

A man with a passion for conservation
and vision for biocentric living
restores an overused piece of property,
builds a timber home and serves as
the steward for his slice of New York.

BY KAREN MARLEY

Conversations with the Land

Photo by Sandra Kicman



OPPOSITE George transformed an exhausted ecosystem into a thriving landscape of wetlands and savannas.

ABOVE His timber frame home, crafted with stone and wood, harmonizes with its environs in every season.

A quality relationship is a high-value resource. About 22 years ago, George Klemens, owner of Timberbuilt, a timber frame design-build outfit, entered into a partnership with a 104-acre parcel of rural property. It's become a treasured connection.

For decades, George worked as a professional hunter in Montana, learning and developing a land ethic of reciprocity. His desire to act on these beliefs led him to this property in rural central New York. Today, his homestead is an amalgamation of the land, the nursery/gardens and his timber frame home.

"Instead of taking, I am going to put back," George declares. "And I want to see all of nature around me on a daily basis. I want to be immersed in it."

George sought land with good bones. "When I walked this property, I was blown away by all its features," he recalls.

But where casual observers saw a pastoral scene of rural life with hayfields, a seasonal runoff creek and a few woodland pockets, George

recognized a landscape distressed from overuse. The wetlands had been drained, over-farmed and overgrazed. A handful of tree species filled an estimated 30-acre woodlot, indicating decades of logging practices that had removed the healthiest, most valuable specimens.

Two ecosystem gems had persevered. A back creek continued to host steelhead trout runs, and surprisingly there were a few fens. Fens are a type of peat-accumulating wetland that takes thousands of years to develop, are critical in mitigating floods and erosion, are biodiversity hotspots and are endangered due to over-development.

"The property had all these pieces, but they were all kind of beaten; kind of used up," George recalls. "They needed some help."

Instead of imposing his personal aesthetic, George listened to the land to develop a vision: a mixed savanna with wetlands, waterways and open spaces interspersed with hardwood groves. It would be an exercise in rewilding. With a laughably small budget, he relied on sweat equity to achieve his goals.

Photo courtesy of George Klemens



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Tucked into the landscape, the home's all-natural ethos is apparent from first sight. Beauty and sustainability marry inside the home, where reclaimed materials accentuate the timber frame design. An artisan-made wrought-iron gate frames up a glimpse of the pond and woodlands just beyond.

George began by canvassing the 100-plus acres in search of oak trees, a critical keystone species. His tally? Zero. After expanding his radius to adjacent properties covering nearly 1,300 acres, he found two as lawn ornaments. Thus began his arduous effort to plant, grow and transplant thousands of oak trees.

To fully restore his property into a thriving ecosystem, he needed a functioning wetland connected with seasonal waterways. This effort required heavy machinery and a master plan. At the time, the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) under the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) provided financial and technical

assistance to restore and protect wetland projects on selected private properties. George applied and was eventually chosen. The plan's framework established a series of ponds and shallow wetlands that fed into one another, allowing the water to be naturally filtered and purified as it worked its way through the property.

"There were glacial potholes all through here that had filled up with organic matter," George says. The wetland project removed and redistributed some of the soil, amending and restoring impoverished mineral soils across the property.

Topography and soil distribution also informed the site for George's 2,700-square-foot

timber frame homestead. With exceptional energy efficiency, brawny timbers and architectural stylings that blend into the outdoors, a timber frame was the perfect choice. George found a demure spot for his house, oak tree nursery and homestead gardens.

"Too often I see things being built with a heavy, anthropocentric hand," George says. "It's all about 'Look at my stuff,' and I did not want that. I wanted a biocentric approach. I wanted the land to win this battle of the natural world around us."

The home sits modestly on the edge of the wetland rewilding project. And just as the land was full of stories, so is his abode. Artful, rugged and green are the home's driving forces. Built into a rise, the single-story ranch includes a fully finished lower-level basement.

The entire common area (great room, foyer and kitchen) is constructed with reclaimed materials. Experienced brick sourced from a street in Boston brings texture to the foyer floor. Exposed wood flooring, window trim, doors, ceiling panels and cabinetry came from a single source: a Manhattan structure built in 1890 using longleaf pine harvested from trees roughly 300 years old.

"This is slow-growing straight timber," George explains. "It was so good, they cut it all down."

Wood extracted from the property's tree groves supplied the lower level, which includes the guest suite. George followed timber stand improvement (TSI) practices, harvesting lower-grade and overcrowded trees. The doors were crafted from cherry. Maple was painted and used throughout



LEFT TO RIGHT Wood sourced on the property anchors the home's interiors and ties them back to the land outside the windows.

Maple, both painted and stained, was used for cabinetry throughout the home.

Photos courtesy of George Klemens

LEFT AND RIGHT On the edge of the rewilded wetlands, George and his partner Mary Carol have cultivated a robust homestead garden. The couple enjoys year-round provisions from the crops they grow.



Photos courtesy of George Klemens

the home for built-in cabinetry as well as the kitchen island.

In a full-circle vignette, the house looks out over those same woods. A deck off of the great room is detailed with an artisan-made wrought-iron railing featuring delicate plants, creating a scenic foreground for the pond and woodland views yonder.

The exterior's stone siding was sourced from Montana. The home's siding also includes stucco, corrugated steel and cedar in shiplap and clapboard styles. To top it all off, the roofing is a

corrugated galvanized product that establishes an agricultural aesthetic.

Nearby, the oak tree nursery and food gardens are thriving due to the enriched soil that was pulled from the wetland project. George jokes, "I call it 'Jack-and-the-Beanstalk' soil. Throw a bean at the ground and get out of the way!"

For roughly 15 years, George has been growing and transplanting 300 to 400 oak trees every year. Today, the homestead garden has appropriated some of the nursery. He and his partner, Mary Carol Dearing, who is largely responsible

RIGHT A covered bridge spans a newly established waterway where wildlife (including river otters) thrives once again.

for the gardens, enjoy year-round homegrown food. George is now focusing on other species to enhance foliage layers and biodiversity.

Just how much of an ecosystem transformation has George enabled? Along the 1,000-foot-long driveway, a quaint covered bridge spans a waterway. In 2020, George noticed bubbles under the bridge. A river otter's head emerged in a spot where, two decades prior, there was no bridge, no stream and no water. Otters are hyper-sensitive to pollution, habitat degradation and other environmental stressors, so his presence was a very good sign. He was the first otter George had ever seen in New York.

The entire property is humming, buzzing, blooming, swimming, crawling and teeming with life, above and below ground. It's just as it should be, and thanks to George it will remain.

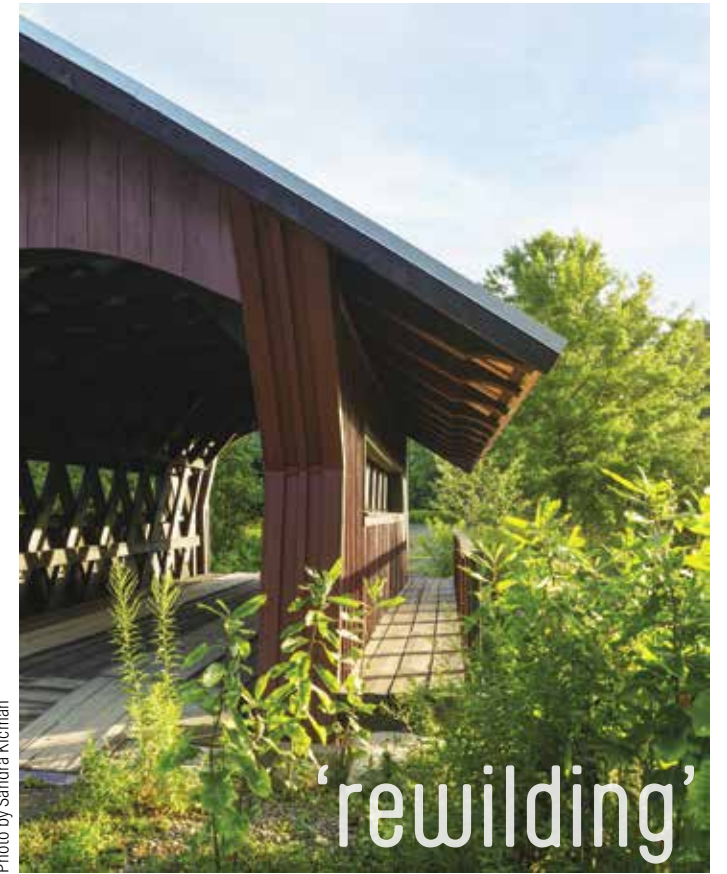


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