



From the comfort of the indoors, Ray Jones is able to keep a journal of the local Northwoods fauna with the help of the large windows on his home's main level.

# Rural Retreat

Wide-plank walnut flooring—and a lot of history—accent this home

**By Doug Dalsing**



**A**s a boy, Tom Jones would spend his summers in Wisconsin's Northwoods, an area to which his family has had ties since the late 1800s. Hunting, fishing, hiking and observing the fauna were regular summertime activities for him and his family, who held permanent residence in Southern California. These memories and others, such as venturing up to Lake Superior to watch the iron ore ships carrying their freight

on the great glacial lake, are still vivid in his mind. So when his parents Ray and Janette asked him to design a new Midwestern retreat for them, Tom, owner of Trabuco Canyon, Calif.-based Thomas R. Jones Design, fashioned a dwelling imbued with family history, memories of his youth and a family ethos steeped in ecology, the study of organisms and their surroundings.

Warm, natural materials—including gorgeous wide-plank walnut flooring—are paramount in this home, which sits on the shore of an inland lake just south of Lake Superior. Stone and wood are prevalent, giving the ordered appearance

of converging escarpment and timber; a stone wall—within which Tom hid necessities like HVAC ducts, a fireplace and a laundry chute—encompasses the home's entire west side, while cedar siding clads the rest of the exterior. The home features a modern, open layout. The main level, comprising 1,450 square feet, contains a great room—with the sitting, dining and kitchen areas—and master bedroom, while a loft hangs overhead. Downstairs are guest bedrooms, another sitting area and a woodshop.

Upon entering the home, visitors are immediately drawn to a south-facing wall of glass. This is one of the most important design elements in the home, and it serves two principal functions. First, as the angle of the sun's rays lessens as the winter season passes, these windows allow the sun's energy inside the home, thereby warming the home and lowering the dwelling's energy consumption during Wisconsin's most frigid months. In the summer, however, an overhang blocks the rays from inadvertently heat-



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Wide-plank walnut flooring, a rarity in Wisconsin's Northwoods, grounds the space.

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ing the home. Tom used a computer drafting program to calculate the ideal overhang length. Second, this wall of windows lets the Jones family immerse themselves in the sights of the Northwoods and the lake, one of the most important requests Ray and Janette made of their son.

"We wanted to be able to look out across the lake," Ray says, "to feel the elements, whether it's raining or snowing, whatever it happens to be." Most mornings, Ray and Janette sit overlooking the lake and see birds at feeders, ducks swimming on the lake and squirrels gathering food.

Clearly, a wall consisting entirely of windows wouldn't be ideal for any urban or even most rural homes, but Ray and Janette don't mind. "There's not a lot of people around, so it's the kind of place where you're comfortable having lots of glass," Tom says, "No one is staring at you."

Throughout the home, iron accents pop up, and outside, a long deck lines the eastern wall of the home; these two features are reminiscent of ships—like the ill-fated Edmund Fitzgerald—that, as a boy, Tom would

see traversing Lake Superior. Overhead, large, exposed wooden rafters dominate a vaulted ceiling while supporting an arched roof. This basic shape brings to mind the old barns that dot the landscape of northern Wisconsin, and the solid wide-plank walnut flooring enhances the effect. Both Ray and Tom were impressed with the walnut's grain. "It has a rustic feel, but not too much," Tom says. "We really like the dark color of the walnut as well," he adds. "It sort of grounded the space."

To have the flooring installed, Ray contacted Terry Nelson, owner of Terry's Installation Service in Hayward, Wis. Nelson was immediately impressed with the home when he entered. "Everything was kind of massive," he says. Also, Ray's flooring appeared to be exceptional, absent of any "color marbling" throughout the boards. Working with walnut was a break from the usual for Nelson. His market primarily selects ash, oak, maple or hickory, while walnut is usually reserved for feature strips and borders. "It's not every day that you walk in around here and see—especially in wide-

plank—a walnut floor,” he says.

In addition to blind-nailing the boards to a subfloor above radiant heating, Nelson used a urethane-based construction adhesive during installation. “The adhesive helps hold the wood flat—keeps it from cupping,” he says. “If it does move, it helps it come back to where it’s supposed to be.” Where the floor meets the great window wall, Tom placed an iron accent strip, forgoing a baseboard. There, Nelson cut the floor to within  $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch and advised the owners to keep the home’s moisture content constant throughout the year so the floor wouldn’t press against the iron. To finish the floor, Ray contacted Travis Transki, co-owner of Duluth, Minn.-based T & C Hardwood Solutions.

From the outside, an eye-catching element of the home is the 35-foot-tall tower, which provides an even better view of the lake and surrounding woods than from the great room. The tower also pays tribute to Joe Sexton, Ray’s maternal grandfather, who worked as

a lighthouse keeper at La Pointe Light on Wisconsin’s Long Island around the turn of the twentieth century. (Today, Long Island is one of the 21 islands that comprise Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, but, back then, farmers, loggers and lighthouse keepers occupied the archipelago; since then, eking out a living on the islands has proven uneconomical, so every island was eventually deserted.) Inside the tower, a spiral staircase takes inhabitants upward, and at the top the owners can soak in the view. “Obviously, it’s not a replica—replicas don’t attach easy—but it evokes a lighthouse,” Tom says. But just in case his lighthouse tribute fails to get his point across, Tom and his father commissioned a true-to-life (but smaller) iron sculpture of their ancestor’s lighthouse, which they placed atop the fireplace on the main level.

The tower also serves a functional purpose in helping to cool the home during the summer months. Windows at the top of the tower can be opened, which catch the prevailing breeze atop the home. Warm air at the top of



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Natural materials like wood and stone are prominent, but iron—a reflection of the area’s industrial past—offers a man-made complement.

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## Project Details

**Architect:** Tom Jones, Thomas R. Jones Design  
(Trabuco Canyon, Calif.)

**General Contractor:** Mike Arnstad, Arnstad Home  
Builders Inc. (Eau Claire, Wis.)

**Flooring Installer:** Terry Nelson, Terry's Installation  
Service (Hayward, Wis.)

**Floor Finisher:** T & C Hardwood Solutions  
(Duluth, Minn.)

**Wood Flooring:** Carlisle Wide Plank Floors (Stoddard, N.H.)

**Finish Manufacturers:** Dura Seal (Upper Saddle River,  
N.J.) and Bona US (Aurora, Colo.)

the tower is sucked out, while cooler air enters through windows on the main level; Tom says the home operates on the Bernoulli Principle. The principle can be explained by looking at an old-fashioned perfume bottle: One squeezes the tube to shoot air forward, which lifts perfume from the reservoir.

But Tom wasn't done paying homage to his ancestors. While Joe Sexton helped guide ships about the Apostle Islands, Lincoln Jones, Ray's paternal grandfather, was working as a lumberjack in a camp near the home's present location. During the winter months, the lumberjacks would store their harvest on the same frozen lake Ray watches from his living room, and then in the spring they would float the logs to nearby railroad tracks. Inevitably, some of the lumber would find its way to the bottom of the lake, and, to this day, each year a few logs are dislodged from the muck and rise to the top. At his son's request, Ray collected some of the pine logs and took them to a nearby mill, where they were fashioned into 8-inch-square ties. Next, Ray cut 1-inch thick, 4-inches-square, end-grain flooring pieces from the ties using an electric saw. He found cutting these pieces challenging, as the old, weathered wood had splintered while acclimating. "I let it crack where it wanted to and then glued it all down," he says. Finally, Ray smoothed the 81-square-foot room with an electric hand-held belt sander and finished it, a process that took him about four days. The result is the resplendent end-grain flooring in the tower's observation area. "We kid around: 'Just think, Grandpa could have cut this floor down,'" Tom says.

While the home has a few features that any designer would immediately label as "green"—reclaimed wood

flooring, large south-facing windows, natural ventilation—Tom is weary to paint green what he sees as simply common sense. "I don't go around saying, 'Oh, I practice such green architecture,'" he says. "I think it's a slippery slope because if you go and say, 'Look how green this building is,' well, someone can always ask why it's not greener." What's more, he sees avid greenwashing as a trap. "If they keep with this slippery slope, they'll have me living in a tent, hovering above the ground."

Overall, the design palette he used on his parents' home is Tom's preferred palette. Many of the homes he designs in Southern California incorporate a more traditional look (think large suburban dwellings), but natural, warm materials are clearly his favorite. "What's sitting there [in Wisconsin]," he says, "is what I like in the world of architecture. If I can push that way, I'll push that way." In fact, he felt liberated working in über-rural Wisconsin, compared with designing homes in Southern California, a place legendary for its many regulations. "A lot of times we get dictated by community guidelines that, you know, preclude us from having fun."

Even as Ray Jones related to the writer on a sunny November afternoon that snow was in his area's forecast, he seemed comforted by his surroundings, his voice absent of the usual annoyance that accompanies such a statement. (After the snow, however, his area was to receive some sunny days with highs in the 50s—a November "heat wave" in his mind.) His comfort, no doubt, resides in the fact he gets to spend some of his year in a beautiful home that complements its surroundings so well. "It's the balance of the place," Ray says, "the way it just fits in with the environment." ■