

FERTILIZING DREAMS



A Home Remodel in North Idaho Whispers the Wild Wild West

photos and story by Joni Elizabeth

Growth is nothing new to a Midwest couple who met in the fertilizer business. Mike and Gayle Stegmann planted the first seeds of their dreams out west purchasing a home set on 83 acres just off Highway 53 near Rathdrum, Idaho. Six years later, they live in a fully remodeled home, with a guest house addition completed and others in progress, now on 500 acres of land. Though originally purchased as a summer home, the couple decided to transplant full-time in 2014, leaving their residence in St. Louis. Edwards Smith Construction spearheaded the remodel, demolishing the original home to the studs to provide a clean slate for new direction. “It was a nice house, it just wasn’t our house, and what we really wanted was the property,” Mike says of the original home, built in the early 2000s. The couple knew they wanted something different—dark wood instead of light—but beyond general

ideas they did not have an exact blueprint in mind and began meeting with contractors for guidance. Andy Smith at Edwards Smith Construction immediately clicked with the couple, and was hired for the job. "He reeled us in with his vision, excitement and enthusiasm for what this could be," Gayle says. The inspired vision capitalized on the outside views by introducing a row of floor-to-ceiling windows as a northeast portal to wildlife and tree-studded hills surrounding the home. Adding a five-acre manmade lake and waterfall further enhanced the landscape of the Stegmanns' backyard. "Our vision was not restricted to the house, it was what we wanted this ranch to be. Now the ranch is four houses and 500 acres," Gayle says. And though they've come so far, the vision continues to evolve. Construction is

underway to add a full-size barn and indoor riding arena to the property (again by Edwards Smith), that will soon house 15 mules, currently boarding a few miles away at Gayle's father's home. The Stegmanns own the Gem State Mule Company, a passion project for Gayle who started riding the animals, a cross between a female horse and male donkey, when she was 12. She's been in a serious relationship with the animal ever since, showing and riding through the years. In 1989, Gayle set the world record for a mule marathon (which consists of riding a mule, in this case Apache Ripper, for 26.2 miles) and completed the course in 1:32. The Stegmanns are deeply rooted in the agricultural community. Animals, farming and land are the soul of their lives, and provided the backbone to the visionary dream of their ranch in progress. Decor plays on the traditional cowboys and Indians version of the Wild Wild West. The Stegmanns worked with Jane Legasa at Lake Forest Interior Design to select tasteful western decor. Each piece is





deliberate in the Stegmann home, where clutter is non-existent while large, carefully selected tone-setting artifacts fill the space. A portrait of Chief Joseph, painted by the Montana artist Colt Idol, dominates the mantle of the 20-foot floor-to-ceiling rock fireplace, while a traditional Native American white feather headpiece resides in the facing bookcase. A seventy-inch screen TV blends with the surroundings, encased in a custom wood frame with a cowhide border.

The great room flows into the dining room, the open space broken up only by Aztec rugs and furniture placement, where white leather and hide chairs surround a simple wood table beneath a chandelier constructed of elk antlers. An open doorway leads to the kitchen, where the western theme translates to cowhide stools at the bar. Even modern appliances whisper western. A custom-made (Coeur d'Alene-based artist Theresa McHugh) hood



accented with nails used for horseshoes provides proper western headwear to the Wolf range stove. White and brown granite countertops echo the cowhide stools while providing contrasting bright to the dark wood cupboards. A copper farmhouse sink reflects the light from the window above on a sunny morning. Extending from the kitchen, a hallway passes by Gayle's office and circles back to the main entry, a definite conversation starter.

Yes, let's rewind a bit to the beginning. The private drive to the home leads to a timber porte-cochère decorated with an elk-antler chandelier. Once inside, custom art and historic pieces greet the entrant and set the outdoor tone. An owl painting, another Colt Idol piece, perches above a Theresa McHugh custom-made metal branch table. Across the way sits a mule racing statue, given to Gayle's father by former Idaho Governor Cecil Andrus upon retirement from office in 1995. The statue, now set in a 1,200 pound basalt rock—an enhancement from Gayle—commands the space in front of a floor-to-ceiling leather and cowhide framed mirror.





As President of Lange-Stegmann Co., fertilizer, Mike continues to travel to the St. Louis headquarters every few weeks. When in Idaho, Mike works from his home office, a simple desk, iMac, and great leather chair all encased in wood. Windows revealing the great outdoors fill one wall while a commanding longhorn oil on canvas fills the wall behind him.

Across the hall is another of Mike's special spaces, a small room housing guns in dual Champion safes, surrounded by custom cabinetry. Further down the hall, a master bedroom features another floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace, built-in bookcases, and a plush king-size bed facing out to the wilderness views. The remainder of the hall leads to his and hers bathrooms and closets. Gayle's closet resembles a western boutique, with boots, buckles and jewelry on display beneath an orbital chandelier. Though they don't entertain much, they do house family and friends a few times a year. The downstairs is ready for such occasions, outfitted with two guest rooms, each with access to private baths. One bedroom beckons children with log bunks and antique-inspired western decor, while another is more traditional with a suede frame and Aztec pillows and blankets. A foosball table, wet bar, and a taxidermy bear (whose story is waiting to be told) provide entertainment choices in the main downstairs living space.

Other amenities include a fully equipped fitness center, sauna and tanning bed. An array of Aztec rugs and blankets scattered throughout the lower level brightens the darker space while echoing the hues

of the floor above. Upstairs leads to a loft, a creative space for Gayle, who enjoys needlepoints and documents each year in scrapbooks. Another Champion safe houses the annual albums, protecting the preserved memories in the case of a fire. All in all, grand timbers with intricate detail comprise the home tastefully decorated with western whim. The Stegmans sing praises of Edwards Smith construction. "They cut no corners, and their craftsmanship is second to none," says Gayle, nodding to oversized dark-stained baseboards lining the great room as an example. The expansion continues beyond the original home. Exit through the radiant-floor heated mudroom and the "doghouse" is just steps away through the forest. "We really ought to be calling it the bunk house, but the joke is if I'm in trouble this is where I have to stay," says Mike.

The Stegmans infused a more traditional throwback to the Wild West in this space, planking and chinking the walls beneath a bronzed tin ceiling exuding Old World charm. A cast-iron gas stove provides extra heat while a cast-iron pulley light in the full kitchen sets a moody tone with Edison bulbs. Fun nooks and old relics dot the 500 acre property outside, like a dinner bell repurposed from a train of the Wabash Railroad and transported from the ranch Mike grew up on in Missouri; and a freestanding fireplace. Plans are underway for a network of trails.

Walking those trails is not something Gayle would take for granted. An incident with a mule left Gayle, an Olympic-trial qualifying marathon runner, paralyzed from the waist down. The accident resulted in a lengthy hospital stay and halted remodel plans as the couple waited to see what extra accessibility they might need. Fighting her way through extreme rehabilitation and therapy sessions, Gayle learned to walk again.

A year later, Gayle was back to riding mules and slowly learning to run again as well. Plans sprang back into motion for the home remodel, the location cherished for the proximity to Gayle's family as she returned to her hometown. Gayle's dad just lives down the street, her daughter and grandchild less than two miles away, and a brother and sister in the area. It all seems, almost, too perfect.

The Stegmann ranch, and their story, certainly echoes days when settlers traveled west to live out their dream on a plot of land.

An avid traveler, Joni Elizabeth snaps photos to document inspiring architecture and design. Writing about such spaces melds Joni's love for design and decor with that of sharing an individual's story, as she believes spaces are often a small reflection of the owner. She's also convinced no space is complete without a dog.

