

A HOME ON MOUNTAIN LAKE

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There is a hidden place in Polk County quietly tucked away and out of sight. A place with historic homes and large, leafy lots where the sound of serene bells escape surrounding gardens. Lovely and mellow, insulated from the hustle and bustle of the outside world by a lush natural landscape, it's a neighborhood where many arrive to spend a few days, weeks, or months immersing themselves in the healing warmth of the Florida sunshine and friendly culture. But, "Shhh," please don't tell anyone. It's one of our area's most beautifully kept secrets.





Mountain Lake was conceived by Baltimore's Frederick S. Ruth, developed at the turn of the last century as a winter retreat from the snowy weather in other parts of the country. Rail, the principal system of transportation at the time, passed through Central Florida near Mountain Lake on its way south to Miami and the popular lower east coast. Consequently, the area was a convenient stopover, and Mr. Ruth's family had property in the area.

Mr. Ruth put together 3,500 acres of some of the highest and most scenic rolling

land in Florida, and brought in Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. (Olmsted's father was well known for many public designs, including Central Park in New York City, Niagara Reservation in Niagara Falls, and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.) Ruth's goal was to design a small, planned residential community with a fashionable clubhouse and private hotel.

Ruth's intent was to preserve and protect the area's natural beauty and tranquility all the while folding in a relatively small number of homes. He hired respected golf-course designer Seth Raynor, whose works were previously named one of the top 100 in the United States by *Golf Magazine*, to lay

out a world-class golf course. Consequently, Mountain Lake is a very beautiful and charming golf-course community that has worked diligently for a hundred years to continue to effortlessly fit into its natural setting. Interestingly, by design, few of the homes are actually on the course itself and many are hidden entirely within the community's natural habitat. The clubhouse, restaurant, and unique hotel (reserved for members' use) were extensively renovated several years ago but retain all of their original turn-of-the-century charm. The Mediterranean Revival structure is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The hotel continues to provide a convenient

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place for Mountain Lake families and guests to stay during visits, and the lovely restaurant is seasonally open to members and guests.

Mountain Lake is private. Its residents and members seem to appreciate the manner, tradition, style, and grace more often associated with a prior era. For instance, in the evening, men wear jackets and ties in the restaurant and cell phone use is discouraged. How is this possible? you may ask. How could anyone get along without constant text, phone, and email?

The answer appears to be quite simple. People get along without the intrusive smartphone by simple, attentive, and enjoyable visits with good company. Just as people once did at the turn of the century. Proper decorum, often overlooked and underappreciated in these days of texting,

is valued and respected. This is not to say that the folks living in Mountain Lake are socially rigid. *Au contraire*, it's quite the opposite. Friendly members and outgoing residents enjoy the freedom that civility brings. They are socially responsible, and supportive of a number of causes and charitable organizations in the communities. Like civility, helping others is highly valued.

In the mid to late 1920s, Mountain Lake resident and Pulitzer Prize-winning author and publisher, Edward W. Bok, created Bok Tower Gardens. The Singing Tower consists of a neo-gothic and art deco stone tower that soars 205 feet over the area. Surrounded by extensive gardens and a bird sanctuary, the tower is located on 250 acres of Iron Mountain and is adjacent to the community of Mountain Lake. Listed

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on the National Register of Historic Places and a National Historic Landmark, Bok Tower Gardens was dedicated in 1929 by President Calvin Coolidge and presented as a gift to the American people. Its gardens were laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and contains a 60-bell carillon. The carillon is played daily, with frequent concerts. The Mountain Lake residential community and the Bok Tower Gardens were interconnected with a common theme of preservation and tranquility. To this day, members continue to enjoy the park's natural character and beautiful gardens as originally intended almost 100 years ago.

Several years ago, I was hired to renovate and decorate a house in Mountain Lake. I had done work in the community before but not a complete top-to-bottom, inside and out renovation. The house was built in 1985 on almost four acres and had seemingly

seen very little in the way of updates since then. In other words, there were things to be done. A lot of things. I hired Cliff Scholz, a Sarasota architect, to help with the redesign and planning, as we set up a remodeling team.

We essentially gutted the interior. Everything was stripped out of the house. From carpet to curtains. Fixtures, appliances, chandeliers, electrical, and plumbing came out. We wanted a fresh start-over, as much of a blank slate as we could reasonably manage. The house itself was laid out well on the property; it had good bones. The rooms flowed under 12-foot ceilings, and the square footage was efficiently utilized. Fortunately for all of us, the things that weren't right for today's living were fixable.

I had a vision for the house to reflect a timeless, low-country feel with hints of both South Carolina and Louisiana. What I

didn't want was for a visitor to walk through the front door and immediately say, "1985." All of our decisions were made with this in mind. We absolutely wanted to give this house, neglected for a number of years, back its soul.

We started with the exterior. From the roof to the color palette, from the New Orleans gas lanterns to the custom heart-pine front doors, bathrooms and kitchen, every decision was made with purpose. I traveled to New Orleans, Charleston, Savannah, and countless places in between hunting for the right details. I studied shutters, gas lanterns, exterior paint colors, doors, floors, gardens, and landscapes for direction and inspiration.

As we figured out the tone and feel for the outside of the house, we developed a plan to carry the same emotion to the interior. We wanted a seamless, harmonious

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consistency throughout. I believe that the exterior and interior should always tell the same story and evoke similar emotions. Our first step was to work with and enhance the house's positive elements. I often begin by selecting a paint color. I chose Benjamin Moore Misty Gray and painted the entire interior with the exception of the master bedroom. I picked this color because it was soft, creating a background that did not conflict or detract from the art, furnishings, moldings, and wood floors.

I decided on the floors the first time I saw the house. I knew this house had to have antique heart pine. Of course, the challenge was to find them. After a couple of false starts, we located a small sawmill and took off for Mississippi and loaded a U-Haul truck with 2,800 square feet of 100-year-old pine flooring. While I was in Mississippi, I found a custom cabinetry shop and arranged to have pine doors built for the courtyard entrances from the same antique material. I fall in love with the front doors all over again every time I see the house. Doors and floors can give a house a spiritual presence and turn any into a warm and inviting home.

Scouring the world and neighborhood (I am known to repurpose odd things I find off the side of the road) for antique and vintage furniture is my passion, and the things I find often end up being the best part of a



design plan. This project allowed me to engage in an extensive hunt. We wanted to create the feeling of a lifetime collection. To achieve this, I mixed vintage, antique, and new furniture to create the feeling of a lifelong accumulation of things loved. In the end, this home is filled with 60 percent vintage, 30 percent new, and 10 percent antique furniture.

I have a couple of design secrets. My first secret is to pay \$20 for a chair or table (better yet, find the piece) and splurge on the fabric, upholstery, or stone top. With a minimal total investment, the chair or table will look like it cost much, much more. My second secret is paint. It is relatively inexpensive yet can change the emotion of anything and everything, both walls and furniture. An example of both of these secrets coming together is the master bathroom vanity. On one of my furniture expeditions, I found a vintage dresser that, with the right lacquer paint and marble top,

was the perfect look and fit for the master bathroom.

Another example of how to use paint can be seen on the back terrace. I collected rattan furniture from around the Southeast, but none of it matched. The simple solution was to paint it all in a cohesive palette to trick the eye into thinking it was all the same. Paint and fabrics will give many vintage, estate, and yard-sale pieces a new life and, when placed properly, can elevate a design to a new level.

We took out the wall between the kitchen and dining room, opening up the area and creating one large room. We carefully saved the original Gracie dining-room wallpaper, thereby retaining a certain formality to the space. I found an old shoe cart to use for crystal that offset the formality of the room. It's unexpected, unique, and adds interest to the dining room. I also hung a contemporary art piece above the cart and a



transitional chandelier over the English oak dining-room table.

The dining room influenced the decisions we made for the kitchen cabinets. Both of the rooms had to have the same presence and weight. They needed to balance. Also, the two rooms had to flow seamlessly. We decided to use four design elements to bring these spaces together. First, the custom coffered ceiling runs between the dining room and kitchen, visually making it a continuous space. Second, the kitchen cabinets are a close match to the background color of the vintage dining-room wallpaper. Third, instead of constructing an island in the kitchen, we found an old shirt table from a men's clothing store and put a beautiful piece of white marble on it. The old shoe cart in the dining room and the antique shirt table in the kitchen tie these spaces together. Lastly, the open shelves in the

kitchen mirror the open shelving of the shoe cart. Crystal and china are displayed at both ends of the space.

My goal was to create a timeless home that would fit smoothly into the serene, enduring, ageless environment of Mountain Lake. We wanted it to reflect the unique nature of the community itself: elegant yet informal, warm, hospitable, relaxed, friendly, and inviting. A classic yet unpretentious atmosphere. Mountain Lake may not be the right fit for everyone. Privacy and good form are important. Social responsibility is cherished. The verdant natural surroundings and abundant wildlife are treasured and protected by the community. But its charm and unique character as one of the country's oldest planned communities is undeniable. And the sense of community is pronounced and valued. It was the perfect place to recreate and reimagine a 1985 house with good bones. ☺