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Bakerville: Pre-print of Chapter "Moving" from Collecting Houses by Anne W. Bakers

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Moving

Dismantling a house is one way to save it. Moving a house in one piece is another—and a much better method. The original house remains the same, its historic fabric isn't destroyed, and the cost is far less than the cost of taking a house apart and putting it back together.

The first time I moved a house in one piece it was my own. Not my grandmother's house, where my first husband and I lived, but an old house I discovered, moved, and then moved into with my new husband. A moving experience that was set in motion on a winter morning in 1963, when my telephone rang.

"Is Pete there?" a man asked when I answered.

"That's me," I replied, "How can I help you?" He said his name was Bob Baker, and asked if I was the person with antique woodwork for sale.

"I'm looking for an old mantel," he said.

I assured him that I had an extensive collection and we arranged an appointment for the following Wednesday. Innocent enough until Wednesday at 10:00 when he knocked on my door and I opened it. First I noticed his shiny black hair that lay like a mane on his forehead, then his canvas coat with elbow patches, his leather boots and a blue wool scarf flung casually around his neck. He looked gorgeous, like an explorer who had just returned from an exotic adventure. And when he removed his pipe and grinned, his eyes—the color of green polished glass—glowed like the tide had just washed over them. There was no need for "hello"—it was as if we had always known each other, and I knew my life was about to change.

I can't remember how we got to the barn or even how I managed to sell him some woodwork. We kept discovering each other and how nicely we fit together. He, too, loved old houses, and was also a collector. As a marine architect his main interest was collecting old boats, but he had some old cars, and even some old house parts. Before he left I agreed to meet him at an old house he wanted to show me, and then of course there were boats to see and then more houses, and over the next few months our relationship became solid. I had discovered a way to be me in combination with another.

By the end of a year my husband had agreed to a divorce. Bob and I were married and the kids went back and forth between our two houses, except our house, Bob's and mine, was a boat — a big one — 83 feet long. She was a real antique, built in 1908 and my children loved being aboard, but by 1967, and the birth of two more children — a nose count of seven — 83 feet had absolutely, definitely, gotten too small.

Not wanting to get away from the water, just off it, we decided to look for a house in Westport, Massachusetts, a peninsula, of land jutting into the ocean, where Bob had lived before I'd met him.

We didn't want to get involved with a real estate agent until we had looked around on our own. Warren, Rhode Island, where our boat was berthed, was only a half hour from Westport. Whenever we had a chance we'd pack a picnic, and with the 2 youngest who weren't in school, drive over to Westport and look for houses with a **For Sale** sign in front. But the houses were either too small, too new, or smack on the edge of a road, and nothing was next to the water. Even though we weren't in a hurry, we routinely checked the real estate section of the newspaper every Sunday.

And suddenly there it was. For Sale by owner. Seventy acre farm. Two aluminum barns. Two-story house. River frontage. Exactly the parts we wanted. At the bottom was a telephone number which I immediately called. I told the man who answered that my husband and I had seen the ad and wondered where the farm was. He gave me the address, and explained he didn't live there, that he'd inherited the farm from his father.

"But, " he said, "You're more than welcome to take a look at the property," and told me if we wanted to get in the houses to call him and he'd meet us there with the key. I thanked him, told him we might take a look, hung up, and relayed the conversation to Bob. Ten minutes later we'd left the kids with a friend and were on our way to Westport.

Luckily, for once, I didn't romanticize about what we'd find because when we arrived I saw a depressing mess.

"What's happened?" I said. "This land looks horrible. Like a body that's had its skin scraped off."

"That's just about it," Bob replied. "The land has been stripped of its gravel. It happened about 4 years ago, around 1962, when the State decided to build a new road through the middle of Westport."

Then he explained that Westport sits on a gravel moraine and because gravel was needed as a sub base for the new road, the state had offered to buy the gravel from local farmers. The state said they would save the topsoil aside and when they were through they would put it back and even rebuild the stonewalls.

"Obviously that never happened," I said.

Bob nodded his head . "As a kid I loved passing this place. The green and yellow grasses crisscrossed by stonewalls made the fields look as if nature had covered them with a quilt."

I felt sad for the land, but especially for the house. Sitting in the middle of this scarred and ugly mess, it looked as deserted as an orphan.

Safe in the northwest corner, and not far from the house, was a little graveyard— the only evidence that life had mattered on this farm. We slowly walked over and by the time we'd reached its moss covered stonewalls I felt as though I'd fallen in step with a procession of mourners. But, when I entered, instead of fresh earth the ground was a tangle of bitter – sweet and briars. There were fifteen or more headstones, eroded and encrusted with lichen; some slate, some marble — worn and blurred by the passage of time. I squatted down and rubbed away the lichen on the face of a few ; Joshua, Anna, Calab, Sarah. A baby, a husband, a wife. Deaths that ranged from 1725 to 1891. I looked up at the house. These were the people who had lived and died under its shelter.

I'd been too depressed by the land to pay much attention to the house, but now for the first time I gave it a good look. The asbestos shingles, windows with one-over-one sheets of glass, and a cinderblock chimney poking out of the roof indicated the 20th century. Except there was something about it that was different.

"It's the second floor gable-end overhang '" Bob said.

"That's it," I replied, "That's eighteenth century construction. What are we standing here for?"

When we got closer I noticed details inconsistent with the 20th century. The foundation was granite instead of concrete, and the window frames protruded about 2 inches away from the walls just as they did in the 1700's. My heart raced. But when I looked through a window, all I could see were plywood floors, sheetrock walls and cardboard ceilings—material that matched the period of the asbestos shingles. Still, it was possible that this was a veneer — a 20th century attempt to modernize. If so, what was behind it? This could be a very old house, and considering the inferior site it was on, a house that might be slated for demolition. We looked at each other and nodded. Why bother the owner when we probably could find a way in now.

The front door was nailed shut and the windows sealed, but the skeleton key that Bob always carried— for just this purpose— easily opened the back door. Without hesitation we walked into the kitchen. A damp, moldy smell filled our nostrils, and the only inhabitant was a scurrying mouse. I swept my eyes up the walls, across the ceiling and down to the floor looking for an exposed beam, a raised panel door, a fireplace, wide floor boards—anything that could give a hint of age—but like the room I'd seen through the window, every surface was covered in modern material.

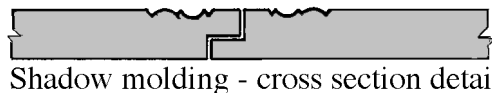
But not the next room. Jumping and squealing like I'd just won the lottery, I yelled at Bob to come see. A summer beam spanned the center of the ceiling, girts surrounded the top of the walls and each corner had a post— exactly the kind of construction found in an early room. We knew we were on to something special.

The door that led from this room to the next hadn't been used in so long that its seams were painted shut. Using a jackknife Bob cut through the

paint, and after a bit of fussing it came loose. I jiggled it, and it open into a tiny front hall that had apple crates stacked to the ceiling. We shoved them aside and discovered a closed string stairway with a triple run that looked just like the pictures of ones I'd seen in a book about early houses. Despite many coats of cracked and peeling paint it was magnificent. Its balusters were turned like the legs on a Windsor chair, the wall below the steps had a raised panel and the area below the panel was finished in hand-planed, boards.

Excited, we continued to explore—the first floor, the second, the attic and the cellar—and wherever we looked we'd find more of its earliest parts hiding behind flimsy partitions. It was like Christmas morning. The jewel was a board-and-batten door. Its original butterfly hinges and wooden latch bar were still attached.

two boards wide with moldings carved into



The door was shadow the surface of

the boards—a type of decoration not used much after 1680.

I knew this kind of door had originally been part of a wall decorated in the same manner and I dared to believe it might still be waiting to be found behind the plastered walls. Even though the house was only giving out its secrets in whispers, we had learned enough to know that parts of it at least, were very old.

I kept pinching myself. How could this be possible? Here, in the middle of this castrated land, we'd found an ancient house with a story to tell

and with a past to coax back. I was itching to get a tool and bust through its disguise. Like breaking open a piñata, I could already imagine its parts spilling out and into our lives. Not only was it a perfect size for our whole family but it had all the old parts we loved. "Except," I said to Bob, "It will never work. No matter what we do it will still be sitting on a site that's outlived its meaning."

"Simple," he said, "We'll move it to another part of the land."

I knew that moving a whole house from one place to another wasn't a new idea. I'd heard old stories about oxen hauling houses on rollers and once I was caught in a traffic jam behind a house being towed down a street. I'd parked my car and had gotten out to watch. Men were tying back branches and cutting telephone and electric wires so the house could advance. I remember thinking how cocky the house must feel as it passed by others forever stuck where they were. I was sure this house would feel just as smug if it was moved away from this desolate spot. Moving it seemed like a perfect solution. I looked at Bob and nodded a YES.

"Let's go right now and find the owner," I said.

Now that saving the house seemed possible, I found myself switching from never wanting to see this farm again to worrying that it could have been sold since talking with the owner four hours ago. I was relieved to find him at home and more relieved when he told us that so far there hadn't been much interest.

"It's the land," he said. "It's not much good for farming. A developer did come around, but haven't heard from him for a while."

We told him we'd been in the house and liked it, but not its location.

"We've been tossing around the possibility of moving it," Bob said, "provided there's an area on the farm that hasn't been destroyed.

"Interesting idea," the owner said. "There is a large undisturbed section. Come on, I'll walk the boundaries with you."

As we walked through a wooded area the owner explained why this half of the farm had survived the graveling operation.

"Partly because of the woods here, " he said, "but also because there's an Indian burial ground next to that field up ahead. When the bulldozer driver started to dig he came up with a bucket full of bones. It scared the hell out of him and I'm told he left in a hurry. By the time another driver was hired the State didn't need any more gravel."

"Thank God," I said.

This part of the land included frontage on the river, a forest, a brook and a field—a perfect spot to locate the house and our lives. I could already imagine our days and nights cloaked by its ancient structure, waking in the morning and laughing with Bob at the bickering of busy sparrows, getting out of bed, my bare feet touching the silky knots in the ancient floor boards and looking at my vegetable garden through the bubbles and waves in the hand blown window glass. A dream I was shaken from when we finally dared to ask the price. "\$58,000," the owner replied. Perhaps not much for a house, river frontage and 70 acres of land by 1990's standards, but in 1967, a lot of money, and definitely more than we could afford.

"I have an idea," Bob said, and he looked at the owner. "We might be able to swing this if we could find a person who wanted to buy the barns and the trashed out section. Is that possible?"

"As a matter of fact," the owner replied, "there was a farmer who was particularly interested in the barns, but he'd been turned down when he'd applied for a farm loan. I remember he saying that the graveled off part was fine for his five hundred head of forced fed cattle. Holsteins, he'd said, a breed of milk machines that only needed to be on the land when the barns are being cleaned. When we get back to my house I'll give you his name."

The farmer was definitely interested in the part we didn't want, and tried again for a loan. A week later he called to say the loan had been approved. We shook hands on the deal, signed a bill of sale, and assured the farmer we'd call a house mover.

People who move houses don't live around the corner or even in the next town. The nearest company we could find was located outside of Boston.

"We're pretty busy," I was told by the company's owner, a man named Roland. "It might be a couple of months, but I'll be in your area day after tomorrow and if you want I'll come over to Westport and take a look at the house and where it's going."

When Roland arrived in a green Cadillac I expected to see a suit-and-tie guy get out the car. Instead he had on a black and red checked lumberman's jacket, overalls and boots and looked about forty, the same age as Bob. Before he said hello he stooped down, and with a French Canadian

accent spoke to our two youngest. I couldn't hear what he said but when he stood up they were giggling. Smiling, he said, "Hi, I'm Roland." He shook my hand and I could feel the roughness of hard work. I liked him right away.

"Nice house," he said. "Looks in good shape. Shouldn't be a problem to move it."

He told us he didn't have time to go inside. He'd do that later. "Right now," he said, "I need you to show me where its going. Then he explained that it takes time to map out the route, get a moving permit and arrange for the telephone and electric company to be on hand to lower wires.

"It's only going next door," Bob said, "across that piece of land," and he pointed to what used to be a field.

Roland nodded. "That looks easy enough."

We walked across an open expanse to the edge of the woods and then into a meadow flaunting the soft greens of spring. Halfway down the edge of the meadow was the spot we'd chosen to put the house. It was next to a brook, near the forest, but out in the open enough to have gardens and maybe some sheep.

"I can see why you want to move the house over here. It's a beautiful spot," Roland said, then looked at a mile meter attached to his belt and told us the distance for the move was just under a mile.

"Actually the distance isn't what matters," he said. "It's getting it ready to move that does. I'm guessing, from the size of the house, it'll take us a week. It's now April. I think we can start the second week in June. You'll need that time to get in a well and have the foundation hole dug. And that's all I want—just a hole." And then he reminded Bob to be sure and tell the

excavator that when he dug the hole he should leave one end open and level with the ground so the house could be backed in.

I asked him why we couldn't build the foundation first. He explained that if there was a foundation he wouldn't be able to back the house in as its walls would be in the way of the trailer wheels.

"When the house is in place," Roland said, "I'll build some cribbing under the carrying beams and remove the wheels," assuring us the house would be just fine sitting that way until the foundation was built. Then he told us when the foundation was ready he'd come back, remove the beams and set the house down on its permanent foundation. I couldn't visualize it yet, but I was sure by the time the move was finished I would.

Fortunately—at least I thought so then—1967 was before perk tests were required, which gave us the freedom to simply go ahead and position the house without worrying about the water table. The front would face south as it always had. The east end would have a view of the river, the west end would be next to an old stonewall and close to the brook, and off the back of the house, to shield us from the north, we planned to build an ell.

We also had to consider a driveway, where to park and the placement of future out-buildings. Bob needed a boat shop. I needed a building for storing my collection of old house parts (now in a rented barn) and we both needed a place for storing tools. We juggled around imaginary structures until we were sure that the house and future building would work together as a family. Satisfied, we hammered stakes in the ground to outline the exact position of the house and the ell so a contractor would know where to

excavate. While he was there we'd also have him put in the parking area and our half mile long driveway.

"Its got to wind through the woods and go over the brook with a wooden bridge." Bob said.

I loved that idea, especially the bridge and hearing the patter of wooden boards when I crossed in my car.

We hadn't told many friends about the house or that we were planning to move it. We saw it as a great adventure but we doubted others would. We didn't need to hear, "My God, what a lot of work," or "You guys must be crazy." We already knew that. Still word got out and friends drifted in. But instead of skeptics we had offers of help— from ripping off the asbestos shingles, photographing the whole process of moving and restoring, to taking care of the children whenever we needed them out of the way—and I had a feeling that that would be often. There was a huge amount of work that would have to be done before we could even think about moving in.

There were still seven weeks before the house movers would appear, enough time for me to learn more about the house before it was moved. The previous owner knew nothing. He didn't even realize that the house was very old. Old to him was something that was falling apart. I did learn, at the local historical society, that John Goddard, the famous furniture maker, was born in the house in 1723. The only other reference to the house I could find was a will dated 1721, the year the owner had bequeathed it to his son. I felt sure its architectural details would tell us the rest and I was anxious to start ripping off the twentieth century veneer.

In the meantime I was having the usual mother pangs. The thought of picking up and moving a two story house with its chimney gave me the shivers. That had to be one heavy load. I kept thinking the more sheetrock, fake paneling, and bricks from the sealed up fireplaces that we got out of the house, the less it would weigh.

We removed its twentieth century appendages very slowly, savoring each discovery—especially the Indian arrowhead I found buried in a crack, and a mark on the wall where another stairway had been. But Bob's discovery was the best. I knew it would be special by the tone of his voice when he yelled to come see. He'd been removing the bricks sealing up a fireplace. When I saw him I had to smile. Covered in soot, he looked like a charred piece of wood. But when I looked through the opening he'd made and saw a series of fireplaces, I was flabbergasted. Three fireplaces— one inside the other. The last one was the first and earliest and was huge. It was like an inventory of change all the way back to the first page, but without any explanation.

Needless to say, by the time the movers appeared, we had more questions about the history of the house than answers.

House movers come with jacks, trucks, a front loader and a tractor, wood for cribbing, steel beams, wheels the size of a barn door, a crew of six, their own unique knowledge, and a guarantee that when the house is moved, it won't collapse. "It doesn't matter, brick, wood or stone," they advertise, "and if it's too big for the highway we'll cut it in half." Fortunately ours was

only 30 x 40 feet, so that part wouldn't be necessary. Anyway our trip was across an open space and less than a mile.

When Roland arrived, he was all business. He parked his equipment, put his crew to work unloading his gear, then told us he was going to examine the house.

"If there are any weak areas we'll have to fix them before it can be moved," he said.

He started in the cellar, and like a doctor he checked the underpinnings, then went from room to room checking every timber. Everything was okay until he got to the attic and discovered some joists had slipped out of their pockets.

"She's spread a bit over the years same as my grandmother, " he said. " and told us that to be on the safe side he was going to insert steel rods through her plate at four different places to connect her front and back walls. He explained that each rod would have a turnbuckle and when turned the house would tighten up.

"Don't want her collapsing on her first voyage." He said

It sounded as though he was planning a hip operation. I didn't want to hear anymore. I put my hands over my ears and left, trusting that whatever he did would keep her safe.

While Roland and two other guys worked in the attic, the rest of the crew were moving the earth from around the foundation. Two days later, when Roland announced "That'll do," there was a 10' wide by 10' deep trench surrounding the house like a moat. Then he ordered his crew into the cellar to remove the foundation from under the chimney. This, Roland

explained, had to be done so the part of the chimney from the first floor up could move with the house. Like miners, the men tunneled through the chimney's foundation, and as they dug out the rubble, they placed horizontal steel beams just below the hearth level. The beams, they said, would keep the upper part of the chimney from falling into the cellar. I was hurting for the house, but if it was going to have a new life obviously this was the best way.

Roland declared the surgery in the attic successful and then asked to see our new foundation. As we walked over he kept poking the ground with a shovel to see how firm it was.

"It's been a wet spring," he said. "There's nothing worse than getting a house stuck in the mud, but this seems O.K." I couldn't resist asking him what he'd do if it was too wet.

"Bring in gravel" he said.

"Coals back to Newcastle," I muttered, and described to Roland what had happened to the land.

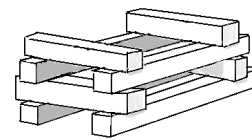
When we got to the new site Bob explained how we planned to build the foundation. We had decided it would cost too much to have all of it built in stone so we opted for a cinderblock base up to a foot below ground level. This way we would have enough space to finish the top with stone. We definitely didn't want to see cinderblock above ground where stones had always been.

"Good idea," Roland said and promised to save all the stones he could from the present foundation and bring them over in his truck. He told us the

excavator had done a good job, but the area where the house would be backed into the hole would need a little more smoothing.

"I'll send a guy over to fix that later today," he said.

After we returned to the house Roland started the crew removing the foundation from under the house. I watched as they removed sections of the stonework and substituted cribbing — a stack of 8x8 timbers, crisscrossed on top of each other — as a temporary foundation.



After two more days eight sections had been removed and eight stacks of cribbing put in place.

Next the remaining foundation walls were knocked out, and the cribbing was the only support holding up the house. Balancing on these stacks of timbers, the house looked as if the slightest touch would push it over, and I was relieved when Roland announced they were ready to start lifting. I wanted to get this over with.

The next day the crew placed screw jacks under the sills of the house and next to the cribbing, then lifted.— a little bit here, a little bit there, slowly nudging it up. Roland kept circling the house checking for stress and talking to it like a trainer coaxing an elephant to stand. After it had been raised 8" the crew stopped and filled the new gap between the sill and the top of the cribbing with more timbers so that throughout the process the stacks of cribbing would continually support the house.

I couldn't tell at what point Roland decided it was time for the hydraulic jacks, but they suddenly appeared to take over where the first

jacks had left off. Once in place the crew attached a hose to each one, and then attached all the hoses to a master control panel.

"Good Lord," I said to Bob, "I think our house is about to have an electrocardiogram."

But instead, when Roland flicked the switch on the controlpanel, rather than the house rising a little here and a little there as before, the whole house rose like an elevator and kept going up until he signaled enough and waved in a truck loaded with I-beams. Somehow, between a hoist and six men, they managed to get the carrying beams under the first floor of the house. After the beams were secured, four sets of huge wheels were rolled under the house and bolted to the beams. Like an illusion, the parts they'd attached to the under-side of the house turned into a trailer—a trailer that 83 tons of house would ride on.

"We'll move it tomorrow." Roland announced, and then told me to be sure and put a full glass of water inside the door.

"If any spills before we reach the new foundation," he said, "you'll know we haven't done our job well."

I didn't know if he was teasing, but I put it there anyway.

Dew was still on the ground when we arrived the next morning, but without any children. Worried they might get hurt we had left them behind with a baby-sitter. Roland and his crew were already there and it wasn't long before there was a crowd of camera-carrying people. Friends we had called, our new neighbors and various others who had heard that a house was on the move—a cheering section of fifteen or so people. Even the man we'd bought

the property from showed up. He came with his wife and they both kept staring at the house not knowing what to make of it —but neither did I. With the wheels underneath it, it was high off the ground and looked like it was floating on the early morning mist.

Some thoughtful person was passing around coffee and donuts, but I was too nervous to think about putting anything in my stomach. Bob gave me a hug and told me everything would be fine.

"Roland knows what he's doing," he said, "Stop worrying,"

But that was impossible. If nobody else was going to worry then I certainly had to. I couldn't take my eyes off Roland as he preformed a final check— the air pressure of the tires, the bolts that held the trailer to the house, and then the bar for attaching the trailer to the tractor. When he was finished he signaled to the tractor driver to back up to the house. The tractor and the house were hitched together.

It isn't every day that a house takes a walk. I was torn between fear and pride, like watching a child about to take its first step and I jumped when Roland spun his fist, pierced the air with a thrust, and shouted "Roll it." The tractor's engine revved and as the house slowly moved forward— ever so gently being nudged from its roots— my throat caught and I had to turn my back for a moment.

The sound of clicking cameras filled the air, but after forty feet the forward motion came to a halt and there was sudden quiet. The house had arrived at a place where the ground dropped away—a hill a sledder might like, but not an old house. I looked at the house and then at the hill. I couldn't imagine how it could get to the bottom without landing in a nose dive. House anxiety gripped my stomach, Bob anxiously puffed on his pipe, while Roland lit a cigarette with a "no problem" look on his face. He must know how to handle this, I thought, after all this was his business, but I couldn't help thinking this definitely had the makings of a suicide leap.



I watched as Roland took some measurements, checked the hitch, then signaled to his crew. They grabbed some jacks, pumped up the front end of the house and now the house looked like a cannon about to be fired. Roland, seeing my face turn ashen, came over to explain that in order to get the house down the hill it had to be kept level or it would collapse in on itself. I understood, but still didn't like any part of it. I held my breath when they

jumped in the truck and started the engine. The house crept forward—inch by inch. Then every few feet they'd stop again to level it —a nerve wracking process that continued all the way down the hill.

Finally, at the bottom, when the house looked normal again —at least as normal as an old house can look perched on a trailer— I did the only thing left to do—I shrieked. Roland had kept his promise. I looked at the glass sitting in the doorway, and not a drop of water had spilled.

It was mid afternoon. Nobody had eaten, but nobody cared. The crew, our friends, Bob and myself, were just happy knowing that flat ground was ahead and our destination in sight.. Freed of tension and feeling a bit goofy we celebrated by dancing along beside the house waving our jackets like flags and making up songs about an old house on an afternoon outing, happily chaperoning it across the land to reach its new life. Even Roland joined in, his crew stupefied by his actions, but unable to stop a rhythmical clapping .

By sundown our house had been settled in its new location and looked idyllic—under the trees and next to the brook. No doubt, after we said good night, the deer, fox and raccoons wandered out to meet the new creature that had entered their woods.