

HOME ON THE RANGE

In the spirit of his grandfather, Waldo, Sean Sexton and wife, Sharon, have built a comfortable home on their ranch from salvaged materials

BY WILLI MILLER | PHOTOS BY ROB DOWNEY



An unimposing entrance greets guests approaching from a tree-covered parking area near the house.

If practice makes perfect, Sean Sexton was definitely on the right track when he decided to build a house for his young family in the mid 1980s. He “practiced” by constructing the small wooden cottage that later would become his art studio. Sexton, a working cattle rancher, is an artist and a poet with the eclectic thinking and determination that have long been associated with the Sexton name in Indian River County. Sean is a grandson of Waldo Sexton, whose distinctive style continues to have devoted admirers on the Treasure Coast, where he built the Driftwood Inn, Ocean Grill, Patio and many other iconic attractions.

“The studio was framed and paneled with boards that had all the old Driftwood graffiti still apparent on their surfaces,” Sean says of his house. “It was a kind of poetic homecoming of things cast off from something my grandfather had built.”

Sharon Sexton was one of four artists who opened Tiger Lily Studio in downtown Vero Beach 20 ago. Her work in clay, glass mosaics and large-format paintings reflect a love of the natural beauty she and her husband find all around them on their cattle ranch on 37th Street west of town. The windows she created for their house turn sunlight into rainbows of glowing color.

The five acres that surround the house were a gift to the

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The porch dining area is a favorite spot for family gatherings.

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couple from Sean's father, Ralph Sexton. "Not many better things will happen to you in your life than being given five acres at the beginning of your adulthood," Sean says. The couple lived on the land in a 10-foot x 30-foot trailer for several years while they designed the house and, in true Waldo Sexton fashion, collected the materials that would go into its construction.

SALVAGING EFFORTS

They drew the house according to what they were able to find, including eight sets of French doors with damaged bottoms, retrieved from the John's Island Beach Club.

There was a marble slab from the old Florida National Bank, Sean says.

"The wood we used was what we could get our hands on," Sharon says. "We milled some beautiful Australian pine, very dense, looks like black walnut. The main room is paneled with wood from a huge log that washed ashore after a

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Sean Sexton is a popular guest at literary gatherings, reading from his books of poems such as his collection, "Blood Writing."



Sharon Sexton created this mosaic window in the style of stained-glass artists as a focal point in the bathroom.



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Sean's studio is a separate building constructed in the classic Sexton rustic design, with many found and reused elements.



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Sean and Sharon Sexton enjoy their patio after long days of work on the ranch and in their studios.

bad nor'easter." Sean explains, "That was the Thanksgiving day storm that took the floor out of the Ocean Grill. It was a 100-foot log, four feet in diameter, that city crews had to cut into 20-foot sections, as it was rolling into the boardwalk and damaging the pilings. The largest piece is about 18 feet tall by about 25 inches or so."

A different storm was the catalyst for turning the home's screened porch into a library. Hurricane Frances dropped part of a large oak tree onto a corner of the house, taking out the roof, some framing and some of the slab. Another library figures in the interior of the home, in a floor-to-ceiling bookcase made of bird's-eye cypress Waldo had donated for construction of the county library years earlier. Sean says it was offered to him when the new library was built. "Nice that it went from one library to another." >>



A screened porch became the library after a hurricane damaged the porch.

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ENJOYING NATURE

The front door, decorative wrought iron in a thick cypress frame, was from Waldo’s Turf Club, now Szechuan Palace restaurant. Sean says, “I talked my dad out of the door, framing an opening for it as we were building the house. Danny Frasier and I hung the door Waldo described it as ‘an ironmonger’s master’s thesis.’”

“We wanted to have a large open space inside, one room deep throughout, and create... a Florida house, comfortable in the ambient temperature, with cross ventilation,” Sean says. With an open ceiling, large ceiling fans and high-profile agricultural ridge vents in the roof, the house doesn’t need air conditioning except for a few of the hottest days. To heat the house, they chose a wood stove rather than a fireplace.

The Sextons aren’t much for watching television. They spend what leisure hours they can cobble together on the porch terrace, sitting around the fireplace built by brick mason Gary Kohlston, who was assisted by various Sexton animals. “Our dog, Annie, had a hound’s habit of laying down and napping right in the middle of the action and would sleep in the firebox as Gary laid bricks around her,” Sean says. “We also had raised two baby orphan raccoons which, along with the peacocks, would pay him visits throughout the day as he worked. We and the animals got so used to seeing him and inspecting his daily progress that we were sad to see him finish and leave.”

Designing and building their welcoming home was a true labor of love for the couple, but Sean is quick to give much of the credit to others. “We wouldn’t have this home we love so much without the skill and friendship of people like Bruce

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The wrought iron front door is from the long-gone Waldo’s Turf Club on 43rd Avenue in Vero Beach.



The stone patio is a favorite place for the Sextons to relax and enjoy the flavor of the ranch.

Smith, Cindy Bournique, Chuck Schock, A.E. "Georgia Boy" Brinson, my Uncle Randy, Roland McNeal and his daddy, Boyd McNeal, Eric Pederson, Bruce Smith, Bea Riley, Odis Bellamy, John Vocelle, George Yount, Sharon's brother, Dennis Koerner, and others. It was a lifelong goal to build my own house... The main part of the house we built, nail by nail. There were subcontractors... but much of it we did ourselves and certainly with the assistance of many dear friends." *R*



A pond filled with water lilies offers a peaceful setting for quiet conversation.



The high-ceilinged great room becomes an art gallery, with work by Sean and Sharon Sexton lining the walls and displayed on cabinets.



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