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4C The News and Observer, Raleigh, N.C., Sun., June 23, 1985

In cabin in the woods, paradise

Continued from page 1C

is. The two younger children have never tasted meat or sugar.

They also will tell you that they never get attached to "things." For that reason, they said it took no real adjustment to leave the house in the city for the cabin in the country.

The Kambons came to North Carolina in 1980. The five stayed with Mrs. Kambon's relatives until spring when they found an apartment and began planning to build a house.

But neither Kamau nor Mawiyah Kambon had found a job. Although both had advanced psychology degrees from Columbia University (he has a doctorate; she, a master's), they had no job contacts.

With savings, they bought four acres of land in Wake County and ordered a kit from Wisconsin to build a log house. Mrs. Kambon described the house she wanted, a six-sided structure with sections of the roof meeting at one point above like a teepee. The Wisconsin company designed the kit to fit her description. Kamau and Mawiyah Kambon decided to do all of the construction themselves.

They built a utility hut for practice. A couple of months later, partly for economic reasons, all five Kambons moved into the 12-by-22-foot building.

"We really talked about pioneering," said Mrs. Kambon, who is now a doctoral student at Duke University. "And Kamau, at one point, had talked about no electricity, but I said that was too much."

No water and no plumbing, however, wasn't too much. For the year and a half they spent assembling the log cabin, Ayanna washed the dishes with well water. Her mother and father cooked on an electric hot plate, which they also used to heat bath water.

Although the family helped with the digging, they did hire someone to build a foundation for their log house. Then the white pine logs came, tied together in bundles.

"We stood at the top of the hill and saw these 20 to 25 bundles, and we didn't know how we were going to put these together," said Kambon, who is now an assistant professor at St. Augustine's College. Kambon handed over the designs to his wife to figure out what went where.

After a little study, Mrs. Kambon discovered all the logs they needed first were on the bottom of the bundles. Each log weighed 150 pounds.

Before the house was finished, the two laid 96 logs and pounded long nails into them for the six walls. They tediously stuffed insulation and caulking into each joint. They cut holes for the windows and doors, realized the plans were wrong, pulled out nails and started again.

Their tools included a small chain saw, a sledgehammer, a borrowed scaffold and a couple of strong backs. An electrician did the wiring, but Kambon installed the plumbing in the kitchen area and bathroom. Mrs. Kambon took a wood-working class, then fashioned wood cabinets and tile counters for the kitchen.

Once when the weather forecast called for rain, the Kambons stayed out until midnight to finish the roof, using lamps to light their way.

Another time, Mrs. Kambon was installing a light fixture when she turned and looked into the eyes of a snake hanging from the rafters. Kambon swears her heel marks are visible in the concrete foundation.

They bought carpet off the back of a truck and furniture from flea markets. They got a Persian rug from a man who was retiring and moving out of his home.

They installed a wood-burning stove and ceiling fan, which would be their only heating and cooling systems. They had hoped to install their 1900 cast-iron stove, but for now it's just decoration.

The parents hung African masks and dried flowers in one area. The children hung posters of Michael Jackson and Mr. T in another.

They moved four beds and Mrs. Kambon's childhood piano into the 1,000-square-foot room. They added a television, washing machine and stereo. Mrs. Kambon planted a vegetable garden, and the family joined a Raleigh food co-op.

When they had no money for the younger children's birthdays one summer, Kambon built a swing set out of left-over logs.

They hope to build an additional room when they've saved enough money. They already have cinder blocks for the foundation, and they hope to buy or trade something for a tractor soon.

But for now, they are satisfied. "We wanted to be debt-free," Kambon said. "I think our lifestyle really reflects what a lot of people need to be thinking about in the community now. We operate on a pay-as-you-go basis. We try to deal with what we need rather than what we want."

Will they ever sell the mortgage-free home they put so much physical sweat and emotional stamina into building? "We would sell it for about $150,000," Kambon said with a laugh. "I think we would maybe sell the first house, the little one we built, for $200,000."

The family plays outside the cabin

Staff photo by Karen Tam

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