

# **Making Something Out of Nothing: Vernacular Architecture in Michigan's Upper Peninsula**

**by Mary Hoefflerle**

Scholars studying the Upper Midwest have described many characteristics of cultural life in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, including the region's foodways (Lockwood, 1991; Magnaghi, 1997), ethnic heritage (Loukinen, 1997), relationship between the Yooper dialect and identity (Remlinger, 2006, 2007), traditions of joke and storytelling (Dorson, 1952; Leary, 1991; 2001), and festival art (Hoefflerle, 2009). They and other writers (Frimodig, 1983; Zechlin, 2004) generally characterize Yoopers as resourceful, independent, modest, proud people who often use self-parody to laugh at themselves and “to acknowledge who they are and who they are not” (Leary, 2001, p. 248).

However, no one has examined how these and other cultural traits materialize in the U. P.'s vernacular architecture, specifically in its shacks and seasonal housing. Therefore, very few people outside the region know about the biographies of the shack builders, their construction processes, their motivations for shack production, the shack's distinct aesthetic qualities, or the social functions hosted in these humble dwellings.

Although humble, vernacular architecture merits serious study and has earned at least one serious definition: Brunskill defines vernacular architecture as “a building designed by an amateur without any

training in design; the individual will have been guided by a series of conventions built up in his locality, paying little attention to what may be fashionable. The function of the building would be the dominant factor, aesthetic considerations, though present to some small degree, being quite minimal. Local materials would be used as a matter of course, other materials being chosen and imported quite exceptionally” (Brunskill, 2000, pp. 27-28).

Academia aside, a more general neglect belies the shack builders' contributions to Yooper culture and neglects the social role that shacks, camps, and other forms of informal housing play among many Upper Peninsula families who use the structures for staying overnight at the beach, for hunting parties, or just for spending time with family and friends.

This article addresses the gap in research by introducing Carl Domitrovich, a shack builder from Ontonagon, Michigan, and provides an examination of his methods and materials of construction, his motivations for building shacks, the social functions of the structures, and his shacks' aesthetic character, which embodies the Yooper traditions of resourcefulness, thrift, and self-reliance.

It is reasonable to ask, “Just what is a shack?” The shack builder himself will answer that question, and distinguish the “shack” from the “cabin” and the “camp” later.

### **Traditions of Resourcefulness and Thrift**

A lifetime of family gatherings at my Uncle Carl's four shacks (all located within fifteen miles of his farm in Ontonagon County), and a love for the shack's unique aesthetic character prompted my investigation into Carl's shacks, writing field notes,

making sketches, and taking over one hundred photographs. I conducted an interview with Carl at his farmhouse to find answers to questions prompted by the shacks' physical features. Although my research focuses on Carl and his shack building, his construction experiences are a continuation of a family tradition of resourcefulness transmitted through his father, Frank Domitrovich, Sr. Like other folk builders, Carl learned construction techniques by participating in and imitating his dad's building projects and, of course, trial and error. Throughout my interview with him, Carl repeatedly mentioned his father's informal teaching methods and clever recycling habits. So we begin Carl's story of shack-building with his father Frank.

Frank Domitrovich emigrated from Osojnik, Croatia (formerly Yugoslavia) in 1915 to the Upper Midwest, where he worked as an unskilled laborer at the Quincy Mine in Hancock, in the so-called "Copper Country" of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and on farms, until he saved enough money to buy farmland near Ontonagon in 1924. There he and his family operated the Lone Pine Dairy.

Only an old barn and a small house with no running water or electricity stood on the property. Carl remembers that his dad built the chicken coop first:

In '28 he just took lots of those small balsam trees, squared 'em up, stood them up and down, one next to the other. Then he took some . . . I think he used clay or lime or something . . . plastered it, and it hardened up. He filled in between the trees, then he plastered the whole inside, so the chicken coop had a plaster finish on it. The chicken

coop was in the back of the building, and in the front we had a stove. Mother did all her washing in there. We took showers in there. Took a nice pail, punched a bunch of holes, pour some water, hang it on a nail and get under there quick!

Carl mentioned that his father learned this style of construction in Croatia but only employed these building methods on the chicken coop. He quickly realized that other methods and materials were more appropriate for the climate of the Upper Peninsula. Carl said that his dad learned all other building techniques through traditional methods of observation and trial and error. "If Dad saw it done once, he knew how to do it. Everything he saw, what he did here, he never did in Yugoslavia the same way. He just watched other friends and tried it until he got it." As folklorist George Shoemaker (1990) suggests, this pattern of acculturation surfaced in all immigrant groups as they transitioned into ethnic cultures situated in their newly adopted countries.

When asked to recall his earliest shack-building experiences, Carl relayed the following memory: "One time when I was a kid, there were big tag alders all over, and my dad wanted [to use] the land, and wanted us boys to cut the brush down. Before we burnt the trees, we made shacks all over, and when we got them all done, we set them on fire." After Carl finished laughing, he said "When we got older, we built more sophisticated stuff." By "more sophisticated stuff," Carl meant that he, his father and his brothers built all the structures on their farm—the barns, hammer mill, machine shed, and chicken coop, including benches, stanchions and fences. Folklorist Ruth Olsen explains,

“Northerners have always been self-reliant, in that they have always had to depend on their own capabilities and resources to get by.” (Olsen, 1997, p. 76). Due to their rural location and financial circumstances, these men etched their resourcefulness and hard work into everything they built. In the following stories, Carl retraces his father's building endeavors, use of indigenous materials, and penchant for recycling:

I helped my dad build the barn down there [he motions toward the north barn]. We went down to the lake [Lake Superior] and we found some long beams washed up on the beach. My dad took and he flattened, hewed them out so they were square, and we hauled them home. When you hew a log, you have to cut a straight line, you know. My job was to go and chop into the right depth. And then Dad would come with a broad-ax, and then take the big slabs off, and it'd go straight. He never used any electric equipment, just a good sharp ax.

After Carl and his dad retrieved the major beams for the skeleton of the barn, they needed more building supplies. They started construction of the north barn in 1947, only two years after the end of World War II. At that time, both building supplies and money were extremely scarce. In response, Carl's dad purchased and recycled an old deteriorating commercial building from a neighboring town. Carl recalls the demolishing and recycling process:

My brother Frank, my dad . . . three of us tore down that store. We worked . . . we worked for betchya two or three months during the wintertime. Fed the cows and then

in between every day, we'd go up and get a truckload. That building had the lumber going across for the floor joists in one piece--28 feet long! Imagine handling lumber like that? We got enough floor joists for both the house and the barn down there. That store was a big building. Back then, those buildings had two-by-fours up and down with lumber on the inside and lumber on the outside. Then they had that tin covering the walls on the inside. No insulation. Lot of lumber . . . . My job all that winter was to straighten nails, and in the spring when the snow went off, we had piles of lumber all the way from [the bend in the road], all the way up around, up to the barn. We'd sort everything out and pull the nails out. For the cement foundation on this barn [south barn nearest the house], we'd take the horses down to the lake, shovel the gravel, haul it up here, and mix the cement by hand.

Carl continued to give examples of his dad's resourcefulness and intense work ethic:

My dad would salvage almost everything. A railroad track used to go across our farm back here, and the railroad company pulled all the rails out and said, "You can have the rest of it." Dad picked up piles and piles of railroad spikes 'cause they just left them there. Then he'd sell them to a junk dealer. Then the ties, the ties he took all the good ties out. He needed a fence and took the ties and crisscrossed them. [He] used all those old ties, and those big telephone poles! He took all the wire down and piles and piles of wire around. There were coils of wire all over here,

and it kept being used up, and used up and pretty soon it's all gone.

## **Self-Reliance**

Carl learned construction methods by watching and working with his dad and family friends who helped build the barns and outbuildings on the farm. Aside from a basic high school wood shop class, Carl does not have any formal training in building construction and never attended college. He learned to be self-reliant by following his father's lead, making a living by dairy farming and logging and providing his own practical education through hands-on experience, solving daily mechanical problems with farm equipment and meeting immediate needs for shelter. Without the financial resources to purchase professional services from carpenters, mechanics, or architects (and often these services were not even available in rural areas), Carl learned to provide for himself and his family.

I interviewed Carl in his home, the house in which he and seven other siblings were born, with his dad serving as midwife. As I glanced around, I asked, "Which of these things did you make by hand?" He began listing items: "The deck, the bird feeders, bird houses, the lamp, this chair, the plant stand, and all the shelves." He also made Adirondack chairs, bunk beds, rolling carts, tables, quilt racks, and futons. Unlike his father, Carl uses a table saw and other electric-powered equipment to make his projects, but he neither uses commercial blueprints nor drafts a plan before he begins his work. He pages through garden books and catalogs such as *L.L.Bean* and builds entire sets of furniture just by looking at a

picture.

### **Shack Attack**

As mentioned, Carl learned most of his woodworking and construction techniques from his father and through his own work as a logger. He applied his skills in barn and house assembly, used his knowledge to create countless pieces of furniture and other utilitarian objects, and also exercised these diverse skills in his shack-building. Although Carl's brothers also build shacks, he alone initiated the construction of four of them, all built in beautiful wooded areas of Ontonagon County.

The Dam Shack, the Back Shack, and the Norwich Knobs are named according to their specific locations, and the Weekendica (pronounced "weekend-eet-za") is christened with the family's Croatian-American slang word for "small, weekend shack." The following descriptive survey of Carl's work starts from the newest shack and proceeds to the oldest, examines the distinctions between the terms "shack," "camp," and "cabin," explores Carl's motivation for building the shacks, and concludes with a discussion of the shacks' social functions.

### **The Weekendica (see Figure 1)**

After clearing a small space between his own farm and Ontonagon proper in the mid 1990s, Carl, with help from a couple friends, built the Weekendica primarily for card games on weekends. Carl has never slept overnight in it. He recalled how this particular 16' x 24' one room camp came into existence: "We cut some of the balsam trees. There was no market for it. We thought there was, but then all of a sudden there wasn't. When the wood gets so old, no one wants it. So then we had



them sawed up, small logs. And made a shack with it.” He made this shack, its accompanying outhouse, and virtually everything in it, from scratch—the tables, benches, the futon, the special hooks fashioned from horseshoes. He even cut the trees and planed the wood for the walls by himself. Chuckling, Carl added, “To me the challenge was to build something, and then don't buy nothing. The only thing I bought down there was the flooring and roofing.” The Weekendica's interior is completely and finely finished, with floors and mission-style furniture layered with coats of polyurethane.

### **The Norwich Knobs (see Figure 2)**

In the early 1980s Carl and his two brothers Stanley and George bought a parcel of land about fifteen miles from the family farm. The land rested on twin rock bluffs—the Norwich Knobs—that overlook a vista of trees in all directions. On one of the bluffs his brothers built the Dubrovnik, a modern cabin named for a beautiful coastal city in Croatia. While Carl helped Stanley and George construct their place, he spied a perfect spot for his own shack. He recalled, “So I was cutting trees, one here and one there, going towards the hill there, and then I saw that rock. That'd be a good place to build a shack! So then we put a bulldozer up there. I said 'Well, if I can get a road up there, we'll build a shack.' So I went around and got a road in there, and that's why we built it there. That's a nice view.”

As with the Weekendica, Carl purchased only a tin roof and commercially planed lumber for the floor. All other materials came from his logging activities and scavenger hunts for recycled materials. The walls and floor of the Norwich Knobs are left untreated, and the furnishings include an

eclectic mix of cast-offs from the family's home, a wooden booth (table and high-backed bench-seats) from a local restaurant, and cooking utensils from thrift sales. Carl's youngest son Peter and his family are now the primary users and caretakers of this camp.

### **The Dam Shack (see Figure 4)**

Over 40 years old, the Dam Shack sits only 500 yards from Carl's farmhouse, on the little feeder stream known as "First Creek." With dynamite and bulldozer, he created the dam in the late 1960s when the U. S. government offered to cost-share if he agreed to build a reservoir to prevent cattle from "slopping around the crick all the time." Even though the dam's original purpose served cattle, Carl made the dam primarily for recreation—fishing and swimming. The actual shack is the old garage from Rogers' Motel, a small tourist business in downtown Ontonagon. After laying a cement floor near the dam, he backed his truck into the garage on its original site, jacked it up, and drove it right up to the farm. Instant shack! As with the other shacks, Carl's recycling expertise appeared here in the building itself and in the outdoor grill, which he made by cutting a hot water heater in half and welding metal legs to the underside. Since Carl's brother George Domitrovich and family use the Dam Shack frequently, they invest a great deal of time and effort to keep it clean, freshly painted, and tastefully decorated. The Dam Shack is strictly a summer place, with no insulation or stove for heat.

### **The Back Shack (see Figure 5)**

We turn now to the Back Shack, an example of Carl's earliest shack-building. Carl explained that

his friend Eugene Knickerbocker tore down an old house. So Carl and four or five of his pals, all in their early 20s, reassembled the rafters and framework of the house and recycled its lumber on a new location—the back woods beyond the Domitrovich farm. Without drawing any plans for the structure, the young men just started building. Laughing, Carl said, “For the porch we just peeled some poles and let them dry a bit, put that up. We didn't have no level or anything. I don't even know if we had a tape [measure]!” For the roof Carl's nose for discarded building materials led him to the Catholic Church in town: “I think they were putting a new roof on the old Catholic Church, and there were a lot of those octagon shaped shingles. Someone had a bunch and they said, 'Free for taking.' So I took that and we put them on the shack. Of course, after a while, that rot. Then we put tin over the top. I don't know how many roofs we had on the flat part!”

The original shack was only one room, but within five years, Carl added a second room to accommodate a kitchen and a small bunk room with a large doorway connecting them. In 1974, a second addition housed a larger living room to make space for his family of five young children and his friends' growing families. Carl sank the floor of this second addition two feet lower than the original shack to allow for easy extension of the established roofline and installed French doors as a partition between the new living room and the old bunk room.

At first glance the shack seems a hodge-podge of lines, shapes and textures, but on closer scrutiny, it illustrates a peculiar sense of order. For example, the front porch demonstrates bilateral symmetry

with windows balancing each side of the front door. The two walls that face the road are completely finished with siding but the other two, which overlook the woods, are only covered with tarpaper. The location of the shack on the hill is deliberate: The main windows offer a great view of a small ravine that doubles as a sledding hill in wintertime.

Since the users of the shack generally stayed there in the fall and winter, the stove had a very significant and demanding job. This particular stove throws so much heat that Carl covered the walls near it with tinfoil to prevent fire. He also stuffed tinfoil in the cracks between the wall boards to prevent drafts and exclude mice. Numerous wire hangers and other drying racks dangle above the stove for hanging wet snowsuits, mittens and hats. Tracing the origins of the stove, Carl said, "I think I got the metal for the stove from a guy named Scurvy down in Freda. He tore down some buildings on that old mill site there. Lots of iron in there and I went down and bought a bunch of iron." The stove has the words "Still on the Hill" engraved in the side. The original builders of the shack christened the whole building with this title, but the name just didn't stick. Early on, Carl's siblings dubbed it "Carl's Shack" but it is most often called the "Back Shack," referring to its location in the back woods beyond the farm.

Visitors to the shack will find thoughtful, quirky details in every room. The knob on the kitchen cupboard broke off so Carl attached a tiny deer antler to the door instead. He said the tiny "freak" horn came from a big deer that weighed almost 200 pounds. Railroad spikes, nails and hangers serve as hooks for pots, pans, clothing, lanterns or anything else requiring storage off the floor. The users of the

shack nailed maps of the Porcupine Mountain State Park, the Ottawa National Forest, and a North Norwich Road hunting map to the kitchen walls. Bungee cords, hunting licenses, a lumberjack saw and wooden cutting boards adorn the walls, adding a decorative but utilitarian touch to the room.

The shack's two outhouses also carry stories of recycling and local history. The old, broken, unusable outhouse has been standing on the property since the infamous Ontonagon fire of 1896 and remains for nostalgia's sake. The functional outhouse offers two holes, and the right hole boasts a fancy arm- and backrest made from a wooden armchair found at the local dump. With his typical flair for imagining new uses for old objects, Carl constructed the entire back wall of the outhouse using three old doors, made the hinge on the entry door out of leather belting from an old piece of machinery, and carved the door handle from a tree branch.

Of all the shacks, the Back Shack best represents Carl's sense of humor and recycling obsession. How can you not laugh when tugging on a deer antler (with fur at the base, no less) to open a kitchen cabinet? Or upon entering the crude outhouse and finding an elegant chair? This shack, with its additions and evolving décor, also track the major transitions of Carl's life, from single young man, to husband, to father, to grandfather. Every recycled board, nail and piece of iron carries a story and a connection to other times, people and places. Even though Carl's skills have evolved from this shack to the most recent, and his aesthetic taste has changed, and he has acquired more technologically advanced building tools, he has never changed the desire to build with humble materials.

Even though Carl does not refer to himself as a designer or an architect, he certainly operates like one, making decisions regarding construction and visual presence of his structures, and developing strategies for building them (Dormer, 1997). Also, folk builders' distinct vision allows them to rethink high style elements in their own manner (Upton, 1985). The Back Shack's sunken living room, cedar shakes, and French doors exemplify Carl's ability to integrate elements from more sophisticated architectural forms into his own buildings. This rethinking results in a distinct vernacular style.

### **Is it a Shack, a Camp, or a Cabin?**

Carl and his family drew distinctions between the terms “shack,” “camp,” and “cabin,” with each category based solely on its degree of ruggedness. According to Janet, Carl's wife, shacks are rough and rugged, a camp is a “gussied up” shack, and a cabin is the “fanciest” of the three. Janet used the adjective “fancy” when referring to buildings made primarily from store-bought materials and/or with electricity, gas stoves, or plumbing powered by on-site generators. However, she and many other like-minded Yoopers do not necessarily prefer the more elaborate modernized structures. In fact, while she was explaining the differences between shack, camp and cabin, Janet's tone of voice betrayed a hint of “Jackpine Savage” syndrome, that is, “a certain pride in roughness and lack of civilization” (Olson, 1997, p. 66). Places like Carl's Back Shack visually represent the Yooper spirit of “roughing it” or a sense that foregoing convenience, comfort and modern amenities builds moral character and heightens the rustic, sensory experience of life in the woods.

New cabins with their modern amenities offer a different aesthetic sensibility and reflect a different set of values, as illustrated by the Dubrovnik, the more refined cabin built by Carl's brothers (see Figure 3). Modern machines and technology produce materials that have a uniform and predictable aesthetic, which runs counter to the irregularities and idiosyncrasies of the handmade (Dormer, 1997). Carl's work defies predictability and uniformity since he collects his materials from everywhere *but* a store. However, with each successive shack, Carl noticed, "We're upgrading. The Back Shack is the rugged one, then the Norwich is a little bit better, and the Weekendica is better yet." The Weekendica is indeed the most polished in terms of surface finish on walls and floors, but without running water or electricity it still does not meet Carl and Janet's definition of "cabin."

In his discussion of Upper Peninsula summer camps, Jon Saari (1997) mentions that "modesty was a hallmark of camp architecture in general, and it was a modesty enforced by limited means as well as ideals of rusticality" (p. 181). However, he does not differentiate between shack, camp, and cabin according to their *degree* of modesty as Carl and Janet do. Instead he explains that "it is the coming and going from town to camp that justifies the usage" of the words more than the structures themselves (p. 178). In other words, seasonal, temporary quarters surrounded by the natural world comprise a category of architecture that includes shacks, camps, and cabins, with all three terms used interchangeably.

Troy Henderson (2009) offers another perspective on the issue in his study of shanty-boys, lumberjacks, and loggers in the Upper Great Lakes.

He describes “shackers” (primarily jobless veteran lumberjack squatters) who moved into abandoned lumber camps once the lumber industry began to fade in the 1920s, similar to hunters repurposing lumber camps for their hunting excursions. The lumber “camps” became “shacks” once the occupants and the function of the structures changed. When the buildings were used for official business (logging) and specific functions (hunting), they were labeled “camps.” When squatters occupied the buildings as residents, the label changed to “shack,” which suggests that the definitions of the terms depend not only on the buildings' physical attributes, as identified by Carl and Janet, but also the structures' history, inhabitants, and use.

### **A Shack Builder's Motivations**

When I asked Carl why he built the shacks, he responded without actually answering the question: “When friends of ours first come up here [to the U. P.], they couldn't figure this out. They said, 'You already live out in the country. How come you have a shack? How come you have so *many* shacks?’” His friends' comments suggest that shacks primarily provide an escape from the noise and congestion of an urban area, but this reason does not apply to Carl's situation. Janet thought that this shack-building phenomenon is a “local thing.” She stated, “It's not just this family. Look at all the people in Ontonagon who have camps!”

Helen Hoefflerle, my mother and Carl's younger sister, gave a different explanation for his shack fever. She suggested that he and his brothers inherited a genetic urge to build. She reasoned, “They just gotta build something. It's got to do with



wanting to build with your hands and make something out of nothing. Instead of knitting or crocheting, they build something out of wood.” From my conversations with and observations of Carl over the years, I would posit that his irresistible drive to build shacks and camps stems from a combination of the enjoyment of working with his hands *and* his need for special, away-from-it-all places specifically designed for socializing, relaxation, and communing with nature.

### **What Do You Do at Camp/In a Shack?**

It never occurred to me until recently that everyone in my extended family has spent time at one or more of Carl's shacks/camps, gathering in every season for a diverse range of social activities. As the oldest building, the Back Shack hosted the most events—birthday and Christmas celebrations, wedding anniversaries, sledding parties, a Catholic mass to honor religious educators, hayrides, a party for a great aunt visiting from Canada, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the shack, snowmobile parties, and partridge feeds. Originally, Carl, as a young man in his 20s still living with his parents, built the shack as a place to socialize, drink beer and play cards with his male friends without parental interference. When he married and had children and grandchildren, the shack continued to provide special psychological and social space to “be away” from the routines of daily life on the farm.

Non-family members used the shack too. A group of hunters who had been staying at a base camp belonging to Carl's neighbor, needed a new resting place when their usual getaway deteriorated with age. Carl said to them jokingly, “ I'll rent you my hunting shack.” The hunters accepted the offer

and continued their annual pilgrimage to his shack during hunting season until the late 1990s. The hunters told Carl that they “don't even care if they ever see a deer.” They just love going “up there” to the shack. Due to advanced age and changing interests, the hunters no longer meet at the shack, and even Carl and family have found other places to spend their leisure hours. As of November 2011, mice, raccoons, and other woods critters are the shack's only visitors.

Each of Carl's other shacks and camps all seemed to have their social season. The Dam Shack hosted countless summer events—birthday parties, Sunday swimming parties, picnics and cook-outs, Fourth of July fireworks, and sleepovers. The Norwich Knobs offered the best views of autumn's red and yellow days, the best routes for spring hiking, and an overnight snowmobile destination to break up winter's monotony. Carl seemed to build the Weekendica solely to provide a perfect setting for all-afternoon cribbage games with his best friends.

Carl's shacks certainly provide unique contexts for social engagement. They are gathering places and vacation spots for families who do not have the time or the financial means, or maybe even the inclination, to travel much farther than the borders of Ontonagon County. The shacks ooze memories, and their physicality visually preserves the Domitrovich and Yooper traditions of self-reliance, resourcefulness, and thrift. “Humble artifacts have important messages if we can figure out how to read them. They are statements made in mud and wood” (Glassie, 1975, p. ix). Carl's statements made with wood, deer horns, and old church shingles remind us of a humble, enterprising

do-it-yourself mentality that we rarely see in our store-bought, professionally-built, contemporary suburbs and cities. Carl's vernacular architecture testifies to a richness of life with family and friends and expresses the joy of making something out of nothing.

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## Figures



**Figure 1: Weekendica**



**Figure 2: Norwich Knobs**



**Figure 4: Dam Shack**



**Figure 5: Back Shack**

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