

by Lin Waterhouse

*Comfortable
serenity is
the Farm's
stock-in-trade.*

River of Life Farm, or ROLF, in rural Ozark County is a place of spectacular beauty and natural serenity where the North Fork of the White River nourishes the land and the soul. The Farm offers guests riverbank campsites, luxury cabins, canoeing, kayaking, hiking, and birding along with some of the finest fly-fishing on the planet.

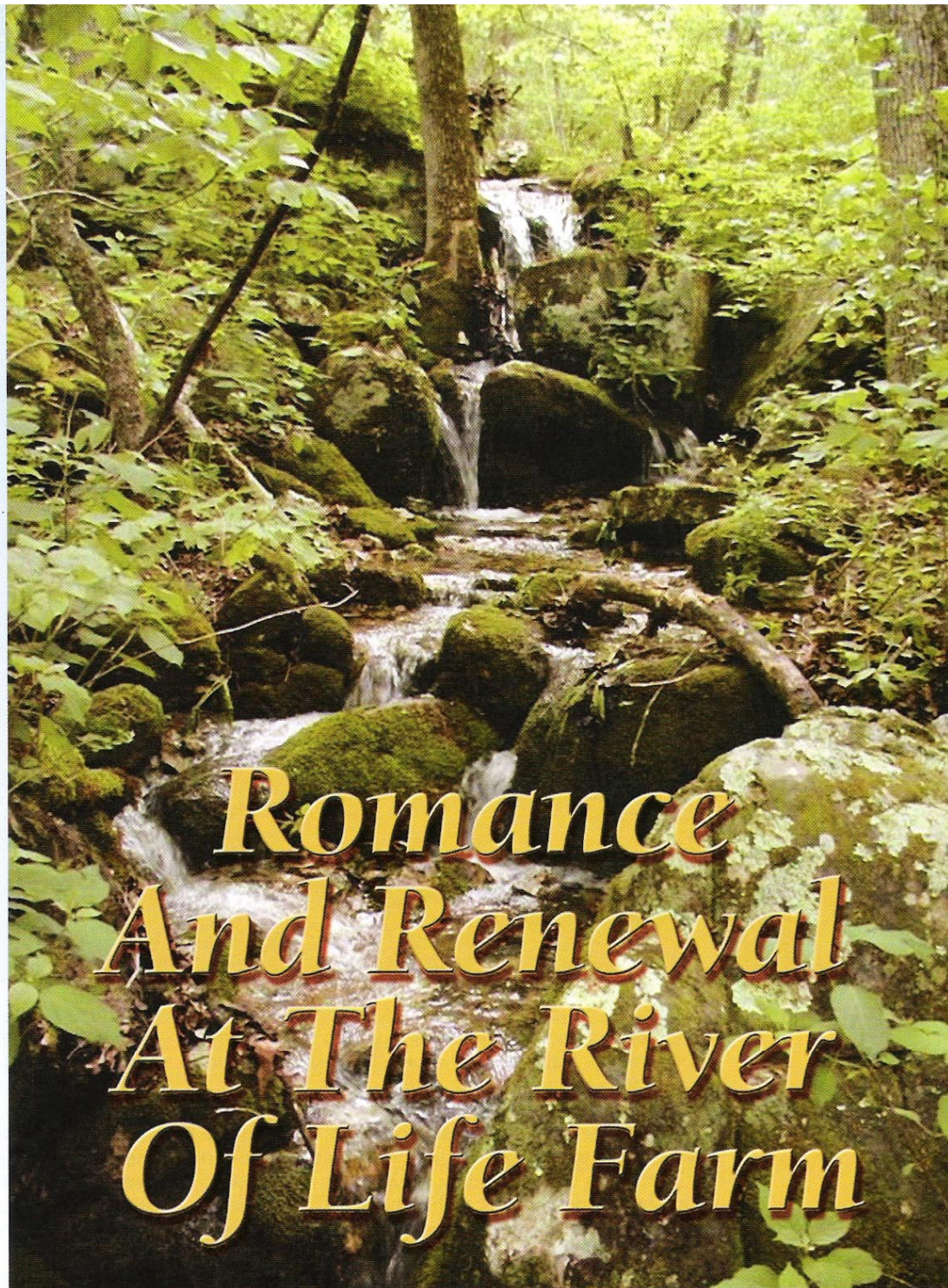
The Farm caters to guests who desire their nature experience in comfort. Well-appointed cabins perch on stilts high above the rushing water. The sound of the river flowing below a visitor's deck and 360-degree views of the water and surrounding timbered hills make for a unique vacation experience. With names like Tree House, Eagle's Nest Lodge and Wren Cabin, heated and air-conditioned lodgings accommodate singles or large families in search of Ozarks' beauty.

Comfortable serenity is the Farm's stock-in-trade. Cedar-scented accommodations offer natural stone fireplaces, stained glass windows, hand-hewn furniture and cozy quilt-covered beds. Meals are not available at the Farm. However, utensils, spices and condiments are tucked into the red cedar kitchen cabinets for guests to use in preparing their own meals.

Modern appliances and whirlpool tubs make for convenience and relaxation. Open decks offer barbecue grills, comfortable outdoor furniture and potted plants. Rustic-chic describes the classy but serene appeal of the cabins.

Just getting to the Farm engenders patience. Visitors travel more than five miles off the pavement over dirt roads through country little changed since the days the Osage Indians hunted and fished the land. Abandoned homesteads, modern homes and weekend cabins nestle into the old hills. Cattle and horses graze contentedly in the fields. An old family cemetery alongside the road recalls days of

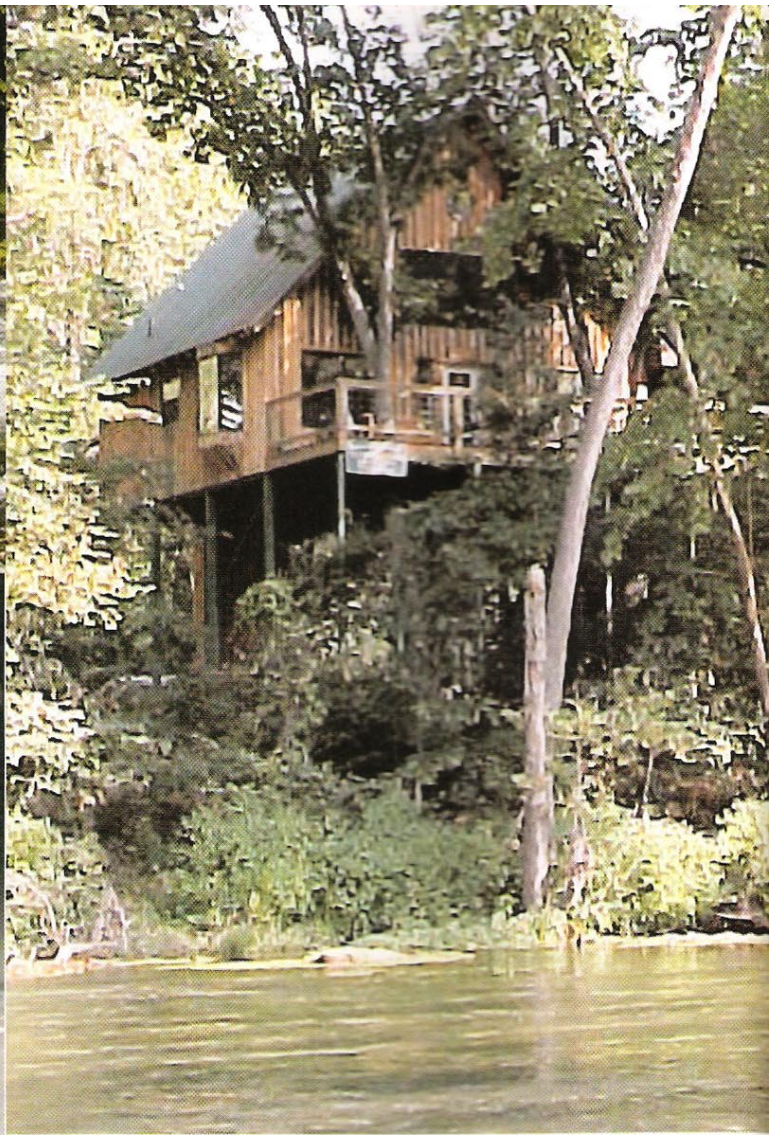
July 2004 • The OZARKS MOUNTAINEER



North Fork River B&B Caters To Guests Who Desire Their Nature Experience In Comfort.

homesteading and hardship. Drivers of almost every vehicle visitors encounter, whether shiny new SUV or weathered tractor, wave in welcome. There's a real sense of slipping back in time to a less frenzied lifestyle.

That's the way Farm owners Myron and Ann McKee like it. They want their guests to experience the Ozarks the way they remember it as children. However, they dish up that rusticity with modern amenities. Myron is a child of this land. His earliest days were lived along the river without conveniences. "It's neat to hear the old timers talk about life before electricity. I still remember our family gathering



around a coal oil lamp." Today's visitors to Myron's 120 acres savor a backwoods experience. However, "where we carried water from the spring, visitors today take Jacuzzi baths in luxury cabins."

Meandering paths, cleared by a leaf blower to promote the growth of a soft carpet of moss, guide hikers to a picturesque spring or up a steep climb to "Inspiration Point." Birders might catch a glimpse of regular Ozark residents such as bluebirds or cardinals as well as rare and endangered species that make their homes along the river. Myron and Ann recall the white pelican that took up residence along the river only to disappear a few days later. "We don't know if he realized he was far from home and left or if a predator got him." Caves along a limestone bluff beckon explorers, and the brave can repel off those cliffs into the forest of maples, oak and dogwood below.

The White River is one of the 100 top fishing rivers in the U. S. The waters burst with a naturally reproducing population of rainbow trout. The McKees' River of Life Farm offers wade access to a "miracle mile" of the Wild Trout Management Area of the North Fork of the White River. Missouri Department of Conservation regulations allow fishermen to keep one trout over eighteen inches each day. However, trout larger than the minimum are often caught in the McKees' front yard.

Since the emphasis of fly-fishing is on the catching, not the eating, the McKees encourage

fishermen to release rainbow trout. Myron explains, "The drought of 2001-2002 drastically reduced the number of rainbow trout in the White River. We need the big rainbows for breed stock."

Guests come from all over the 50 states. However, the Farm's eclectic tourist population is increasingly international. This spring the McKees hosted groups from Czechoslovakia and England. Myron laughs recalling one stereotypically dour Scotsman from Glasgow. "He tried to teach our rainbow trout to use his Scottish flies. They boycotted his offerings."

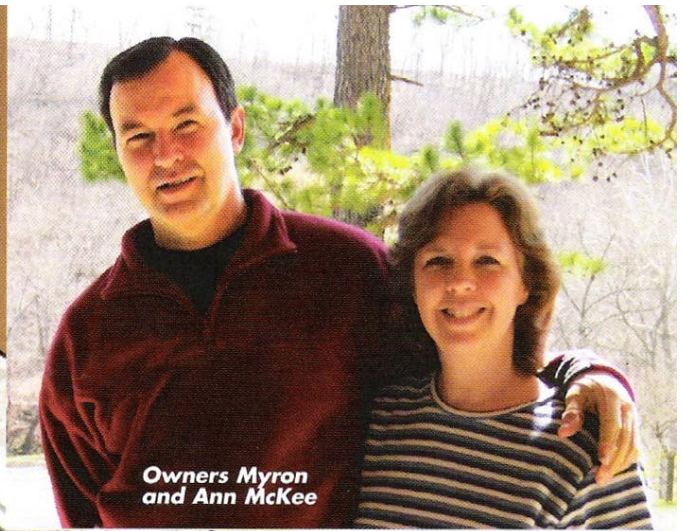
The McKees enjoy hosting tourists. "It was a way to make a living on the farm, a home business," says Ann. "We love people coming. We try to be their recipe for happiness and then to exceed their expectations." Myron, when asked about his motivation to develop the resort, is less poetic: "We needed to feed seven kids!"

Journalist Tom Brokaw once commented, "If fishing is a religion, fly fishing is high church." Few resorts can offer the ultimate fly-fishing experience in so secluded and natural a setting as River of Life Farm. Fly-fishing guru Chuck Tryon would agree McKee's farm is the "high church" of Missouri trout fishing.

In 1994 Myron and Ann were struggling to raise their family and searching for a way for Myron to give up his job as a purchasing agent in West Plains, Mo., a 25-mile drive from his home. Myron, with \$7 tucked into his pocket and enough gasoline to get home,

"If fishing is a religion, fly fishing is high church."

—Tom Brokaw



Owners Myron and Ann McKee



attended a five-state fly fishermen's conference in Arkansas. Chuck Tryon, author of *Fly Fishing for Trout in Missouri*, bowed to Myron when they were introduced. "Myron McKee, who lives at The Falls on the North Fork of the White River, I've been waiting to meet you." Tryon and other fishermen at the meeting urged Myron to open his property to serious fly fishermen. Myron and Ann had found the perfect home business.

Ann McKee explains their choice of a name for their resort. "It suited us because we have seven children. It's always pretty lively here." The name also reflects the McKees' deep Christian faith. They chose it from the spiritual chorus, *The River of Life*.

The James Project, which provides physical and spiritual support to widows and orphans of the third world, is the McKees' personal mission. Profits from the Farm support The Shadow of His Wings Orphanage in Guatemala City.

Myron's support of the James Project springs from deeply felt childhood pain. Myron's father John Calvin McKee, who had dreamed of owning a resort on the river, drowned when Myron was just seven years old. Soon after, his younger brother died of a respiratory ailment. Myron's beleaguered mother Rose "just wanted out of here. She boarded my sister Marilyn and me with neighbors and hitched a ride to Arizona."

Family problems pervaded Myron's childhood. At the age of fourteen, he found himself in foster care

in California. At eighteen he graduated from state care to become a "fruit tramp" following the harvesting of crops across the U.S. In 1977 he married Ann Jameson, a high school friend he ran into in a California pear-packing plant. Together they returned to the Ozarks and started a family.

In 1982 Myron's uncle Harold willed him 80 acres of pristine riverfront property. The rest, as they say, is history. "My childhood left me more sensitive to the plight of orphans and destitute women. I know how it feels to be taken into a home when you need help and to have a financial benefactor." Myron and Ann take to heart the Biblical directive "to look after orphans and widows in their distress" from James 1:27.

ROLF is more than a funny-sounding all-capitals dog bark sound. It's a "Farm" and a place of outdoor enjoyment, romance, and renewal for guests. However, the McKees see it as even more. "There's a direct correlation between the people staying in our cabins and the support of third world kids," says Ann McKee. "It makes cleaning toilets and making beds more agreeable." ♦

(More information on next page)

— Lin Waterhouse, a member of the Ozarks Writers League, lives at Dora, Mo., in Ozark County.

Editor's Note: See our cover feature about Rockbridge Mill and Resort for more information about this area of the Ozarks.



How to find the "River of Life"...

River of Life Farm is located approximately 10 miles southeast of Dora, Mo., or approximately 100 miles southeast of Springfield, Mo. Approximate driving time from Branson is under 2 hours; from Kansas City, 5 hours; from St. Louis, 4 hours. For directions, rates and accommodations, visit their website at www.riveroflifefarm.com or call Myron and Ann McKee at (417) 261-7777. For information regarding the James Project, contact Myron or on the web www.jamesproject.org.

Some Things To Do In Ozark County

Water Adventures. Fishing, canoeing, rafting, and kayaking along Bryant Creek or the North Fork of the White River offer exceptional scenery and water sport. More than 20 local resorts and outfitters provide waterway access, supplies and transportation to boaters, day-trippers and campers. Visitors can explore the Missouri arms of both Bull Shoals and Norfolk Lakes. Originally built for flood control and power generation, the lakes are bordered by timbered hills, rocky bluffs and secluded beaches. Clear and uncrowded, the lakes are popular with fishermen, boaters, skiers, and scuba divers.

Campsites in Ozark County range from primitive to full service. Many private outfitters offer camping facilities. The Army Corps of Engineers operates full service camping and recreation areas on Bull Shoals Lake and Lake Norfolk. Information about COE services and availability are at www.reserveusa.com.

Caney Mountain Conservation Area was established in the 1940's to restore native wildlife, especially turkey and deer, to the area. One thousand acres of the 6,500-acre refuge is open to the public for in-season hunting. The area offers archeological sites, caves, springs and breath-taking vistas. Visitors can hike, drive, bike or ride horseback. Primitive camping

is permitted. See: www.conservation.state.mo.us/

Golf. The Theodosia Country Club offers visitors a 9-hole, par-34 golf course with a view of timbered hills and Bull Shoals Lake. (417) 273-4877

Mill Tour. Visit four historic, 19th century gristmills. On weekends in the summer months, **Dawt Mill** near Tecumseh demonstrates the grinding of flour and meal with aged buhrstones just like in the good old days. Conference rooms, water rentals, camping, gift shop and an outdoor restaurant await visitors. **Hodgson Mill** in Sycamore is reportedly the most photographed mill in the state. In 2001, owners Hank and Jean Macler hired Amish craftsmen to restore the old building and recently reinstalled the original turbines that power the grinding stones brought from France in 1884. A shop offers crafts by local artists and canoe rentals are available.

Rockbridge Mill, converted to a riverside pub, is the centerpiece of Rainbow Trout Farm and Gun Club at Rockbridge. Guests can visit the resort's hatchery that stocks one mile of spring-fed creek with rainbow trout. Fishermen can

have their catches specially prepared at the resort's picturesque restaurant. The **Zanoni Mill Inn Bed and Breakfast**, nine miles northeast of Gainesville, recently rebuilt the old mill, with its rare overshot millwheel, into a wedding chapel. The lovely pillared home on a spring fed lake is a popular photo opportunity for tourists. Check www.ozarkmntns.com/milltour/ for photos and directions.

Music. At 7 p.m. on Tuesday nights throughout the summer months, unfold your lawn chair or lay out a picnic in Hoerman Park, east of Gainesville on Hwy. 160. Local musicians gather in the pavilion to informally celebrate the traditional bluegrass music of the Ozarks. The group moves indoors to the Gainesville Senior Center in cold weather. Vaught's Family Restaurant in Gainesville frequently serves up country music with country cooking in their dining room on Saturday nights.

The **Glade Top Trail National Forest Scenic Byway**, Missouri's only National Scenic Byway, winds through an Ozark wilderness of natural glades, native species of plants and trees, and scenic vistas. The 23-mile drive is spectacular in any season. However, the fall colors are especially exquisite. Walking trails and picnic areas make for a leisurely day of exploration. The byway can be accessed from Ava or Longrun. Directions and map available at www.ozarkmntns.com/gladetop/

Hootin an Hollarin, Ozark County's three-day celebration of family, community and old-fashioned ways, begins the third Thursday in September on Gainesville's charming courthouse square. Booths offer crafts and food. Live music, bed and outhouse races, horseshoe pitching, pet and costume parades, a turkey shoot, quilt show, and square dancing are all part of the fun. Call the Ozark County Chamber of Commerce, (417) 679-4913 or visit: [//zeus.oznet.com/ozcounty/](http://zeus.oznet.com/ozcounty/)