

Wintertime, And Fishing Is Easy

By GREG BREINING

AS the lakes of the Midwest, Northeast and Canada freeze, clusters of fishing shacks appear, forming villages above the best wintertime fishing spots — despite the cracking, moaning and eerie warbling of the thickening but unstable skin of ice.

Once a foot of ice accumulates, fishermen in New York tow houses onto Saratoga, Oneida and Champlain. In Michigan, ice-fishing villages sprout on Houghton, the state's biggest inland lake, and nearby Higgins, where anglers camp in their shacks all night to catch rainbow smelt. The self-proclaimed ice-fishing capital of the East is Lake Simcoe, north of Toronto, where as many as 4,000 ice huts appear. And don't forget about Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire.

But nowhere are these ad hoc housing developments more impressive than on Mille Lacs Lake in central Minnesota, where, in a typical winter, some 5,000 shelters create villages across 200 square miles of snow and ice. Most, known locally as icehouses or fish houses, are basic shacks cobbled from plywood and two-by-twos, and just big enough for a couple of guys to tend a fishing hole in each corner, drink a few Grain Belt beers and listen to hockey or basketball on the radio.

But as in any community, there are houses for the common folk and there are those that stand out from the rest: chalets with cathedral ceilings, sleeping lofts, hardwood floors, kitchens with custom cabinets. And, of course, satellite TV. They can cost as much as \$10,000, if you do the work yourself, and three times that if you don't.

Call them cabins on the lake — literally — or McMansions on ice. By law, the houses, some weighing several tons, must return to land by the end of February, before they sink. In the meantime, the best provide not only a place to fish but also a hideaway where friends and family visit.

The fishing lines, with auto jiggers and rattle reels, pretty much tend themselves. Occupants just have to yank up the fish. Otherwise, they can cook, sleep, play cards, drink beer, gab with the neighbors — and savor the architectural detail.

Some owners of icehouses are so invested in

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their getaways that they don't even need ice. They continue to use their houses during the summer when they are stored on shore.

"A guy can come out here for a week-

end, it's pretty cheap," said Randy Duff, who owns a metallurgical company in the Twin Cities area. He fishes from a 10-by-20-foot house that has a sound system, DVD player, satellite TV and full kitchen.

"I mean, you bring a couple steaks with you, couple pizzas, bring what you want to drink, some movies and make it a weekend for 20, 25 bucks," he said. "Cheap getaway. It's even better if the fish bite."

MILLE LACS is too broad to see across in places. It is windy and shallow, and one of the state's best fishing lakes. Dangling minnows through the ice, anglers yank up fearsome northern pike that weigh more than 20 pounds; delectable wall-eyes, the state fish, of up to 10 pounds; and jumbo yellow perch of over a pound that are some of the sweetest eating to come from fresh water.

On North Slips Reef, on the lake's south shore, sits Craig Freeman's icehouse, a model of efficiency. "I wanted to use all 24 feet," he said.

On a mid-January morning, as the lake awakened from overnight temperatures of 20 below zero, Mr. Freeman was fishing with his 17-year-old son, Ryan. A 50-year-old machinist from Big Lake, about 30 miles northwest of Minneapolis, Mr. Freeman started fishing Mille Lacs when he was a kid.

His father owned a basic shack. He took it over when his father gave up the sport, but found the house too small. "I built this house because I wanted something that my family could enjoy," he said.

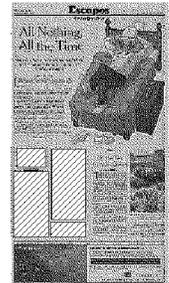
So 10 years ago, he bought a used house, installed it on a new stainless-steel skid system, added four feet to its length, popped up the roof, and added double-glazed low-energy windows. He finished the ceiling in knotty pine. A friend built the custom kitchen cabinets.

Mr. Freeman wired the house for a 110-volt system powered by a generator, and a 12-volt circuit that runs off a battery. Propane heats the place and fuels the Magic Chef range and oven.

"I can cook anything I want here," he said. "I can cook a turkey, pot roast."

But his real concern was space for guests. He designed the kitchen table to convert to a double bed. The cathedral ceiling, nearly 10 feet high, accommodates bunks in lofts tucked in either end. In all, eight people can stay over.

Mr. Freeman even installed a bathroom in one corner, with a stainless-steel urinal. "Not too many guys have



one of them on the lake," he said.

He estimates that his finished house weighs nearly five tons (the houses are generally built on skids and pulled by a four-wheel-drive pickup truck). "I like to have at least 12 inches of ice," he said.

Often, as a lake freezes, pressures building in the new ice form cracks that run for hundreds of yards. Under the

pressure of wind, and the expansion and contraction from changes in temperature, ice sheets grind like tectonic plates.

"It's like being out in California," Mr. Freeman said. "It's kind of unnerving. But I've been out fishing since I was 5, and I know what goes on out here in the wintertime."

Mr. Freeman hasn't ever gone through the ice, "God willing." But anglers and vehicles do, occasionally with fatal results. Big houses can depress the ice, causing water to flood the surface. Sometimes, they even break through.

So, why take the risk?

"I enjoy the peace and serenity," he said. "I love this lake. Just being out off the ice and being by myself, and seeing

what nature has to offer in the wintertime."

Mark Rislund feels the same way.

"It's peaceful coming up here," he said. "I just come out here to relax. Go around to the neighbors', shoot the bull a little bit."

As he spoke, the ice shuddered beneath the house. "Last night it was popping pretty good," he said.

Mr. Rislund is an owner of a construction firm in the Twin Cities region. He has ice-fished most of his life, and he took over his dad's house.

It wasn't small, but "it was drafty," said Mr. Rislund, who is 41. "The older you get the more comfort you need."

So he built a giant among icehouses — 10 by 28 feet. The project took three years. He built the house within a steel frame — he described it as a birdcage — that envelops the entire structure to give it rigidity to withstand the stress of towing it between shore and ice. He insulated the walls and finished them with tongue-and-groove knotty pine and maple wainscoting.

A glass-front propane stove keeps the place toasty. He has an indoor toilet, and a full kitchen. An eight-pound wall-eye hangs on one wall, a northern pike of nearly 20 pounds on another. Mr. Rislund caught both on Mille Lacs.

The house has seven holes. Ice fishing isn't much of an athletic event, anyway — even less so in a house like Mr.

Rislund's. Fishing lines hang from wall-mounted rattle reels that alert (or wake) the angler when a fish bites. Mr. Rislund even has a jigging gizmo to lift and lower the bait automatically.

Like most posh icehouses nowadays, Mr. Rislund's place is equipped with a high-output sound system, DVD player and satellite television. On a mid-January day, however, one of the two TVs was hooked up to an underwater camera that showed several fish lurking near a wriggling minnow 26 feet below. "Perch coming in, huh?" he said.

With a click of a remote control, he spun the camera for a look around.

"Last year, there was a big northern, looked like a big log coming in," he said. "Looked at the minnow and swam off."

The house is a hit with Mr. Rislund's 4-year-old daughter, Cassidy, whose Scooby-Doo minnow scoop sat in the corner. "She loves it," he said. In fact, she is behind his latest inspiration.

"This summer, I think I'm going to start a guesthouse," he said. "When the daughter gets older, she can bring a friend. They can sit over there and play video games."

As for cost, Mr. Rislund was reluctant to pin it down (though he acknowledged the steel frame alone cost \$6,000). "I got a good idea," he said, "but I don't want to let it out because the wife might get a little upset."

For fit and polish, it's hard to beat the 10-foot-by-20-foot house that Steve Mattson built with his cousin Scott Daniels.

"People come in here and go, 'Wow!'" Mr. Mattson said. "Then they go to the floor and they go, 'Wow' again."

The reason is clear once you step inside: from wall to wall, Mr. Mattson's fish house is finished with a parquet floor, an intricate pattern of herringbone, borders and rectangles made of Australian cypress, maple and Brazilian cherry.

BUT that's not all. Mr. Mattson, a 52-year-old custodian and "jack of all trades," and Mr. Daniels, a 42-year-old appliance salesman, finished the walls and cathedral ceiling in tongue-and-groove cedar. The sun pours in through a skylight, and Mr. Mattson and Mr. Daniels made the birch cabinets by hand. (A heated outhouse — also with a parquet floor — sits nearby.)

"It's built nice," Mr. Mattson said, "as nice as any house you'll find anywhere."

"It took us nine months — and what

did we figure? — about 150 cases of beer,” Mr. Daniels said. “Almost a couple of divorces.”

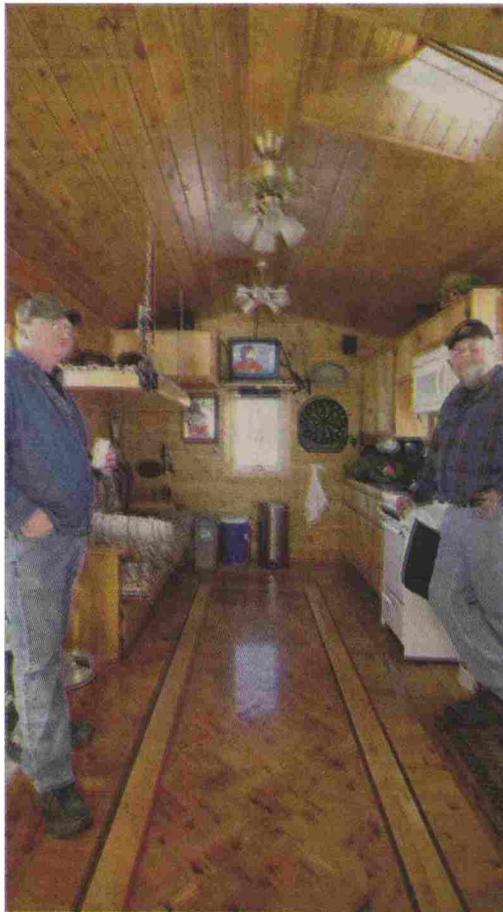
Mr. Mattson figured the tally for materials alone came to nearly \$7,000.

“It’s going to be the last one we hope to build,” Mr. Mattson said. “We wanted to do it right.”

Given how much work it took to build the house, is their interest really in fishing? Or in building and tinkering?

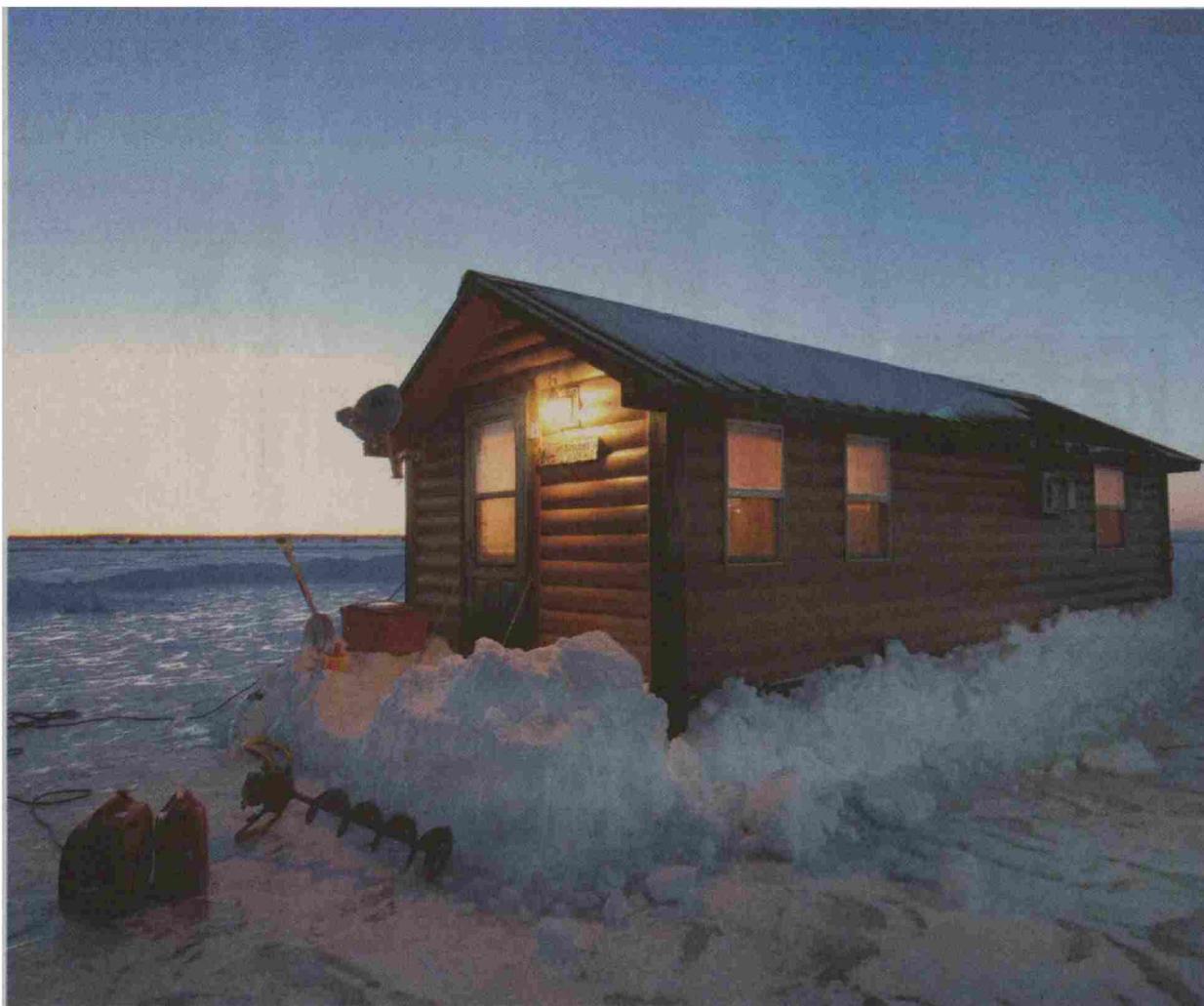
“Fishing,” Mr. Mattson answered, “now that the house is done.”

Angling for walleye in heated comfort under cathedral ceilings and maple wainscoting.



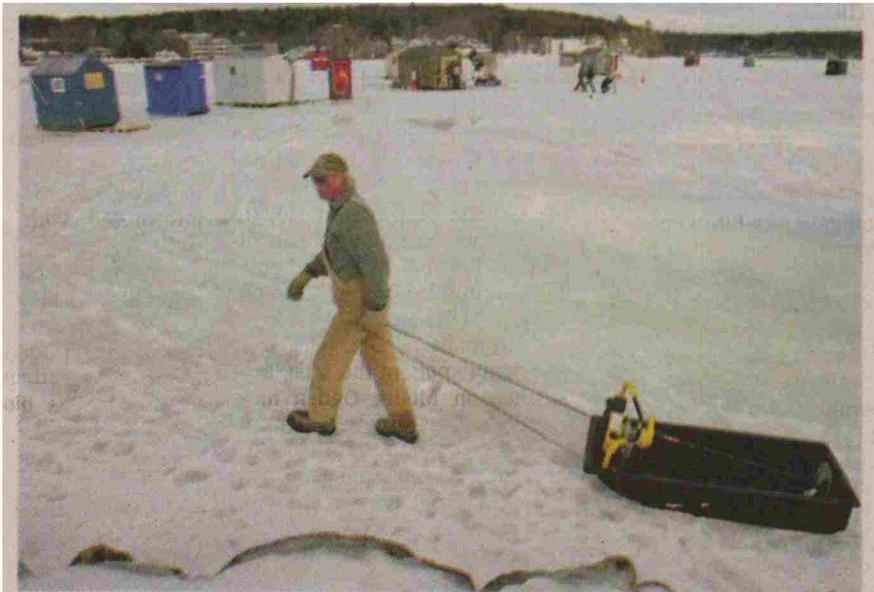
T. C. WORLEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ROUGHING IT Scott Daniels, left, and his cousin Steve Mattson in the ice-fishing house they built at Mille Lacs Lake in Minnesota.



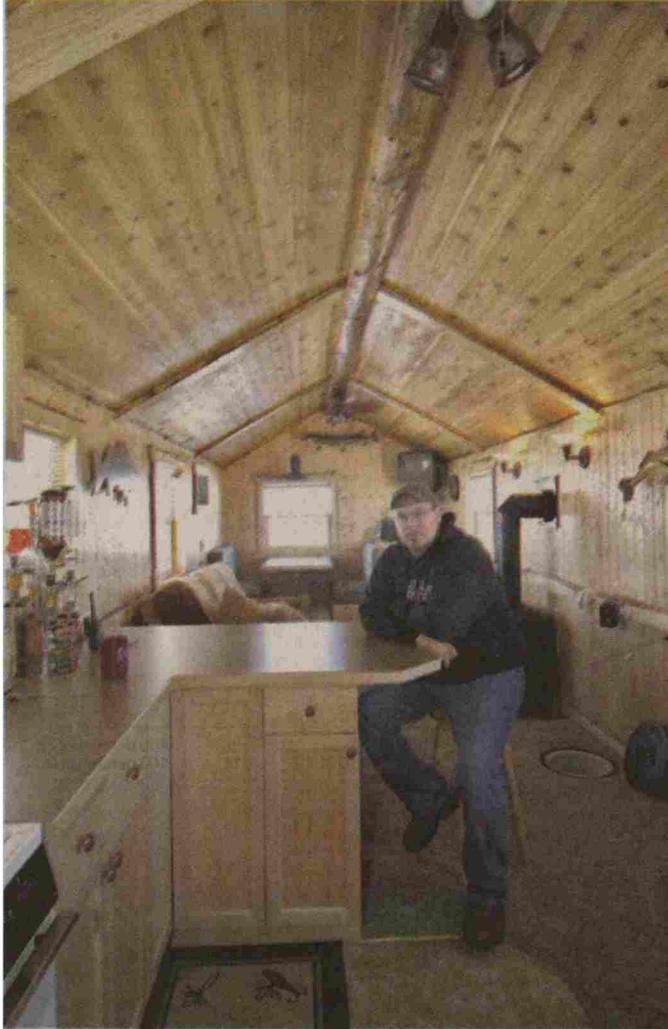
PHOTOGRAPHS BY T. C. WORLEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A McMANSION ON ICE Mark Rislund's 10-by-28-foot icehouse on Mille Lacs Lake has a full kitchen, an indoor toilet, a sound system and two TVs.



MARK WILSON/THE BOSTON GLOBE

DIFFERENT STYLES Mr. Rislund, right, inside his icehouse. Above, Bob Mysh-rall heads out to fish on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire.



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