



CARVING OUT A PLACE IN NATURE

Inspired by the land,
veteran-turned-mountain man
makes a living as an antler artist

STORY BY BETH JUDY
PHOTOS BY JEREMY LURGIO

It's not hard to believe that Pat Stevens, who is over six feet tall and wide-shouldered, was a sailor, first in the Navy, then the Merchant Marine. "I was a climber," he remembers. "I climbed all over those ships." But he was born in Missoula, and after seeing the world—India, the Soviet Union, South America, the Philippines—Pat returned to the mountains and his longtime girlfriend, Betty Lou.

He landed a job in maintenance at the University of Montana. But living among family has its pressures. When he heard of land for sale in the Garnet Range east of Missoula, he bought 20 acres for \$5,000. It was August 31, 1972. The next day, he moved. He was 30 years old. ▶



Photos on these pages: After a six-mile snowmobile ride, Stevens is greeted by his dog, Blackie. "I have more than a lifetime of horns to work on," Stevens says about the numerous antlers he has collected, which adorn the inside and outside of his cabin.

'I WAS BORN 150 YEARS TOO LATE.'

PAT STEVENS

"It was a nice flat meadow, grass up to my armpits, almost too nice to disturb. That didn't last long," he chuckles. "I started hauling logs around." In two weeks, he had a cabin—no windows, and he would peel the logs and chink that winter—but he could move in. Days later, it snowed six inches; he realized he had no firewood. He gathered it when Indian summer returned, and by the next snow, he also had a deer hanging.

Since then, the cabin has been Pat's home summer and winter. Betty Lou joined him sometimes, but had kids in town. In 1980, Pat built her a beautiful two-story log house next door to the cabin, and they lived there for eight years. But she died in 1991, and he moved back into the cabin.

Pat is 70 now. His skin is pink with health, maybe because life on the mountain keeps him moving. "It's always physical up here," he says. He heats solely with wood and gets drinking water from a spring. In the garage he built across from the cabin, he washes clothes in an old Maytag run by a generator, with water melted from snow.



Pat's main staple all year is wild game, the deer or elk that he shoots. They're in the freezer, which he turns off in winter. In the cabin, his refrigerator is a tin-lined "cold hole" under the floor. It works well even in summer. Out back, the bathroom may be simple but the view is magnificent, nothing but trees and a neighboring mountain. After January 1, the roads aren't plowed. In the old days, to go to Missoula, Pat snowshoed six miles down to his 1978 Blazer, parked at a trailhead. The Blazer is still there today, but now Pat snowmobiles, hauling things back in a sled cut from a pickup bed liner. He tries not to travel after dark. Headlights on the "snow machine," as he calls it, aren't great; too often he's run up on moose walking the trail. "I've had them jump over my head," he says. He always carries a pistol.

Last March, Pat brought photographer Jeremy Lurgio and me up to visit. At rest under trees by the cabin,

old cars that Pat works on and sometimes sells were indistinct beneath four feet of snow. Under the same thick blanket, the cabin was cozy. It's one room, 14-by-19, with built-in bunk and cupboards, a small desk by one window, a faucet-less sink under another. The windows are barred for bear. Close by the woodstove, Pat's armchair faces the big front window and porch, where birds flutter between feeders. Another armchair belongs to Blackie's, Pat's dog; on a shelf above the bed, his white cat washes her face and striped tail.

Everywhere—over our heads, entwining the cabin's support beam, festooning the porch—are antlers. Some of them hold things, like Pat's wet coveralls near the stove. Most are just for admiring.

Collecting antlers is Pat's passion and livelihood. Once he moved up, he lost the desire to travel to Missoula for work. While he pondered how to live, he sold scrap metal combed from the woods, then firewood. One year, he trapped coyotes, but he felt too sorry for them.

Then he discovered the antlers that local ungulates shed each spring. Over several years, he

This page, top to bottom: Stevens shakes the snow off his jacket before heading into his cabin. He makes money by turning antlers into belt buckles, cribbage boards and other pieces. "Kitty Kitty" rests in the cabin. "I'd hate to live up here without a cat and a dog," he says. Facing page: Stevens restores old cars including this 1927 Ford Model T.



sold hundreds for the Asian medicinal market. During winters, he learned to transform them into saleable belt buckles, jewelry, cribbage boards, and knives. He decorates the antler with mountains and animals in colored ink. "He's super-talented," says Dave Lucero, Pat's horn-collecting buddy. "He can do anything he wants." Pat took his merchandise to gift shops and bars. Now, it sells by word of mouth. A buckle costs \$100, a knife \$300. Pat cuts the blades from old

sawmill wheels and grinds them down. "I like to make use of old things," he says.

With enough antlers now for several lifetimes, Pat still walks area roads, searching. A sore knee limits him to two or three hours. But getting older, he says, just means doing everything he's ever done, slower. Expertly, he picks horns out with binoculars before walking to investigate. "If it doesn't tell me it's an antler, I don't go."

Pat snaps photos of most antlers he

finds. He knows what animals they come from, sometimes down to the individual, and can match antlers found 10 miles apart. He also has lots of photos of cars he's refurbished. In the garage, two "hot rods"—a 1927 Model T and a 1930 Chevy pickup—take more of his time and money than he approves of, but in the end, he says, "I do what I want up here." The hot rods are a dream come true: as a kid, he hankered to build cars, but he began working when he was 13 and didn't have the time.

He knows he may not be able to stay in his cabin forever. Actually, it's not his anymore. He sold it and the rest of the property to retired friends after Betty Lou died, with the stipulation he could stay as long as he wanted. In summer and fall, he drinks coffee with his neighbors most mornings; they discuss the news, weather, and last night's TV shows (they gave him his first color TV, a flat-screen model). When the snow flies, Pat's friends head south, leaving him in a world of white.

Does he like winter? "I accept it," he says. Pat accepts a lot of things. If his health fails, for example, he would go live in Missoula. "I wouldn't want to, but I'm flexible. I'd make do."

"I was born 150 years too late," Pat suspects, because he loves his lifestyle so. He takes care of basics, works on his hot rods and antlers, and watches car shows and "Survivor." Relaxing in his armchair or bed, he mulls memories: a swim call in the deepest part of the Pacific, when he and others jumped off the ship; a moose that snuck up behind him once and kicked him in the head; how Betty Lou loved to hunt, would have hunted all day and night. In fact, she was the one who taught Pat to hunt.

He has no pictures of her or himself when he was younger. Except maybe one. In the outhouse, a fly-spotted 1991 calendar hangs open to a random painting of a man in frontier clothes and a woman in a long blue dress, standing in a grassy field. He stands behind her. She is sighting, deadeye, through a rifle. ■

Beth Judy is a freelance writer from Missoula.

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