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Building the Treehouse of Your Dreams

BY DENISE HART

Trees and childhood intertwine for most of us in special memories of games of hide and seek, climbing from branch to branch in order to see farther (and sometimes risking our own limbs in the process!), or perhaps discovering the gateway to a secret hideaway among the leaves and boughs.

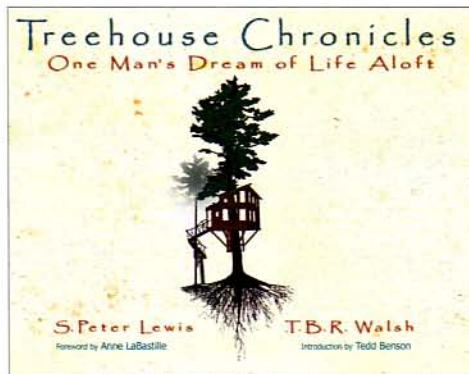
Peter Lewis is an author, professional photographer, father, husband — and master treehouse builder. You could say he's a man who has learned to put his dreams into action. With his son almost off to college and his daughter embarking on her teen years, the treehouse isn't for his children — he built it for himself.

I fondly remember an ancient cherry tree behind the home my parents had bought when we decided to trade city living for the suburbs. It straddled the property line between our house and the neighbors, its trunk so huge that my arms could not encircle it. I loved climbing the thick branches to a special limb that I would perch in, reading my books from the library for hours where no one could see me. There was something about leaving the ground below me that freed my spirit.

Peter not only dreamed of a life aloft — he found a way to inhabit it as an adult. In *Treehouse Chronicles* you will have an opportunity to accompany Peter as he sets in motion the plan to build the treehouse of his dreams. It's a whimsical story with plenty of derring-do; it's also a story of creative engineering solutions and craftsmanship in wood. And, probably even Peter would say, it is most importantly about the people in his life who encouraged him to dream — like his wife, Karen, his mother and father, Uncle George, daughter Amanda and son Jeremiah — and the friends who rally to the cause and help to make his dream a reality, like business partner Ted Walsh (who also illustrates the book) and the many people who came over to help raise the treehouse frame, hammer siding or offer advice when needed. And then there's Vinny, Thug Squirrel, who steals fiberglass insulation for his nest, likes to chew the woodwork and connects Peter to life in the tree's canopy.

The treehouse is a timber-frame construction, which, according to Peter, relies on wood-to-wood joints, using a notch (mortise) and a protruding piece (tenon) with a wooden peg to hold the joint together. "It's a traditional style that has had a great resurgence. We decided to do it just because it's a fun way to build things," says Peter.

In the Introduction, Tedd Benson, author of *Timberframe: The Art and Craft of the Post-and-Beam Home*, writes "One of the things I



have always loved about making timber-frame buildings is that every project is a multi-level adventure." Peter takes readers on his adventure of building a treehouse thirty-five feet in the air and the subsequent design challenges, site complications (what to do with that nearby big bough in a manner that won't hurt the tree? how to haul up massive timbers and work in the air?) and the skill and talent necessary to turn boards of pine, cedar,

beech and other woods into a beautiful and magical space.

The men eschew scaffolding for rock climbing harnesses, zip lines and ropes. They are an anti-gravity task force at work. When I asked Peter if he had ever consulted the Eastern white pine tree about the steel harness and approximately 6,000-pound structure that would eventually hang from it, he replied "The tree is pretty quiet; I didn't get any feedback from it. We used no nails into the tree. I've had a lot of discussions with arborists about how to do this without hurting the tree."

It's no ordinary treehouse either. It grows, at his son's suggestion, from a one-story structure to a 250-square-foot, two-story building complete with two levels of porches, and interior spiral staircase and a pivoting drawbridge entrance stairway. It hangs from a steel harness that sways in the wind. Peter is a man happy to rediscover the boy inside him. As he observes, "On the ground you must be what you are; in a tree, you can be whatever you want to be." (126)

Ted Walsh's paintings, illustrations and diagrams tell a story all their own and the book masterfully reproduces his art both in full color and line drawings. A big part of the pleasure in reading this book is taking the time to listen to the story evoked with brushstroke, color and line. Some of the illustrations take a non-builder like me through the technical "how we did this" details in ways the text could not. Others, such as the facing page of Part Three titled "The Joys of Framing" capture Peter's smile and energy as he makes a dream take shape.

Peter's photographs give you a sense of the man behind the words and provide another point of view of his work on his treehouse project. The photographs enhance his words with additional layers of meaning that are at times documentary and at other times artistic interpretations. One of my favorite photographs is pictured with the mini-essay "Being with me" and shows a hand in running water, fingers streaming into the currents, all boundaries between man and nature blurred.

Another quiet pleasure of the book is Peter's short essays interspersed throughout the text. Some are vignettes of life building the treehouse; others are musings about the special people in his life and nature. In "The Edge of Silence," Peter muses on the moment, four years after construction began, that quiet descends on his treehouse villa and the aerial world opens before him in new ways.

There are practical, bureaucratic necessities to building a treehouse like obtaining a building permit and insurance. "I decided right from the beginning to do it right," says Peter. "I didn't want any troubles. My town considers it an outbuilding, although every municipality is different. It has no utilities (it is heated by a coal stove). My insurance agent had no problem with it; I was a little surprised."

The treehouse was completed 1,028 days after construction began in December 2004. Most of the labor was done on weekends and in "spare" time from Peter's and his friends' day jobs. It was, like most building projects, over-budget and overdue. "I was a little disappointed that I finished it so late and didn't get to enjoy it much at first," he says. "Those first warm, wet days of spring were just great — you're way up in the air, right up in the canopy and everything smells so great and fresh."

With spring beginning to push winter out of the way, and the sap slowly rises in the trees and returning avian friends begin to crowd

your thoughts, perhaps you wonder how they do it and how it might feel to see the world as they do, how it might be to live free as a bird. Or maybe, you just yearn, as I sometimes do, to return for a moment, perhaps buried in ancestral memory, to a younger time when trees represented our safety and solitude. "Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it," said the philosopher Johann von Goethe. "Boldness has genius, power and magic in it." *Treehouse Chronicles* is a book that will inspire you to live your dreams — whether they take you into the treetops or anywhere else.

Treehouse Chronicles: One Man's Dream of Life Aloft

S. Peter Lewis, text and photographs; T.B.R. Walsh, paintings and illustrations
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For more information about Peter Lewis's treehouse and possible open house dates in the future, visit www.treehousechronicles.com.