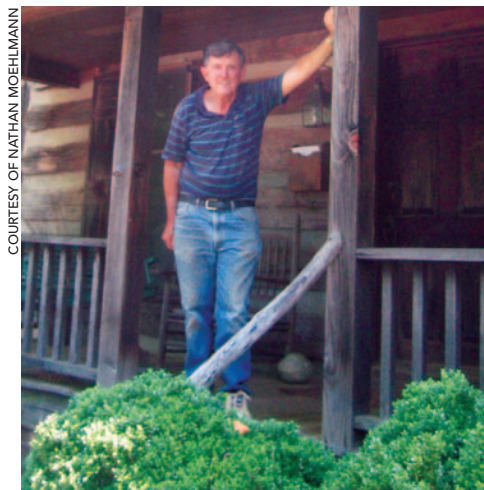


# Cabin Fever

For one day, Robert Hart opens his Carolina village, the largest collection of historically restored log cabins in the nation.

*by Nathan Moehlmann*



COURTESY OF NATHAN MOEHLMANN



COURTESY OF KEITH HART

Above: Robert Hart (top) takes a break on the steps of the Kahill-Dellingher house. Opposite: Volunteers demonstrate how to make lye soap.

**O**n any other day, you can find Robert Hart, a semi-retired physician from Hickory, somewhere in a grove among his 200 acres of land, heaving a dovetail notch into place, laying a floor joist, restacking a stone chimney (he spent two years as an apprentice learning the technique), or hammering on the tin roof of an old log house — or of the old log chapel, barn, cabin, granary, and shed that reside on his property.

But on this day, the fourth Saturday in October, you'll find Hart in a collarless linen shirt with suspenders, touring visitors around his village, Hart Square, in a golf cart, pointing to the circling mule up ahead that is powering an antebellum cotton gin, watching as a gunsmith rifles his barrel, and listening as a fiddler tunes up in the tavern. Nearly 3,000 visitors will meander through this re-created, mid-19th-century Carolina Village, come to survey the largest collection of original historic log buildings — 70 in all, dating between 1782 and 1873 — in the United States.



CHARLES BRASWELL, JR.

## Village voice

In 1967, Hart, along with his wife, Becky, and their young sons, Eric and Keith, moved to Hickory from Charleston, South Carolina, where Hart had attended medical school. The Harts purchased the land as a nature preserve and retreat, constructing five ponds for swans, ducks, and geese. They mounted cypress nesting boxes and populated the fenced acreage with fallow deer, a few of which became tame, including Knobs, a pet.

When the preserve was established, a friend said, “Bob, you need a log cabin to set off the large pond.” The friend knew of an available cabin near Conover, and so the Harts set about to move the Hunsucker Cabin, circa 1840, to their property. Shortly thereafter, it seemed to need a barn and corncrib. Then patients and friends began telling Dr. Hart the locations of other abandoned log buildings. He would photograph them first, correspondingly number the logs

at their joints, and then haul them off dismantled on his red '59 flatbed Ford (he now sits directly on the springs when the seat cushion slips out of place).

A first lieutenant Marine Corp fighter pilot, Hart found many of his buildings through the window of his Cessna 150 — like the Philips Cabin, circa 1870, which was discovered after Hurricane Hugo swept through. (Hugo also considerably damaged much of Hart Square — 17 pines fell on the arbor alone). Most of the structures have been found within a 25-mile radius, and Hart keeps track of them by stamping a tiny red heart onto a copy of the 1886 Yoder Map of Catawba County.

## Labor of love

Moving and reconstructing the log buildings have not occurred without their dangers. To rescue the Philips Cabin, now used as the Hart Square Museum, a road was cut and a bridge built that subsequently gave way beneath the '59 Ford. The logs can weigh 400 pounds each, and boosting a large dressed stone up a scaffold — as Hart and his helper, Boris, did toward the top of the circa 1874 Teague Cabin's unfinished chimney — would be a hazardous pastime for most people.

In another mishap, Hart once



COURTESY OF BOB & BECKY HART



COURTESY OF NATHAN MOEHLMANN



COURTESY OF NATHAN MOEHLMANN

Top left: Hart's re-created community includes an Episcopal church, called The Chapel of Peace (left).

Above: Hart moved the Rhodes house, circa 1820, from a site along the Old Hickory-Lincolnton Highway, transporting the structure in the bed of his '59 Ford.

unwittingly dislodged a crucial support beam from the two-story Dietz House, circa 1820, which came crashing down around him.

Some dangers, however, haven't lacked for humor. Hart and his friend, Harold Starnes, were able to load the Moore Utility Building, circa 1850, intact. "But when we got it to the village on the truck," Hart says, "it wouldn't pass between a set of trees. The tin roof was too wide. So I climbed up and started jerking out the nails, and when I jerked out the last nail, I was sitting on the last sheet of tin. I rode it off like a magic carpet. Luckily, I landed on an embankment, in a pile of leaves. Harold turned around and said, 'Doc, how'd you get down so fast?'"

Hart is also somewhat of a nail connoisseur. "Rosehead nails are handmade and help date the structures. The first American nail machine was patented in 1786, although handmade nails were used around here through the late 1800s. For the rosehead, one end of the forged shank, dropped into the hole of a bolster, was pounded down. The flattened result often resembles the petals of a rose," he says. "I take and keep everything. The only new things I buy are roofing nails. If a board is damaged, I go to the woodpile and find a similar, salvaged one. I take every board and every stone. I've taken the clothesline and even the outhouse."

## Oh, pioneer

The Harts will have opened their village to the public for 20 years this October. Around 220 volunteer artisans demonstrate the period techniques of flax breaking and hackling, spinning, weaving, herb dyeing, open-hearth cooking, broom and shoe making, shingle riving, wheelwrighting, tinsmithing, and moonshining, among many others.

Each building, furnished according to its use, is in itself a museum, and Hart's wife, Becky, who has been instrumental in determining both the site of the buildings in the village as well as their interiors, has encouraged him to look now only for items that will round out the collections. Hart says he "likes finding things made for a specific purpose," like his finds of an 18th-century double-handled framed pit saw,

a basket-maker's bench, or a 30-inch-wide one-board table of curly poplar. At the moment, he's on the lookout for early surveying instruments.

Hart hopes that visitors enjoy and come to appreciate what he does: "how folks lived, how hard it was, what they endured to get us where we are today," he says. The Harts donate visitor proceeds to various cultural organizations in the area, including the Catawba County Historical Association, which sells tickets. Hart's passion for and preservation of North Carolina material history was recognized in 1983, when Governor Jim Hunt selected Hart as "Wildlife Conservationist of the Year." He also received Preservation North Carolina's Gertrude S. Carraway Award in 1997 and the National Daughters of the American Revolution Conservation Award the following year. A three-part documentary, "The 1840 Carolina Village," narrated by the late Shelby Foote, continues to run on PBS stations.

This past June, Hart moved and restored the 70th and, as he promised Becky (although he admits she's heard it before), the last of his log buildings. The Icenhour Granary, circa 1860, was donated from the Oxford Dam area and is now underpinned with stones and ready for visitors. You won't find a new thing on it except the nails in the roof. 🐾

*Nathan Moehlmann lives in Hickory.*

## if you're going

Hart Square will be open on Saturday, October 22.

Tickets are available through the Catawba County Museum of History in Newton.

Catawba County Museum of History  
30 North College Avenue  
Newton, N.C. 28650  
(828) 465-0383  
[www.catawbahistory.org](http://www.catawbahistory.org)

