted Walsh, illustrator and co-worker and friend of tree house builder and author Peter Lewis, sits behind a handmade wooden chess set in Bridgton, Maine. Lewis' book, "Treehouse Chronicles: One Man's Dream of Life Aloft," grew out of the journal kept as he built an elaborate tree house in his backyard. Walsh illustrated the book.