

FROM MADISON AVENUE TO MADISON COUNTY

So they loaded up the truck and moved from Beverly Hills, that is. No more swimming pools, no more movie stars. (Well, maybe one.)

Okay, okay, so it wasn't quite Beverly Hills—it was the Rancho Equestrian district of Burbank. There were hills for sure, of the Hollywood variety and horses too, traipsing down the street. Martha explains. “Remember Mr. Ed? He lived in this neighborhood. But I thought there was something wrong with this picture. I mean shouldn't horses be in pastures and not on city streets?” So, Martha Abraham loaded up Gary, Henry and Purrs (husband, dog, and cat), and moved to the hills of Madison County.... Somewhat less glam than the Hills of Beverly...er, Burbank.

Martha left behind her a long career in the fashion industry. She began as a buyer at I.Magnin, blossomed with a line of her own that graced the aisles of I. Magnin, Nordstroms, Neiman Marcus, and the like. Martha's career in fashion and generous expense account took her from her home bases in New York, San Francisco and LA around the world so many times that her passport unfurls to display pages of visa stamps and extensions. She hip-hopped to Europe and Asia with hardly more fanfare than we'd hip-hop to Atlanta. Her career culminated in what she says was her most fun gig: a VP for Fredericks of Hollywood! It does sound racy for this sweet Southern gal, but as Martha put it, “Every woman has a goddess gene and that is what I wanted to tap into—letting women feel great about themselves in the bedroom no matter their shape or size.”

Don't get me wrong; despite hob-knobbing for years with the rich and well-dressed (or undressed), she is actually a good ole girl, hailing from Newport, Arkansas. Gary too had less glam roots than you might expect, born in Atlanta and bouncing around as a Navy brat. But “join the Navy and see the world” didn't work out for him. His Dad was stationed in Millington, a training center outside of Memphis, three times before Gary was 17. He was destined to be a Southerner even though spending three high school years in Hawaii led him to believe he was an Island boy.

When Martha and Gary decided a major change in their lives was in order, they began to dream of running a B & B in the bucolic countryside of the Blue Ridge Mountains, not so distant in flavor from their own roots. So, Ponder Cove was born. Now the only wild parties at their house are comprised of a flock of wild turkeys that have taken a liking to their property. And then there are those cows that keep escaping their pasture on the other side of the mountain and wandering over to Martha and Gary's deck, where they like to hang out in the shade until the farmer from over yonder comes to reclaim them.

Now Martha and Gary are at the start of another major shift in their lives together, working side by side, getting Ponder Cove ready to open. The two of them go back 35 years, first as friends, then as sweethearts, before they went their separate ways for 25 years. They married 6 years ago with Martha wearing a big red dress and blue suede shoes to honor Elvis, of course. Gary, the yin to Martha's yang, was a high-end furniture maker to the stars. (See some of his work at www.pondercove.com). Even Henry got in

on the movie star scene: he was badly bitten by a pit bull mix whose human was none other than Mean Dr. Green from ER.

So how's the move been from Madison Avenue to Madison County? Martha has been shedding her skin: both the wardrobe and the veneer assumed to fit the role of fashion diva. You might say she is reclaiming her roots. They are learning how to be part of a community they loved on site. Martha is very conscious that being part of a community is giving and receiving. You can find her at the visitor's center in Mars Hill on Tuesday morning donating her time and she is becoming involved with the Madison County Arts Council.

The Inn isn't open at the time of this writing but Martha seems content to relax and ponder her good fortune of being drawn to these hills, sharing them with those who were here before her. She puts it best when she says, "I am overwhelmed by the spirit of the mountains and its people. From those brought here by birth to the newcomers, there is an unspoken bond to protect what was before us. I feel by some great power we were beckoned, and now embraced as mountaineers. I will forever be humbled by this opportunity."

Of course, the ending of this article is obvious. I ask Martha, "So, do you miss the bright lights?" She says, "Excuse me, what do you mean bright lights? Have you ever seen the lighting bug show at Ponder Cove?"