

others." Mac's piercing blue eyes intensify. "That's the secret; you've got two rocks and the one above it has to lock them together." Hmm. Sounds like the makings of a good sermon; the stone "above" holding the two "below" together.

"There's no good stone around here," he continues, none with flat tops and bottoms. He has to drive his Ford pick up, which runs half and half on diesel and vegetable oil, to up

and reflects on the decision to move the family from Missouri to Virginia, and on the decision 11 years ago to enter the ministry. Despite the lack of flat stones, "it's been a very satisfying place to live. I'm very pleased with it. And right now, I'm very devoted to this church. This is just a great bunch of people. They're old line Presbyterians; they don't like a lot of this new liberalism." And that suits him and his conservative sensibilities just fine. "I'm a Scotsman; I'm a Presbyterian. What else could I be?"

He remembers vividly, "The first Sunday I came here, there were six people here. I built it up to about 30 and then they started moving away, dying off. I've lost seven older people in the last couple of years. Now, I'm starting to get a few more." Some Sundays, 15 will show up, "and I'm tickled for all 15." One of his favorite members is the granddaughter of the man who actually built the church in 1874. Elsie Peyton Jarvis, 86, can remember when the poplar tree out front was struck by lightning during a Sunday service 70 years ago.

Of his decision to become a man of the cloth, he says, "I realized that a lot of things that happened in my life, good things and bad have been kind of pushing me toward the ministry." He points to a previous marriage and divorce he underwent a long time ago. "When I

counsel people with marriages in trouble, I know what I'm talking about."

Licensed to do weddings, funerals, and baptisms, "this is where I need to be and it's part of my life." Even though it's an 80-mile round trip, he makes the journey to this beautiful little carpenter gothic building with its 36 spires, three and four times a



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

It's an 80 mile round trip from home to Waddell and back, but Mac McRaven makes the journey several times a week because of his loyal parishioners.

near Luray to find good building material. He can haul two tons at a time. His best source is West Virginia. Stonework is measured in square feet, not cubic feet. A man can lay about 20 square feet in a day. Once, Mac, on a bet, laid 200 square feet with the help of two highly motivated workers in one day.

He looks around the churchyard



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Mac McRaven presents a new forged hinge to Elsie Peyton Jarvis, 86. Her grandfather, George Peyton built Waddell church according to plans laid out by Richmond seminary professor, J.B. Danforth.

week. In addition to Sunday services, he teaches, on first and third Saturdays, stone masonry and on second and fourth Saturdays, blacksmithing. On the fifth Saturday, they host an open-mic acoustic music jam.

Mac and the Waddell church are a perfect match. Not only is it a Presbyterian church in the conservative Scottish tradition, it is a Presbyterian church in desperate need of a man with McRaven's skills. "I stepped down from the pulpit one day and my foot went through the floor," says Mac ruefully. "And I said, 'it is time to work on this church.'" He shows a photo of him revving up a chain saw in the crawl space underneath, cutting out termite-infested timbers. He and his helpers replaced and restored all 36 of the church's spires. He forged the new front door hinges.

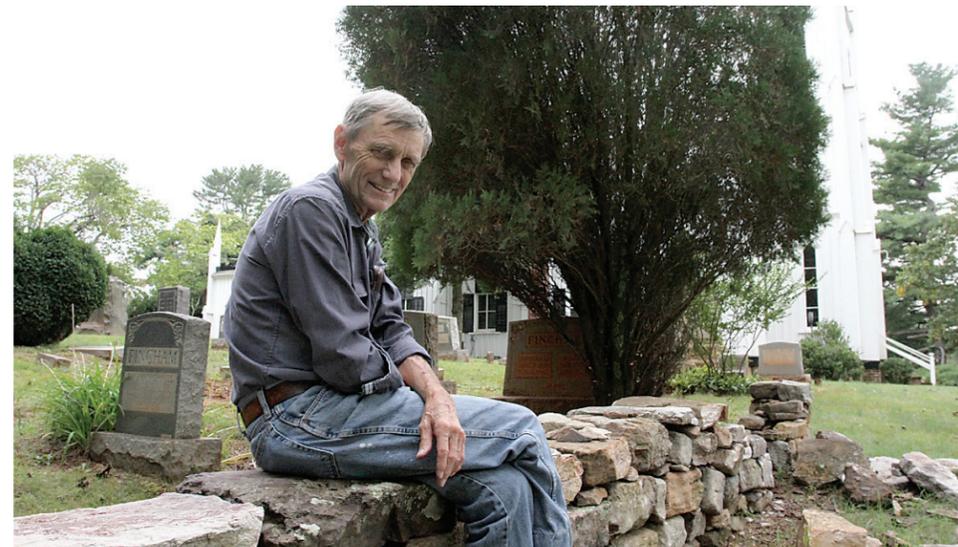
Today, he says, "We're almost finished restoring it." It has been a labor of love. "We try and let people know the church is still alive and well because it has come near closing its doors several times." And he adds, "the younger ones are worried

because the young kids, the ones you don't hear about, the ones who are not in trouble, the young kids are worried about what we're leaving them, economically in this country, morally in this country, politically. They're worried about what they're going to inherit."

Nowadays, Mac complains of deafness in one ear and grouches that his memory is fading. "I stay fairly active. I work out a couple of times a week and keep laying rock and keep putting up beams. I built a chapel on our property where I did the marriage ceremony for my son and his wife, and I'm putting an addition on it now. That'll probably be my last log structure that I'm doing on my own. It's down in a little hollow behind my house...When I get too old to travel; which is an 80-mile round trip here, I'll probably start having services down there."

"I'm 76 years old. I've spent a little bit of time around, but I have done practically everything that I've wanted to tackle so far." He pauses a long beat and adds the word, "almost."

## A man of wood, stone and metal



Left, a man of many callings, Charles 'Mac' McRaven is a log home builder, a timber framer, a stone mason, a blacksmith, an author and a pastor.

PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Below, McRaven started doing forge work in his 20s but he really learned the blacksmithing craft by apprenticing for an old-timer in 1976.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

## A man of the pen and the cloth

Maybe it started when Charles 'Mac' McRaven was 11 years old. His dad challenged him and his brother to dismantle, move and reconstruct a log cabin in rural Arkansas. "If you run into something too heavy to handle, call me," Mac remembers his dad saying. "but I want you to learn."

Mac flips through the pages of the latest edition of "The Classic Hewn-Log House," by Charles Robert McRaven.

Then again maybe it happened two years after the log cabin experience when Mac's father decided to build a stone house. When it was completed, "he and my older brother swore they would never touch another rock." Mac's intense blue eyes soften. "I loved it," he says pas-

sionately. "I loved it. I was 13 years old and I've been in love with it ever since."

He says these words while seated on a low, dry-laid stone wall that he and his students are building in a Rapidan churchyard.

Or how about the summer he spent learning from "this old blacksmith ... very colorful character with a beard and everything... I learned more in those three months than I'd learned in the 20 years before when I was trying to pick it up on my own."

He thumbs through his work, "The Blacksmith's Craft, A Primer of Tools and Methods."

It could have turned out completely differently. He might have stayed on as editor of the weekly newspaper in Benton,



Arkansas, married the mayor's daughter, joined the country club. But that kind of life "was not what I wanted to do." Or he could have stayed with the college teaching job, building tenure instead of log cabins. Or maybe he should have stuck with television news or public relations or photography. Or he could have become a mechanic. Or...

Forget trying to pigeon hole Mac McRaven; he has always been and still is a work in progress. Mac is still building, but less now out of wood, stone and metal and more in structures of the spirit. Among his many other occupations, he is pastor of Waddell Memorial Presbyterian Church in Rapidan.

He describes himself as a typical Gemini. "I do two things at once. I have a one-track mind, but I've got to break this and go do this." He points to the stone wall and then to the church in the background. "I go crazy if I do physical work all of the time and I go really crazy if I do cerebral work all of the time."

So why not do both? Heck, why not do everything?



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Mac McRaven came to Waddell Memorial Presbyterian Church in 2003. Since then he has helped save and restore the 1874 "carpenter-gothic" structure in Rapidan.

Mac's story starts in rural Arkansas. "I was raised in the country; way back in the country...My people were Presbyterian for about 400 years in Scotland and here. All my ancestors are Scottish. They invented that name when they came to this country. They were leaving town right ahead of the sheriff, I'm sure."

Naturally, growing up in the sticks, he wanted "to get into town as soon as possible." His goal, back then, was not to become a stone mason or a timber

framer or a blacksmith but to be a college professor. But first he had to be a journalist because, "I wanted to write."

And how else was he going to work his way through the University of Arkansas, than with his pen. He wrote and sold feature stories to area newspapers, and at night, worked in TV and radio news. When he graduated, he took a job as a photographer for a weekly paper. "And a month or two later, the editor got drunk, fell in the river and drowned." Monday morning Mac walks into the office to hear the words, "how would you like to be editor?"

Writing, by the way, is something Mac is still doing. Four years ago, he won first place in *The Hook's* annual short story competition, and he adds with a twinkle in his eye, "I just completed my 11th unpublished novel. I don't know what I'm going to do with that." He's also a voracious reader, devouring two books a week. "I'm always either writing one and reading two at any given time."

He declares "The most mundane person in the world is worth three good stories, at least. Some of them are worth a lot more." Mac is worth 100 minimum. Of today's infotainment style of journalism, he snorts, "It's like show business now. It's popularity. It's so much like Hollywood."

But we digress. Back to 1965. Armed with a master's in journalism, Mac McRaven decided he would not settle down in Benton, AR with the mayor's daughter and the country club, he'd rather teach the news-writing craft instead. Assistant professor McRaven entered the world of academia, creating journalism departments in a Mississippi gulf coast community college district and at a "work college," that today is the College of the Ozarks in southwestern Missouri.

He remembers teaching a class in investigative journalism. "That's how I got crossways with the administration at the college in Missouri. They (his students) wanted to investigate the administration. I said, 'go for it. I'm not going to teach you investigative journalism and say this is a sacred cow. Go for it' It made 'em (the administration) mad."



Before and after on a McRaven restoration project near Waynesboro. The lady seated to the left grew up in this structure, which was so close to slipping down the mountain, they had to secure it with a cable before working on it. On the right is the finished product, with a brand new chimney and stone foundation, laid by McRaven's daughter.

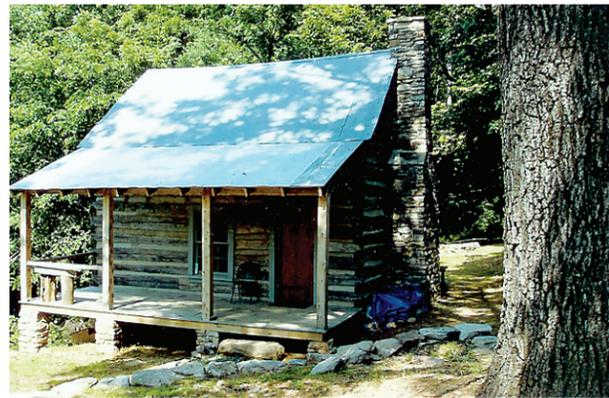
Anyway, at the college in southwest Missouri, he ran into Linda Moore, an accomplished photographer and *National Geographic* picture editor. She was working on a story about American mountain people. They took a shine to each other.

"We flew back and forth from Washington and southwest Missouri for a year and destroyed our savings," he says of their courtship, adding that "we'd better get married; it was cheaper. So, we lived there (in Missouri) until 1980."

In 1975, Mac quit academia. "I thoroughly enjoyed teaching in college but the administrative hassles drove me up the wall. I mean industry is bad enough with people protecting their turf, but you get a bunch of academics? Oh man. Invariably the deans and the president, these guys who couldn't make it out in the real world; they're protecting their turf."

He went back to his first love, "hacking the logs and laying the rock." By this time he had also sharpened his blacksmithing skills, and Linda had started small publishing and advertising businesses. They self-published his first book in 1977, the one about hewn log houses.

The timing was perfect. The whole mid-70s back-to-nature thing was taking hold. When they went to a national bookseller's convention, five publishers lined



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

up to sign them on. They went with what was then Harper-Row. The most recent edition of "The Classic Hewn Log House, A Step by Step Guide to Building and Restoring" dates to 2005.

The next thing the publishers wanted was a book on building with stone. It was the middle of winter, his wife was out of town, so Mac McRaven wrote a book about building with stone in one week... a 189-page 'how to' book in one week.

By this time the McRavens had started a family. "I couldn't see having to go some place I didn't want to live just for a job, and that's never been my top priority. I wanted to go some place where I wanted to live. So, we landed in Virginia, and I had no prospects at all. And I advertised a blacksmithing class and six guys showed up." The next year, 1981, he published his third book, "The Blacksmith's Craft, A Primer of Tools and Methods." Two more stone building books have followed.

Since then, Mac McRaven has either built from scratch or saved and restored dozens of hewn log buildings and stone structures ranging from walls to bridges to houses. "History has always fascinated me. I minored in it," he says. "I restore old buildings because I was watching them get pushed over and bulldozed and burned."

He has also forged all manner of iron and steel objects, both artistic and utilitarian. He has made the nails used in the houses he builds. He has crafted the tools he uses in hewing logs and chiseling stone. And he teaches workshops in his four fields: hewn log building, stone work, timber framing and blacksmithing, all over the country.

In 2006 the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities named him a Master Craftsman, with two apprentices. The first thing he and his apprentices did was make their own timber framing tools. Then, "we cut timber off my property. Hewed the timber out, mortised, fitted, pegged them all together, took it to the National Folk Festival in Richmond." One of those apprentices married his daughter.

His own house in northwest Albemarle is something of a showcase for his work. "A combination of stone, log and timber frame, I'm still building it," he shrugs. There are several beautiful photographs of it in his books, taken by Linda, who he says is "an incredible photographer. I taught it (photography) for a number of years but I was never as good as she was or is." Right now, he's working on a "Russian" fireplace, "one of these big, nine-foot wide fireplaces with all the baffles and the ducts in it."

Hewing logs, toting stones, hammering iron and steel is tough work. It's also dangerous. He tells a toe curling story. "I had my back turned to a pile of big beams and a 12 by 12 oak beam 32 feet long rolled off behind me. I didn't see it coming, and it pinned this leg (he points to the left one) to the ground, and just crushed it below the knee. Fortunately I had two guys with me because it was February and I would have frozen to death because I couldn't get out from under it." They estimate it weighed 1,100 pounds.

Of his five children, four daughters and a son, he and Linda are rightfully proud. Their son is an engineer, carrying on a tradition in his family that he himself did not follow. "All the men in my family for three generations were engineers except me. I didn't get the math. I didn't get the logical approach." As he terms it, "I do everything off the top of my head,"

which, when he builds a 200 foot-long zip line without a brake, somewhat disconcerts his engineer son.

The daughters are equally diverse and accomplished. One is a successful theatre director on the West Coast and a stone mason in her own right. Another has a small restaurant in Charlottesville and devotes her time to missionary work. A third is a geologist along with her husband and a fourth is an architect. Interesting, the children seem to mirror their father's passion for stone and for building both houses and spirits. "All my kids help me with building. My daughters know how to fix their own trucks. They know how to put roofs on." Oh yes, that's one more thing that Mac does; he fiddles and restores antique cars and trucks.

Seated on the stone wall that will eventually delineate the cemetery at Waddell Memorial Presbyterian Church, Mac McRaven talks about his craft and his calling. "A flat top and bottom, that's what you've got to have," he says of stone selection. "We're talking about gravity and friction. A good dry stack wall,



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Mac McRaven is an accomplished writer. He taught college level journalism, has authored several books on the building crafts he has mastered, and has written 11 unpublished novels.

there are some that are 6,000 years old." He points to a picture in one of his books of a wall made by the Incas in Peru. The gaps between the 300-ton blocks can be measured in millimeters, fractions of millimeters.

He tells a story of a medieval lord interviewing stone masons to build his castle. He asks each applicant how he builds with stone, and all but one reply, "I put one stone on top of another." The job goes to the man who responds, "I put one stone on top of two

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