

Immersed in History

A best-selling historical fiction author lives out his life's work in a restored 18th-century cabin in Tennessee.



hen Robert Hicks first moved to Williamson County, Tennessee, in 1974, he just wanted a peaceful, commutable retreat away from the lights and noise of Nashville. Fate had better plans. Four years after his arrival, he met a man whose property included a deteriorating 1700s cabin. Hicks convinced the owner to let him dismantle the cabin and relocate it, and after 18 months of construction and restoration, he moved into his new home, now found near the tiny hamlet of Leiper's Fork.

"It was really in rough shape," Hicks says of the cabin. "The guy was planning to burn the place down."

The original two-pen cabin included one-and-a-half stories and an enclosed dogtrot, all made of cedar and featuring the dovetail corners common to many Appalachian log cabins. Subsequent owners added additional pens, or sections, in the 1830s and 1840s with poplar and ash logs. Hicks' crew numbered the logs before transporting and re-erecting them eight miles away, and they added a new chimney found from another log house.

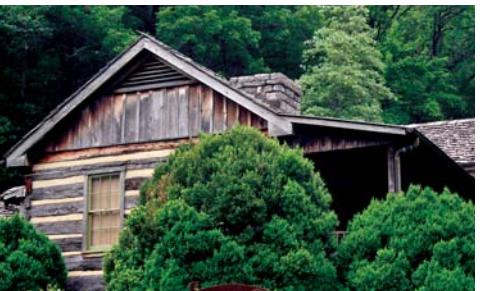
Looking back on the process, Hicks grimaces over the ordeal, which lasted twice as long as he had originally estimated. "I had no idea



what I was doing," he laughs. "I was completely delusional. By the grace of God I survived it, and the house survived me." To capture the memories, Hicks affectionately dubbed his cabin "Labor in Vain." It has since won several preservation awards.

Hicks originally moved here to work in Nashville's music publishing and artist management industries, but his experiences living along the quieter fringes of the city opened his eyes to the rich history of the area. He soon

Russell Hooper photo



began to explore the historical significance of his adopted hometown and was amazed to learn the details of past local events, particularly the Civil War's widely forgotten Battle of Franklin. The five bloodiest hours of the war were fought there Nov. 30, 1864, during which approximately 9,000 men died, many of whom were buried nearby.

Given the historical importance of the site, Hicks strongly felt that it should be preserved as a sacred resting place for slain soldiers and began working to bring attention to the area, save local structures significant to the battle's history and combat commercial development on the battleground. His efforts led him to write "The Widow of the South," a novel centered on the Battle of Franklin and its aftermath for the few survivors. Hicks has since written "A Separate Country," which follows the post-war life of Confederate Gen. John Bell Hood.

Hicks attributes much of his continuing passion for history to his cabin, which keeps him steeped in its 300-plus years of antiquity. "Living around history is really important to me," he affirms. "I have a vision for doing amazing things in Franklin. I'm excited about the future, but I really love being immersed in the past." His enthusiasm is catching. For his contributions to the state's heritage tourism and preservation efforts, Nashville-based newspaper *The Tennessean* named Hicks "Tennessean of the Year" in 2005.

Despite his initial desire to live in what he called "a small, decaying Southern town," Hicks' efforts have helped

LEIP INTO HISTORY

If Robert Hicks' idyllic hometown of Leiper's Fork, formerly called Benton Town, appeals to your historic sensibilities, you can get a taste of what life there was like shortly after his cabin was built. On Oct. 1 and 2, visit "Benton Town 1812," a recreated historic village featuring costumed re-enactors, storytellers, a market fair and more, all depicting life as it occurred along the Natchez Trace in the early 1800s. Go to visitleipersfork.com, or call 615-595-8190 for more information.

revitalize the area. "It came back to life on me and flourished, going way beyond anyone's vision," he observes. "It's a beautiful place to live."

After more than 30 years in the cabin, Hicks has made a few changes but essentially keeps the integrity of the original structure intact. "I can take out all my needs for creativity in writing, so I don't attack the house that often," he laughs. "There's something kind of wonderful about walking on those old floors."

In retrospect, he acknowledges that his original choice for a name may have been a little shortsighted. "After all those efforts and all the energy we spent, my godmother said to me, 'That's the worst-named house in history. It's so far from being a labor in vain,'" Hicks recalls. "It has truly been an amazing gift back to me over the years." **CBC**



OPPOSITE: Tim Putnam photo; RIGHT: Russell Hooper photo

ABOVE: Parts of this historic Tennessee cabin date back to 1795.

OPPOSITE: Author Robert Hicks shares his restored cabin with "Jake, The World's Greatest Dog."



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