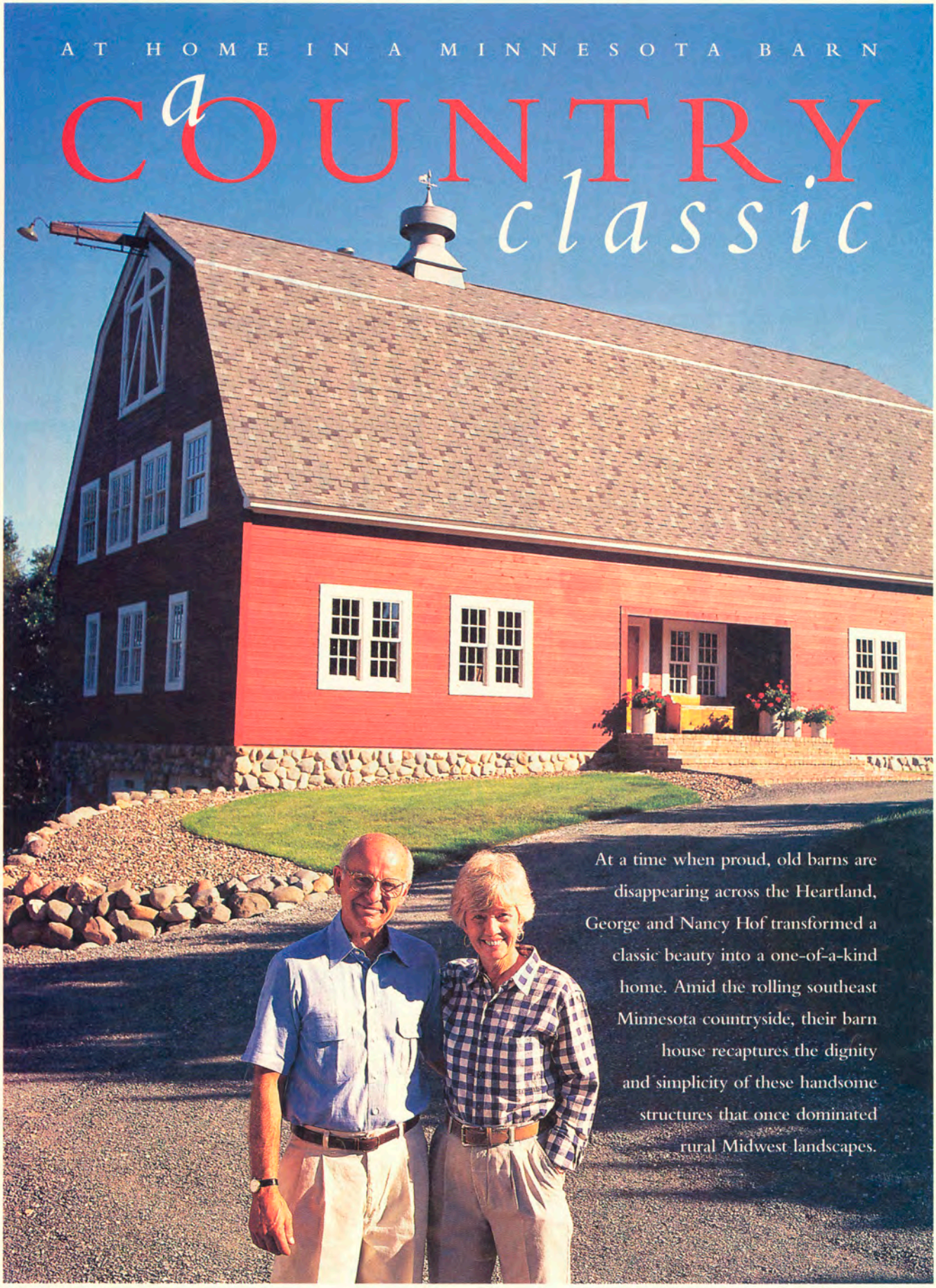
AT HOME IN A MINNESOTA BARN

a COUNTRY classic



At a time when proud, old barns are disappearing across the Heartland, George and Nancy Hof transformed a classic beauty into a one-of-a-kind home. Amid the rolling southeast Minnesota countryside, their barn house recaptures the dignity and simplicity of these handsome structures that once dominated rural Midwest landscapes.

Two deep-rose wing chairs and a sunny window seat create a corner for conversation or curling up with a book. The chairs and the Oriental rug demonstrate Nancy Hof's decorating philosophy: She prefers pieces that work well in more than one room. *(Right)* In the all-season sunroom (triple-insulated against the cold), a sisal rug partners with cheery wicker furnishings.

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At first glance, it takes a discerning eye to tell that George and Nancy Hof's house is a place for people. From the outside, this Minnesota couple's dream home resembles a big, red barn.

Converting a real barn into a home was a project 16 years in the making for the Hofs. After moving from an urban area, Nancy and George decided that they wanted a house with lots of space, but less formality than their Colonial-style two-story.

Following a lengthy search that lasted a year and a half, the Hofs happened upon a 1920s barn with possibilities. They bought the barn, along with the 15 acres of land surrounding it in southeast Minnesota.

"That was back in 1978," George says. "We lived in the caretaker's cottage on the farm while the house plans were drawn. The contractor was lined up. But he was so busy, he didn't get going on the project that fall."

In the meantime, the Hofs bought 15 more acres of land adjacent to the barn, including the farmhouse on the property. "We figured we'd live there until we got back to the barn project," George says.

But that wasn't until just 6 years ago. In 1990, the Hofs called in Twin Cities architect Rosemary McMonigal, asked their son, Michael, to be general contractor and went to work on their barn home in earnest.

First, they moved the barn 300 yards to a lakeside site and built a new foundation beneath it. "I've collected rocks for years," George says, "so I had a good idea of the type of foundation rock I wanted."

Once the 35 tons of rock from the nearby St. Croix River

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Hefty ceiling beams help frame the kitchen/keeping room, where the Hofs painted the fireplace mantel and window trim barn red. A homey half-dozen Windsor-style chairs flank the big Swedish country table. Nancy gave the room a personal touch with pieces from her pewter collection on the mantel. The pine cabinet displays china passed down through the family.

You won't find curtains in the Hofs' house, even in the guest bedroom. The way the house sits, "Our neighbors would never see us—or vice versa," Nancy explains. Just a few treasured family heirlooms decorate this simple room. *(Right)* A scale model of the Hofs' barn house and an old-fashioned pie safe greet Nancy and George's guests in the spacious entry.

arrived at the site, George supervised the repositioning of it several times before he settled on just the right configuration.

The exterior of the barn stayed basically unchanged. The windows are in their original locations—only they're slightly longer and wider. The old hayloft door remains the way it was, with the pulley above it. The Hofs use the pulley to hoist furniture and other storables up to their home's third-floor attic.

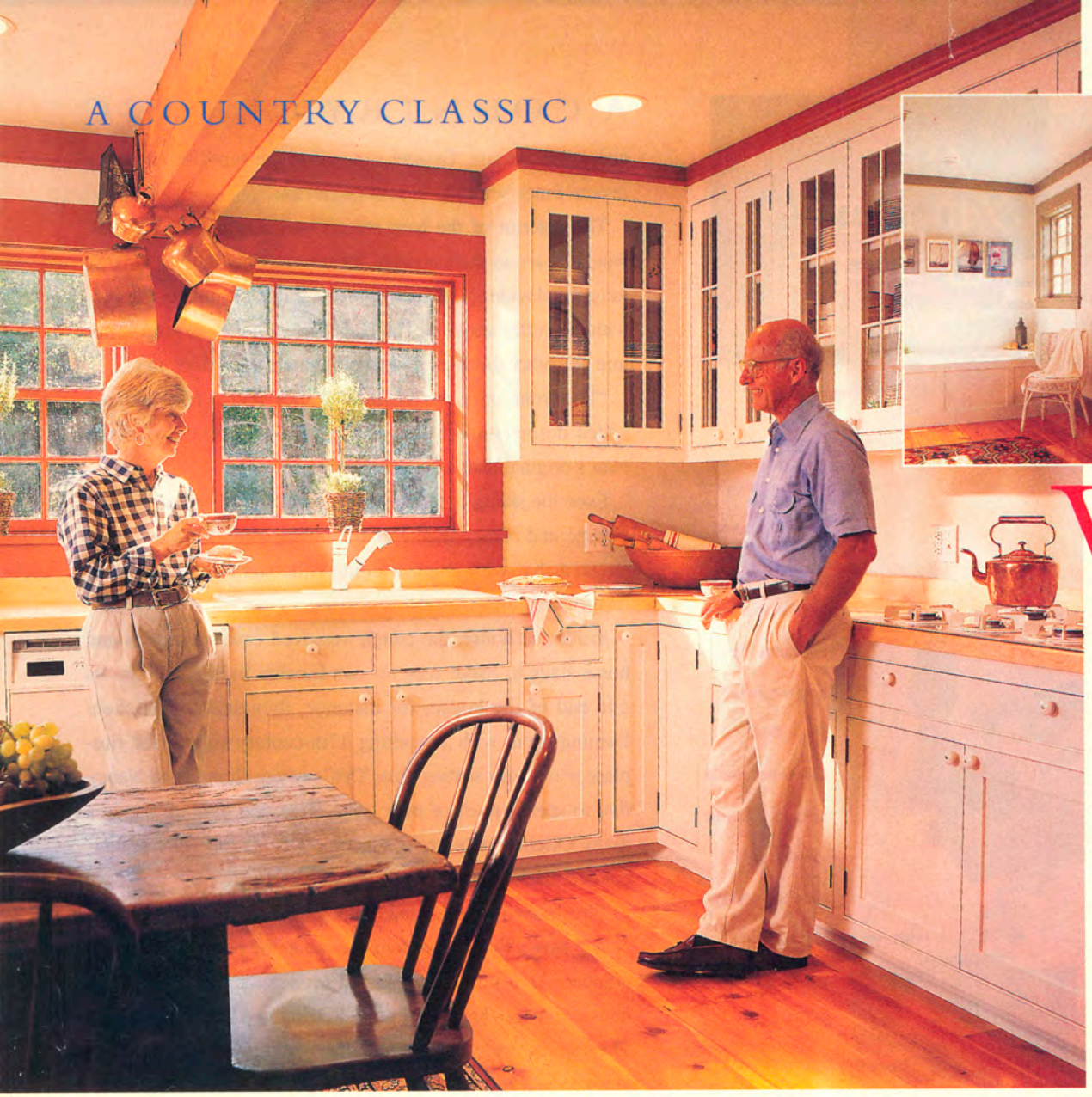
"The front entry is recessed," Nancy points out, "and we added dormers and a sunroom on the back. Otherwise, the barn's original lines remain intact."

Even the siding is true to the original barn. For practicality, George and Nancy sheeted the building with insulation, then covered that with shiplap siding—the same type first used on the barn.

Inside the house, the couple removed cow stanchions and horse stalls to make way for comfortable living quarters. At one end of the house, for instance, they added a kitchen/keeping room with a working 17th-century-style brick fireplace and a cozy seating area. That's where George and Nancy like to spend much of their time. Here, too, one of Nancy's many Oriental rugs perfectly complements the wide honey-colored plank flooring.

"We looked all over the country [for the pine flooring]," Nancy says. "Finally, we found an ad in the paper with an 800 number. As it turned out, an old Montgomery Ward's warehouse with 100,000 feet of pine shelving was being torn down. The shelving ended up at a mill just 5 miles from our house."

Like the 1780 Swedish table in the kitchen/keeping room,



White cabinetry dominates the kitchen/keeping room. Glass fronts add to the kitchen's open, airy feeling. There and in the master bathroom *(above)*, painted woodwork provides just the right accent to the rooms' otherwise neutral color schemes. The ceiling beam does double duty as a rack for Nancy's copper cookware.

most of the home's furnishings are family antiques or pieces the Hofs have collected over the years. Throughout the house, you'll see the couple's particular fondness for wing chairs.

"When George was in law school," Nancy recalls, "we could only get about $25 together at one time to buy a piece of furniture. We'd have the oddest collection of things. No sofa, but great wing chairs!"

Two of those wing chairs are prominently placed in one of Nancy's favorite rooms: the library. Since Nancy loves books, George promised to let her design a library if she'd agree to make the barn their home.

But beyond the window seat, drop-leaf desk and 3,000 volumes in this room, there's something that neither George or Nancy knew about until recently. Their son, Michael, added a secret compartment: a built-in closet behind the room's corner fireplace.

"When I was growing up," Nancy remembers, "our house had lots of little secret passageways. We'd sneak around and scare the living daylights out of each other. Mike remembered those passages from his grandparents' house, and decided to put a secret compartment in this house, too."

The Hofs' barn house also has a few other secrets. There's a time capsule buried somewhere under the stairs leading to the basement, and three other compartments that George and Nancy haven't discovered yet. But that's about all the Hofs don't know about their beloved barn house—a 16-year project that they'll tell you was well worth waiting for. ■

For a buying guide to products in this home, see page 201.

By Heather J. Paper. Photographs: Susan Gilmore.