

STORY **WALTER FRANCZYK**
PHOTOGRAPHY **HAROLD CLARK**

Old School HOMEWORK

Alice Abbott and Doug Gower still marvel at the ease with which their home builder transformed a tragedy into a triumph.



*A reminder of the home's original use.
Many children studied here over the 80+
years that it served as a schoolhouse.*

THE PARENTS OF THREE grown sons, the couple had made their country home in an old school house in Codrington. Built in 1885 as the Mount Olivet School, it operated until 1967 when Ontario built new Centennial schools across the province and shut down one-room school houses. "Almost everyone in the neighbourhood went to school here," says Alice, a recently retired teacher. She got her first teaching job in Newfoundland and moved to Northumberland County when she landed a local teaching job. After buying the old school house as a home, she preserved the original floor marked by screws that kept desks in place. "People would come over and say, 'This was my desk. I sat right here,'" she recalls.

Four years ago, just 12 days after Alice retired, their home burned down. Mice gnawing on varnished cloth insulating old electrical wires sparked a blaze that destroyed the building and everything in it. "When it burned down, it was a huge tragedy for

the neighbourhood," says Alice. "We had neighbours standing here crying." Firefighters poured water on the smouldering building for eight hours. It was January and a flash freeze followed. "It was totally destroyed," says Doug. "The inside was just annihilated – nothing left. We couldn't find our wood stove, we couldn't find our fridge," says the a retired Royal Canadian Air Force electrician and businessman. Alice had her most beautiful dishes in an armoire, but she couldn't find one surviving shard of tableware.

Wisely, they were well-insured. **Hamilton Township Mutual Insurance Company** helped the painstaking process of replacing almost everything they'd owned. Familiar with the excellent reputation of **Gordon Tobey Developments Ltd.** and the company's beautiful homes, Doug called owner **Stephen Tobey** and told him they wanted him to build their new home. *Continued on page 40*



TOP: Comfortably furnished with leather sofas and armchair from Bennett's Home Furnishings, the living room overlooks farm fields where the scenery changes with the seasons. **ABOVE:** Alice Abbott and Doug Gower enjoy country living and friendly neighbours. **FAR LEFT:** William Morris tapestries add subtle colour and texture to the living room walls while improving the home's acoustics.

BELOW: The den with matching leather recliners serves as shared office space. **RIGHT:** Mennonite furniture made with quarter-sawn oak furnishes the dining room where the dinner table can be extended to seat 16 people.



“He zoomed right up here and looked around the property,” Doug says. “He was taking measurements and was very excited about the site and making the new house fit into the setting.” The couple like older homes and wanted their new one to look like an old farmhouse. “Steve went around the county and took pictures of old farmhouses and then we talked,” Alice says. “He said, ‘We’re going to make the outside look like it’s been here



forever and the inside is going to be modern and bright and convenient.’” In designing the house, the couple took about 30 days to do what most people do in two years, Doug reckons. “One thing I wanted was an unfinished basement and an outside entrance to the basement with doors, like in the Wizard of Oz.” Alice wanted a clawfoot tub to replace the cast iron one they’d had in their old bath.

The home was a real pleasure to design and build, says Stephen. “We love to have the freedom to take a design to the next level,” he says. “At our office we took the homeowners’ wishes and combined that with the vision we had for this country lot. The result was a cohesive package that mixed old world charm with modern style and efficiency.” The design was a collaborative effort. “It was the most pleasant experience,” says



LEFT: Cherrywood cabinetry and panels complement the oak flooring and pine ceiling in the kitchen. **BELOW:** Alice hooks rugs, spins wool and weaves in her studio, where a bench pulls out to form a king-size bed for overnight guests. **BOTTOM:** Doug filled, routed and painted plywood to create the studio floor that looks just like planks.

Alice. Part of the building package was spending a day with interior decorator **Linda Bridges** of **Rolston Interior Designs**. Alice was initially skeptical about the need for a decorator. “But it was a really great experience,” she says. “She was wonderful.” Linda knew what décor options would complement the couple’s choices and she kept everything organized.

Doug and Alice wanted high ceilings in their living room to mimic the 12-ft. ceilings of the school house. Varnished pine ceilings give the principal rooms a warm, cosy ambience. A modern kitchen, open to the living room, was a must. “I do a lot of cooking and baking and entertaining and I didn’t want to be in a kitchen where you were shut off. This I love,” she says, seated at the granite-topped dining bar. An array of custom-stained cherrywood cabinetry, by **George Typhair** of **G&D Cabinets**, reaches to the kitchen ceiling. A glassed corner cupboard displays the colourful bowls and pottery of Frantic Farms potter Monica Johnson.

Three-quarter-inch oak from **Sine’s Flooring** covers floors in the main living areas. They chose a light hue for the hardwood floor because they elected a darker colour for their custom-made Mennonite furnishings from **Ruttle Brothers Furniture**. Their dining table with matching chairs, china cabinet, and their bedroom, den and living room furniture are hand-made of quarter-cut oak with old-world craftsmanship. Golden-brown leather sofas and a comfortable arm chair from **Bennett’s Home Furnishings**

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LOCAL SOURCE GUIDE

• Alexanian Carpets • Beams Lighting • Bennett's Home Furnishing • G & D Cabinets • Gordon Tobey Developments Ltd. • Hamilton Township Mutual Insurance Company • Hollandale Landscaping & Garden Centre Ltd. • Rolston Interior Designs • Ruttle Brothers Furniture • Sine's Flooring • Steve Crowe Excavating Ltd. • Vanderlaan Building Products Ltd. • VanVark Electric

complement the oak furnishings in the living room. **VanVark Electric** supplied chandeliers and most interior lighting.

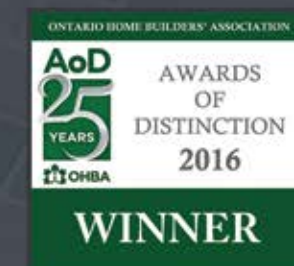
Outside, where the couple are meticulous with their yard work, **Hollandale Landscaping & Garden Centre Ltd.** dropped other jobs and promptly planted gardens and installed interlocking stone to give the new home a finished look as soon as possible. "They worked for 30 days after the house was built putting this stuff in. It was impressive," says Doug.

The master bedroom, with a walk-in closet and en suite bath, inhabits the main floor just steps from the living and dining rooms, kitchen and laundry. Upstairs are two bedrooms, one of which was enlarged into unused attic space to create a nursery for visiting grandchildren. The two bedrooms are connected by a lofty hall that overlooks the living room. Each window in the home has a view of rolling farm fields and forests, a panorama that changes with the seasons and each year as farmers rotate their crops. "Every season is perfect. We look out in the winter and we see the fields full of snow. In the fall it's amazing. We have maple trees that are red and gold," says Alice. "In bed at night, we can look up and see the stars," says Doug. **OH**

TOP LEFT: A glass shower, clawfoot tub and matching sinks in a granite-topped vanity are just a few steps from bed. **MIDDLE LEFT:** An oak bed with matching dressers furnish the main-floor master bedroom. **LEFT:** Bright red canoes in Alice's rug-hooked wall hanging enliven a second floor guest room.



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