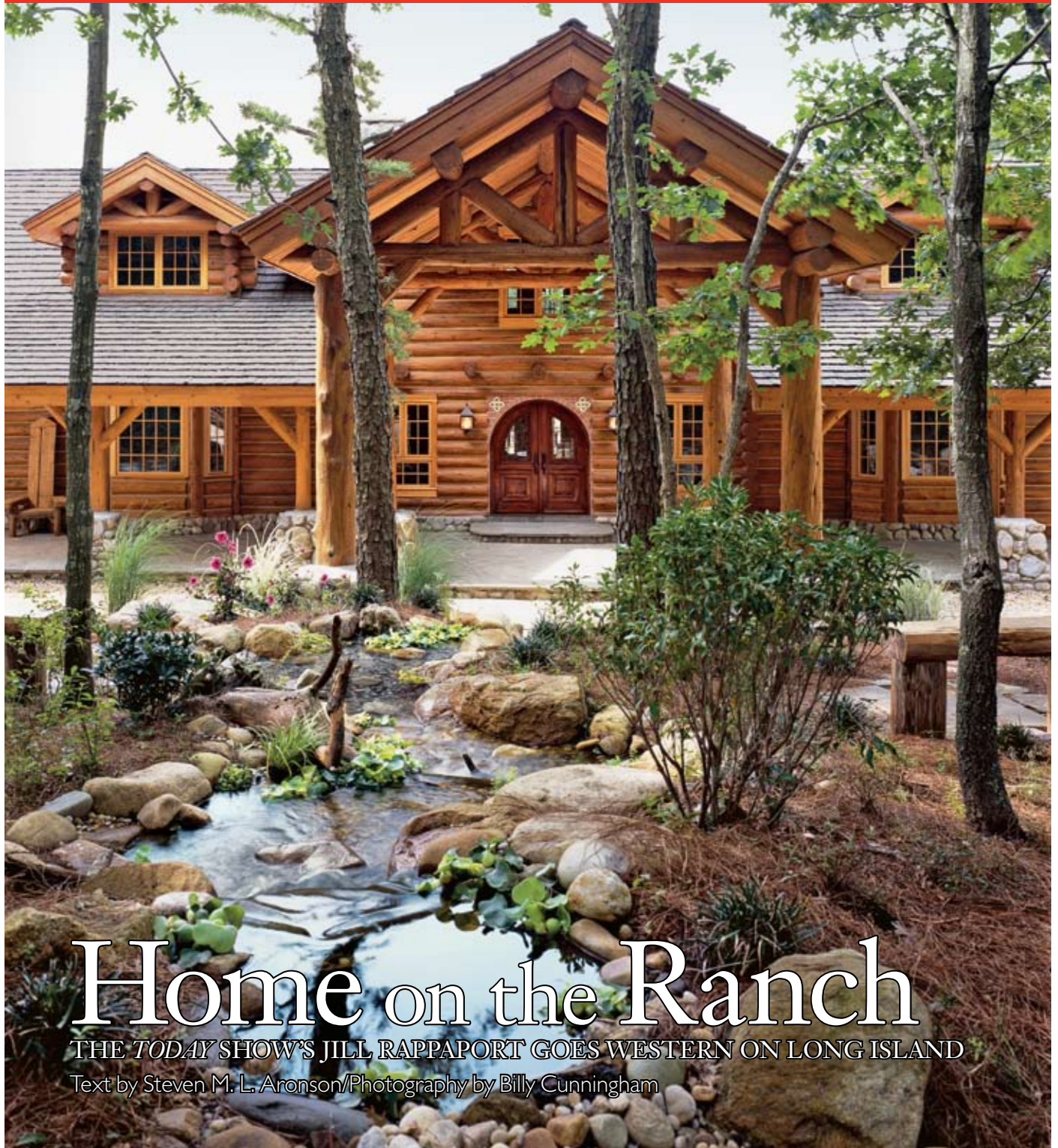


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Home on the Ranch

THE *TODAY* SHOW'S JILL RAPPAPORT GOES WESTERN ON LONG ISLAND

Text by Steven M. L. Aronson/Photography by Billy Cunningham





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For her 18-acre horse farm in the Hamptons, the *Today* show's Jill Rappaport worked with the Montana firm Pioneer Log Homes to design her 7,000-square-foot log house. OPPOSITE: The front, which features a Mexican double door and a substantial porte cochère with exposed trussing, overlooks a water feature by Aquascape and River Rock Landscaping.

TOP: Rappaport's mare Madison is led past two of the property's utility sheds. ABOVE: The design's essence is revealed in the entrance hall, where peeled and polished red-cedar logs, limbs and branches glow—part of an overall emphasis on exquisite finish work. A Leonard Reedy oil hangs in the stairwell. Barn-wood flooring, Carlisle.



THE LAST BUCK RANCH

Okay, how many living rooms in the Hamptons, and I'm talking the whole Hamptons, have stucco ceilings with swirls so thick you can practically gash your hand on them, and how many log homes are there to begin with?" asks Jill Rappaport, the longtime entertainment correspondent for NBC's *Today* show (her popular segment is called, in a play on her name, "The Rapp Report"). Back in 1995, encouraged by her best friend, Christie Brinkley, she bit the bullet and bought a big-timbered log cabin on close to six acres. There she could make a haven for the horses she was boarding in a local stable—and that, she says, was "my dream come true."

In time her dream came even truer: She was able to buy up everything around her to the point where she had 18 acres of woodland, pasture, and pond. Determined to recast the West of her heart's desire in the

East, she set about building an ambitious log farmhouse to rusticate in. "I wanted it to look like Hoss Cartwright—you know, from *Bonanza*—could mosey out the front door," she says, adding, "Gosh, am I dating myself? Maybe I should come up with a more current cowboy!"

Rappaport designed the 11-room, seven-bath house herself, over the phone, with a company called Pioneer Log Homes ("They said, 'Do you want the covered porch on the front?' and I said, 'I want a porch every single place you can have a porch'"). It was built in Montana, then taken apart and shipped cross-country, and finally reassembled on-site. After all the logs were stained (a warm caramel), restorer Dennis Brown added the interior details, which have an aged charm to them—witness the handcrafted red-cedar railings and posts. Local mason Wayne Winter saw to the stonework, including



THEO WESTENBERGER



OPPOSITE: In the double-height living room, which has a Wayne Winter-crafted stone fireplace (one of four in the house), floor-to-ceiling windows are the contemporary feature of an otherwise time-honored building approach. Near the fireplace are a pair of leather lounge chairs with western-boot detailing from Ralph Lauren Home.

ABOVE: With its log beams, wide-plank floors, John Scarola-designed cabinetry, wagon-wheel chandelier, multitude of vintage decorative objects and contemporary fixtures and appliances, Rappaport's spacious kitchen epitomizes 21st-century rustic elegance. The island, an antique bar, was made in Mexico. TOP: Jill Rappaport with her four dogs.





the four monumental fireplaces (the one in the dining room formidably embodies a Native American headdress). And meanwhile artisan John Scarola was busy fashioning a nine-foot-tall mirror complete with Navajo symbols, a substantial jewelry case for Rappaport's vintage concho belts and squash-blossom necklaces, and all the outsize outdoor furniture from logs left over from the house. She christened her new homestead "The Last Buck Ranch"—for two reasons: "It took every cent I had, and it's surrounded by all these deer. But then I had to go back and name the original log cabin, which is now my guesthouse, 'The First Buck Ranch.'"

Rappaport has been collecting western artifacts since she was brim-high to a 10-gallon hat. "I do have to try to control

myself, like put a bit in my mouth sometimes," she admits, "because I don't want to make the place so one-dimensional that it looks like a western museum or a Native American theme park." There is, to be sure, a stockpile of wagon-wheel furniture, Navajo rugs and blankets, elk chandeliers ("The antlers were naturally shed," she offers, adding, "I demanded the documentation"), antique lanterns ("Twenty-nine dollars each on eBay—have you ever? I have the quirkiest, wackiest things, and they cost pennies"), and even cowboy hats (they embellish the branches of the two stripped and stained red cedars in the entrance hall and double-height master bedroom—"Those trees were already cut down, by others; just so you know, we didn't kill them to put them in my house").



OPPOSITE: The logs in the master bedroom, as elsewhere, are exposed for enhanced warmth. Beside the bed, which is a Mexican antique, a tree trunk extends from the floor to the ceiling. "It's a great place to hang my cowboy hats," says Rappaport, whose vintage concho belts are displayed in a mahogany case hanging above the bedside table.

TOP: In a second-floor guest room, the structure of a large dormer provides the perfect nook for a log bed and a pair of Adirondack-style tables. The cowboy-boot lamps are vintage and, like a number of other objects in the house, were found by Rappaport on the Internet. Bed linens, Ralph Lauren Home. **ABOVE:** For the master bath, she chose Saltillo tiles. Kohler tub and faucet.



THE WESTENBERGER

"This is the beautiful scenery I wake up to every morning," says Rappaport, referring to the rear of the property, where a split-rail fence encloses the pastures for her horses. The view can be savored from the shelter of the house's wraparound porch, the log posts of which grow out of cobblestone piers.

But Rappaport also took care to throw in "a little nautical and a little Spanish," not to mention *un poco Mexicano* (her own bed, assorted doors, and an antique turquoise, lime-green, and burgundy bar that she lost no time turning into a fiesta-bright kitchen island).

And then there's her collection of western art, ranging from some 1950s cactus-scene dioramas to several Kay M. Hendrickses, a handful of Leonard Reedys, and a veritable hoard of Heinie Hartwigs. "His sunsets make you cry, they're so beautiful! I'm looking for a tiny one to carry around in my purse. I once said to one of my girlfriends, 'I'm going to get you a little Heinie,' and *she* said, 'I've been waiting my whole life to have a little heinie.'"

Author of the celebrity-ridden best-seller *People We Know, Horses They Love*, Rappaport has six luminously beautiful equines of her own "but," she stresses, "only one heinie. One real one, that is. So sometimes I get a little tired, because I usually try to get on three a day. And by the way, I do everything that a true horse person tells you never to do—like kiss them right on their noses."

Rappaport, who describes her house as "patina-friendly," insists that she doesn't feel at home unless she has "manure on my boots and dog hair on my clothes." Her four adored canines, all of them rescues,

There is, to be sure, a stockpile of wagon-wheel furniture, Navajo rugs and blankets, elk chandeliers, antique lanterns and cowboy hats.



are made free of a vintage cowboy-boot chair in her two-story living room, which they routinely jump up on to look out the window at deer—"It's completely clawed, drooled on, and I don't want to say what else might be on there, and I love it!" To Rappaport's mind, if somebody scratches a wall or spills something on the floor, it only makes it better. When the three mammoth

(named Swifty's in a nod to her fiancé, investment banker Richard Swift, with whom she shares the house). She peopled her little village with mannequins acquired on eBay, dubbing them Randy the Roper, Sheriff Coffee, Bad Bart, and Chief White Horse. A further purchase, a pirate, she reckoned belonged in her 14-seat lower-level movie theater ("Pirated movies—get it? Ha ha").

The first festivity was for Rappaport's friend and colleague Katie Couric.

logs that some carpenter had spent two full days cutting for a ceiling were put in place and failed to fit, leaving a gaping hole in the middle, "I just stuck some hay in there, and a beautiful hand-carved bird that I had, so it would look like a little nest—I made that carpenter's mistake into *art*."

Enraptured since childhood by Old Tucson (the western-town movie set that bills itself as "Hollywood in the Desert since 1939!"), Rappaport was inspired to re-create the re-creation within her own house. Call it the West condensed—there's a trading post, a blacksmith shop, a hotel bedroom, and a saloon

The first festivity held at "The Last Buck Ranch" was a going-away party for Rappaport's close friend and former colleague Katie Couric, who had famously just left the *Today* show for the *CBS Evening News*. On that effulgent afternoon last June, Christie Brinkley nicely summed up the premises—as well as the repast, catered as it was by Smokin' Joe's True-Blue Texas Barbecue—as a "one-of-a-kind western spread." But let's leave the lauding last word to another guest, and another inveterate Hamptons resident, Kelsey Grammer: "Only Jill could have pulled off tall timber at sea level." □