

home improvement

Three homes renovated from
lost causes to country classics

BY MATT WHITE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BETH MANN

‘we’d work until we couldn’t see anymore’

Fulfilling lifelong dreams of farm living, Rachel and Justin Clark have spent two years restoring their home south of Pittsboro

Rachel Clark grew up in Wilton, Connecticut, a commuter town close to New York City with tight-knit neighborhoods and neatly mowed yards, and she insists that both she and her brothers, Dave and Scott Makson, loved their suburban childhoods.

But something didn’t quite take.

Dave now lives in Maine where he is slowly restoring a home built in the 1800s. And in late 2016, Rachel, with her then-boyfriend, **Justin Clark**, put in a bid on an 11-acre farm about 10 miles





Rachel says the barn, with its tall gambrel roof, is her favorite spot on their farm. Last year, they took a break from renovations to get married, and they held their reception outside it.



The Clark's home had no electricity or running water when they bought it in 2017. They spent two years of nights and weekends restoring it.



south of **Pittsboro** that was up for auction. The property came with nine buildings, including a two-story house and a large barn, all in terrible shape.

“My dad says, ‘Why can’t my kids buy a house and just move in?’” Rachel says.

Justin, an engineer at BASF, a chemical company in Research Triangle Park, grew up on a farm in Tennessee and has long wanted his own. And Rachel, despite her suburban upbringing, says that even as a kid, she wanted a farm life – that neatly mowed Connecticut lawn? “I mowed it,” she says. But when



they won the auction, those pastoral daydreams gave way to a daunting rehabilitation.

“It’s our quote-unquote ‘entertainment,’ it’s our weekend, it’s every day,” Rachel says. The couple closed on the property in spring 2017 and quickly sold two of the property’s wood sheds to a reclaimed lumber builder. They tore down two other buildings. But the center of the project is the 1,500 square-foot, two-bedroom



Rachel and Justin both grew up with dreams of farm life. Now with goats, turkeys and a first crop of strawberries, they’re starting to make it a reality.



farmhouse that was built in 1942. As the heat of summer arrived, the couple put in late nights and weekends with no air conditioning and, at first, no power or running water.

“Every day after work we’d change and go to the house,” Rachel says. “It was the middle of the North Carolina heat, ripping up floors and doing demo. We’d work until we couldn’t see anymore.”

Like most rehab jobs, there were plenty of surprises, like the opossum skeleton found under a bathroom tub, or the kitchen’s linoleum floor that hid an unscrapable layer of tar paper. Even a steamer, put to work in the height of summer, didn’t get it off.

“Then we found this YouTube video,” Rachel says. “It said to soak the tar paper in towels doused with Diet Pepsi. So we bought the dollar store out of towels and Diet Pepsi.”

Where heat and muscle had failed, low-calorie soda succeeded. ►



“It scraped right up the next day,” Rachel says.

The Clarks’ farm was part of a larger farm owned by the Moses family, who still own a large swath across the street. Their new neighbors were glad to see the land go to a family set on farming rather than development (the couple bought an adjacent plot last year to bring their parcel to 30 acres).

“Most of the people in our neighborhood have been there a long time and, especially during the first year, neighbors would

come by and tell us stories about the property,” Rachel says. “We got to hear the whole history of this road.”

As the rehab progressed, Rachel and Justin managed another work-intensive milestone: getting married. After a small ceremony at the **Chatham County Historic Courthouse** last April, they held their reception outside Rachel’s favorite spot on the farm, the two-story clapboard barn with its high gambrel roof.

“It wasn’t structurally ready for 40 people,” Rachel says. “It has one working lightbulb.”

The wedding, she says, was the first chance to show friends and family their new home. “It was kind of an open house,” Rachel says. “They all knew we’d worked so hard.”

Though far from finished, the house is now a fully livable home, and the Clarks have focused on turning the property into a working farm. They have goats and turkeys with plans for more. Last winter they put down 5,500 strawberry plants – they hope to sell the fruits at local farmers markets this spring. Rachel also has visions of turning the barn into an event space.

“My dream would be to renovate so we can host events or meetings or something that the community can partake in,” she says. “But that will take a lot of work. It’s a long way from one lightbulb to that.” ►

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