

ROMANCIING THE BARN

A truly unique home, complete with love story, is one stop along the '2009 Tour of Homes—Victor' on Sept. 13.

Story by **Stacey Freed** | Photos by **Matt Wittmeyer**

THE FAIRY TALE VERSION GOES LIKE THIS: IMAGINE AN old wooden barn tucked away in the winter woods of Victor. A man—an artist, musician and architect fresh from divorce and living in a Penfield apartment—is searching for a house to buy. But one winter day he brings his two young daughters to see the barn, set against leafless trees and full-bodied evergreens contrasting against the white snowdrifts.

The cold air inside smells of hay and timbers. There is a fresh, lived-in, natural feeling. The girls delight in running from one end to the other, jumping in the hay, climbing the ladders. They tell their father they don't want to look for a house; they want to live here. And that is where they live, happily ever after.

Only that's just the beginning of the story.

Nearly 25 years later, the man's daughters are grown and have moved out. But he, George Baker, is still living in the barn, with his wife of 15 years, Annabelle Francia-Kiss. And the barn is not a fairy tale but a real-life romantic hideaway.

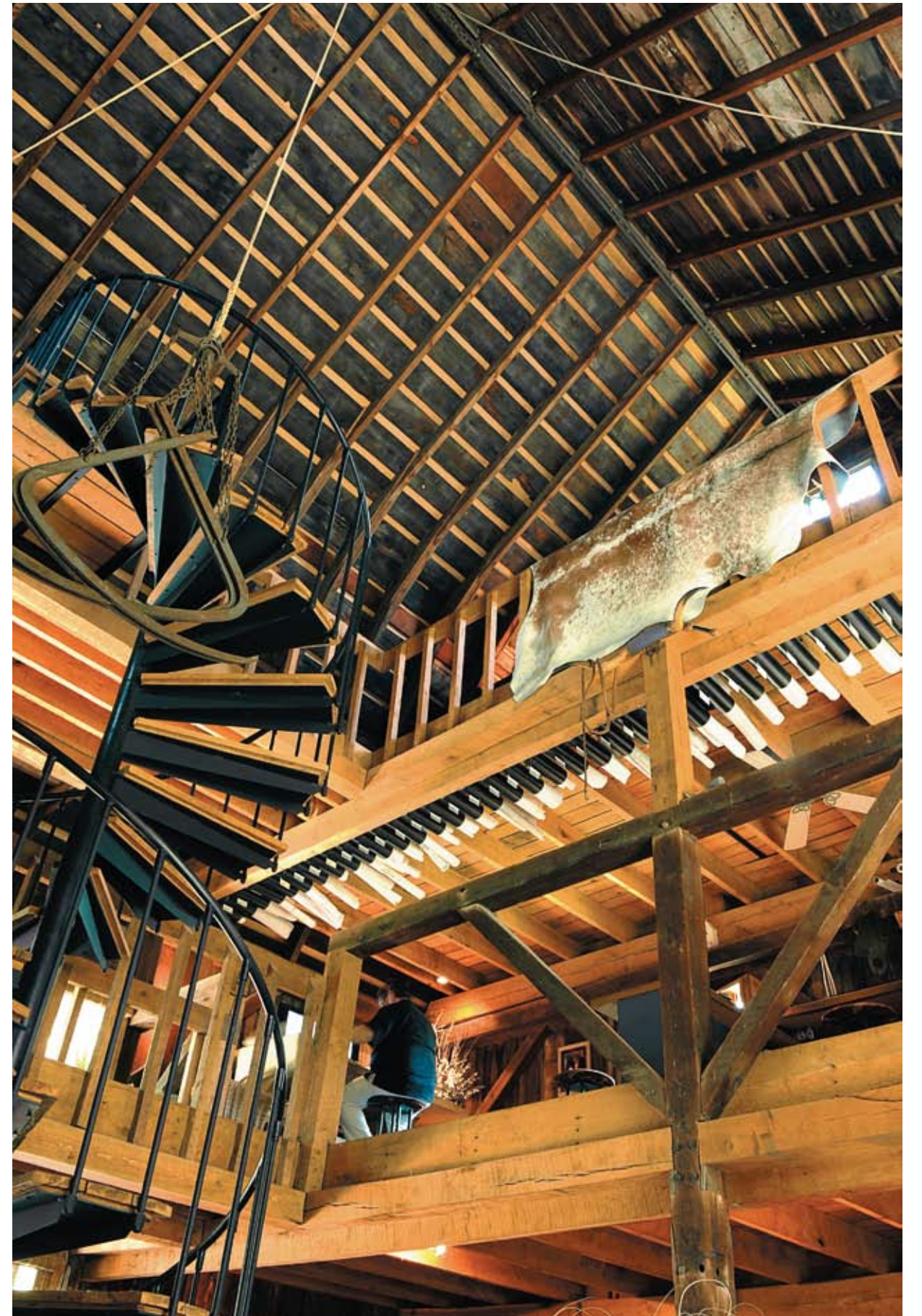
The home's heavy wood timbers create a sense of warmth and welcome, Mexican-inspired furnishings add splashes of Southwestern color, sconces and lamps spread a golden light reminiscent of candlelight, and large windows invite lingering views of the woods.

"I always wanted to do this to a barn," says Baker, who as an architect likes to take on unusual projects. He once transformed a railroad depot into a house for a client. Later he did the opposite: built a house in the form of a railroad depot for a couple near Hemlock Lake. Baker especially enjoyed that project because the husband, who was a builder, appreciated things like timber, interlocking joinery and fine craftsmanship.

In his barn, Baker says, "I wanted what the space gave to me. I wanted to feel like I was still in a barn." The entrance is around back so that the "front" orientation is a view onto the woods and not the road. Visitors enter the main level, which was originally the threshing floor. The level below is where the animals lived. Baker created two levels of lofts above the main level, for office and bedroom space.

There are no traditional walls, and certainly no drywall. The interior is exposed beams—there's no doubt you're in a barn (in this case, one built circa 1917). Baker left rutted floorboards intact, and in the lower-level ceiling are 30-foot-long wooden beams taken from railroad boxcars. Some still bear the stenciled names of railroad companies.

Baker also left the hayfork dangling on thick ropes from the underside of the gambrel roof. Originally



George Baker sits in his home (barn?) office – his architectural drawings rolled up and stored in tubes along a railing. The center of the home is open, with rooms on the sides and a spiral staircase that corkscrews from basement to top level.



(Left and above) Almost like a post-and-beam structure, the outside holds an exterior “skin” of layered plywood, insulation and shingle. Perfectly placed in the trees surrounding the barn are several steel horse sculptures, appearing perpetually in motion, now rusted to a fine auburn patina. Stepping up to the bar means saddling up atop oak barrels – another nod to the equestrian theme.

The 2009 Tour of Homes-Victor

The tour, which includes a circular house, a converted historic inn and other homes, will run from 12:30 to 6 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 13. Begin at either Valentown Hall, 7370 Valentown Square in Victor, or the First Presbyterian Church, 70 E. Main St. in Victor. Take your ticket to either location to receive the tour booklet.

Tickets are \$22 in advance, available from Aug. 16 to Sept. 12 at Wegmans, the Ontario County Historical Society, Mead Square Pharmacy in Victor, Renaissance The Goodie II Shop in Canandaigua, Canandaigua National Bank offices (main branch, Victor and Canandaigua lakeshore locations). The day of the event, tickets are \$25, available beginning at 12:30 p.m. at the First Presbyterian Church.

Each home will have docents on site to answer questions. A wine tasting during the tour will take place at Giovanni's Ristorante BRAVO, 75 Coville St., Victor. Proceeds from the tour will go to the Ontario County Historical Society's historical museum. For information, call 585-394-4975 or visit www.ochs.org.



used to lift and place hay bales, Baker jokes that he uses the fork now to hang contractors who don't follow his plans.

Starting at the bottom is the garage, heating system and den, which the couple calls “the cantina.” The main level holds the usual living spaces, plus a music room and bar area. Above is Baker's office, along with the master bed and bath. The uppermost level holds two open loft-like bedrooms and a powder room. Book-lined bridges connect the spaces.

From high up on the top of the spiral staircase, you can see all the way down to the basement. Before they installed air conditioning, says Francia-Kiss, they used to eat in the basement in the summertime “because it was always cool.”

Well before green was “in,” Baker had installed an open-loop geothermal

heat pump that uses their well water. “We use no fossil fuels and, being in a barn, I didn't want open flames,” Baker says. The device paid for itself in five years. No walls mean no ductwork, so heat is run through soffits in the basement, traveling up alongside the windows through vents. If it's cool enough in the basement, it creates a siphoning effect. The hot air rises all the way to the roof, and the cool air falls back down. “It's a perfectly planned system that was an accident,” says Baker.

Francia-Kiss (who earned that name from her first marriage to a Hungarian horse trainer) is at home in the barn: She's a horse trainer, as well. She keeps horses in Bloomfield and mostly rides for pleasure now, although she showed horses for most of her life. She says she appreciates the humor of now living in a barn.

While Baker is the architect, Francia-Kiss is the decorator. Baker is open in his admiration: “I wouldn't underplay her role. She has a great eye for everything,” Baker says of his wife, whom he has known since they attended grade school together in Cleveland Heights. In high school, he says, “she thought I looked like Elvis, and I thought she was the hottest thing going.” But, alas, she is a year older than he, and in the mid-1950s a senior girl did not date a junior boy.

Fast-forward three decades. In 1985, they met again when Francia-Kiss was judging a horse show locally. They picked up where they left off, but she didn't move here permanently until 1995.

A self-proclaimed romantic (“it's no fun to be an architect unless you can be a romantic”), Baker says theirs is a true love story—in a fairy tale home, living happily ever after. ■