

St. Mary's Catholic Church



Bless this house

*Former Boone church
becomes a cozy home*

REGISTER PHOTOS BY GARY FANDEL

Des Moines Sunday Register

Copyright 1983, Des Moines Register
and Tribune Company

DECEMBER 30, 1984

HO



Tony and Kris Finch outside their home, the former St. Mary's Church near Boone.



Nothing in this modern kitchen hints that it is housed in a decades-old refurbished church.

By JIM POLLOCK

Register Staff Writer

To Tony and Kris Finch, an empty building is just a home they haven't lived in yet. Combining the instincts of Frank Lloyd Wright and the Lone Ranger, this husband-and-wife team has roamed the prairie from eastern Nebraska to Boone County on their mission to save structures in distress.

"When you see an old church or school, you hate to see it disappear," Kris explained.

So these para-renovators are leaving a trail of cozy interiors cloaked by unlikely exteriors, happy in the knowledge that a unique house is more likely to survive than an abandoned commercial building.

Tony, 38, and Kris, 26, started this habit with a small warehouse in Ralston, Neb., moved to a bank in Waterloo, Neb., and now reside in their biggest and most blessed home yet, the former St. Mary's Catholic Church 8 miles north of Boone.

It's a typical country church, 40 feet wide and 60 feet long, with a 45-foot steeple at one corner and a cornerstone that hasn't budged since 1914. The building hosted its last religious services about five years ago, was sold to a private owner a year later and to the Finches in February, 1984.

The pews remained, but already had been spoken for. What Tony and Kris purchased was an empty building with plywood over the windows, no water supply and a ceiling 22 feet high.

On May 1, after doing most of the necessary work themselves, they moved in.

"It doesn't take long," Tony said. "With big, open rooms, there's nothing to tear out."

The former back door at the building's northeast corner is now the main entrance, complete with wooden deck. Visitors pass through a kitchen that, with its new cabinets and microwave oven, could belong to any modern home. From dining room on, the place has a style all its own.

Antique oak furniture refinished by Kris and small iron stoves in fine condition sit on a shining maple floor. A tongue-and-groove board ceiling is 8 feet high everywhere except the living room, where an extra foot adds to that spot's airy feel.

Two steps that once led to the altar now lead from the living room to the stereo and television, and behind that the top half of the wall is occupied by ironwork from a bank teller's cage. Blinds behind the ironwork can be raised to let light pass through from living room to the adjoining bedroom.

The Finches admit that not everybody is crazy about the light passing into another room nearby. Frosted glass in the door and a piece of stained glass as part of the wall give an open, spacious feeling that not everyone is looking for in a bathroom.

The two of them have 1,500 square feet to enjoy, and they'll have more before they're done. The 1,000-square-foot space at the south end of the church still awaits refurbishment under the original cathedral ceiling.

One of their early layout schemes would have turned the south end into the primary living area, but the unique appeal of those altar steps spun the blueprint around.

In the unfinished third of the building, the Finches have installed a sliding glass door beside a platform high on the south wall, above the main doors used by the con-

gregations of 3,000 Sundays. Opposite, they put a stained glass window in the wall, with lights mounted behind. But the plans for the rest of the space remain unsettled and the air unheated.

"I can just see a hot tub up there, with a view to the south and a bunch of plants around," Tony rhapsodized, gesturing up at the platform. As good as that sounds, it's his second choice — "I wanted to put a basketball court in the south end, but finally decided I could do without it."

If they, or some future owners, ever decide that a house of 2,500 square feet is just too confining, the gap between the present ceiling and the original is ready for flooring. For that matter, there's still an attic tucked between the original ceiling and the peak of the roof.

The basement walls received Styrofoam insulation, but the floor is still dirt. The most important quality down there, in the Finches' view, is solidity. Posts support the floor joists every 8 feet and a concrete wall was poured inside the 1914 foundation sometime in the past, leading one to believe that the floor should hold up two trim joggers and their three cats.

The Finches tightened up the old building with 16 inches of insulation blown into the new ceiling and a new wall built inside the old exterior walls. From window pane to inner face now measures 11 inches.

They owned 13 wood stoves not so long ago, but wood-cutting and ash-carrying has lost its charm for Tony, so a new, energy-efficient furnace was professionally installed.

The other major expense for professional help went into a well. After one driller struck out twice around 90 feet, a pinch hitter found water at 40.

The biggest job Tony tackled — with help from a volunteer — was painting the steeple. A 36-foot ladder perched on scaffolding provided more thrills than most people care to face. He remains cool to suggestions that he scale the steeple again and polish its tarnished copper roof.

A cross stands on that roof, the building's last remaining religious symbol. No one has objected to it being left in place, said the new occupants. Although perpetual terms forbid use of the building for business purposes, apparently no one objected to its conversion into a home, either.

While the renovation went on, "It seemed like every day people who had gone to church here would stop by," Kris said. "They would tell us about being married here, or their kids being baptized here."

"I was surprised by how positive their attitudes were," Tony, who lived in Boone as a youngster, made the first break from conventional housing several years ago when he built a pre-cut log cabin in the mountains of Colorado. He stayed there for a year, got his fill of isolation and went back to college for a master's degree.

Together, Tony and Omaha native Kris built an A-frame house in the country, but "it wasn't us," Tony said, and since then they've been in the renovation business.

There's more to the recycling of old buildings than sentiment, of course. Each of the Finches' refurbished nests has sold for a sizable profit, and right now they're living

HOUSE

Please turn to Page 5E



Tony and Kris Finch relax in their country church home.

They eye schoolhouses, gas stations and barns

HOUSE

Continued from Page One
a simple lifestyle on the payments from their previous contract sales.

Tony left his job as a counselor at Metropolitan Community College in 1988, and a while later Kris stopped working for a marketing firm. Avoiding the routine of a regular job fits in with the idea that struck Tony while serving with the U.S. Army in Panama. "I would see ocean liners go through the Panama Canal with all these passengers hardly able to play shuffleboard, and I decided to enjoy life while I could."

On the other hand, he said, "I miss working with students, so I've decided to try to get back into a college."

The Finches moved into the St. Mary's Church intending to stay forever, but they know that feeling probably won't last, either. "We still haven't done a school house," Tony pointed out. They nearly bought a one-room school near the Colorado cabin, but that deal fell through. They bought one near Harlan two or three years ago, only to be informed that they couldn't get a septic permit. These days, "I'm still watching Elkhorn, Neb.," Tony said. "There's a one-room school where they still have school."

When the last dieminal bell rings, it may be the signal for the Finches to

ings on their minds, however. "We looked at a Coca-Cola warehouse in Nebraska," Tony said. "We looked at buildings in downtown Boone, we've looked at gas stations, and almost bought one right before we bought this."

"We've looked at barns for a long, long time. When I applied for a job at Doane College in Crete, Neb., there was a barn in town, and if I had gotten that job I can guarantee you where we would have been living."

As a matter of fact, it's hard to come up with a type of building that hasn't crossed their renovating minds. Have you ever heard of anyone living in a silo? Tony was asked.

"You know, 20 years ago I had twin silos picked out," he answered. "But the farmer wouldn't sell."

Novelties and New Year's Eve
Father Time Beards
\$2.99
Laughing Box
\$10.99
Large Baby Diaper
\$2.75
Safety Pins
\$4.50
Confetti, Hats & Horns
\$2.99-\$1.25
Mail Orders Welcome

Theatrical Shop



Steps that once led to the church altar (above) now lead from the living room to a stereo and television area. In dining room, below, note newly installed ceiling and maple flooring.

