

The Tiny House

By Ruth Merton

Introduction by **Sheila M. Milton**

Ruth Calvert Jenkins Merton shared a love of writing with her celebrated son Thomas, and like him she kept a personal journal. However, Ruth is best known to Merton readers for “Tom’s Book,” the early journal she kept for her first-born child. Ruth wrote a similar journal for her second son, John Paul, born in November 1918, and she continued to keep journal records for each son until March 1921, when she entered Bellevue Hospital in New York, where she died of stomach cancer in October, 1921.

Ruth attended Bradford College in Haverhill, Massachusetts (1906-1909), where she won a prize for an essay; many of her essays and an occasional poem were published in the Bradford Annals. A strong-willed young woman, Ruth decided to study art in Paris after graduating with distinction from Bradford. This was at a time when women were knocking on the door to obtain the right to vote, an atmosphere of new opportunity that may help to explain why she went to Paris unchaperoned. Ruth chose to study art with Percyval Tudor-Hart since he believed that each of the different forms of art, music in particular, is related to the others. It was at Tudor-Hart’s atelier that she met fellow student Owen Grierson Merton. Letters from that period reveal Ruth to be an accomplished and avid letter writer.

Two of Ruth’s articles, “The Tiny House” (1921) and “Come into the Kitchen” (1922), were published by Boston Cookery during the time the Merton family lived on Long Island. Ruth had abandoned her quest to paint while studying with Tudor-Hart because she became fascinated by the idea that a person’s surroundings have a great effect upon one. Ruth married her talent as an artist to her idea that art can be created in the design of a house and its interior furnishings, providing an enormously beneficial effect on those living within the home. Thus, while continuing to study with Tudor-Hart, Ruth accepted interior design commissions.

In “The Tiny House,” Ruth is writing not only to express her ideas regarding the influence of surroundings on an individual, but from personal experience since the house Owen rented for the family on Long Island was in fact very small. “The Tiny House” was published in two installments, October and November 1921 (26:3,4), and Ruth illustrated it with her designs. Ruth insists that even in a tiny house a

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Sheila Milton

large kitchen is essential because she believed it is the most important room. Ruth was drawn to the Quakers and it is interesting, in view of her eldest son's eventual vocation, that she recommends there should be one quiet room set apart for meditation – perhaps it was also a place where she could write.



Ruth Merton

The tiny house has seldom solved the problem of adequate privacy for the individual, and has been rejected by many families of simple tastes and modest incomes because in it they found themselves continually in each other's way, and felt that their life as a family and all their household arrangements were too much under the scrutiny of their most casual visitor.

Now the defect is, we believe, due not so much to the size of the house, as to its plan, the distribution of its rooms and its lack of suitability to the needs of its tenants.

We choose a house which has the correct number of rooms, and, quite ignoring the importance of the aesthetic, we settle down in it as best we may, with little thought as to whether or not it suits us in general character and personality.

Of course it is ridiculous to talk of the personality of houses. That is, most practical people would consider themselves bound to laugh, if told that they would be happier in a square house than a long one, or that Colonial architecture and antique furniture did not suit them.

Yet, as a matter of fact, one should choose the shape and character of one's house as carefully as the colors and style of one's clothes; for many are the mistakes of judgment in architecture which seriously interfere with the business of life, to say nothing of its pleasure!

Unfortunately, here in America, too many houses are put up with an eye to the "average" tenant and with no thought of any particular family and its particular characteristics and needs. As the average human being exists only in calculations, and the average house is alas! the easiest to build, thousands of misfits occur between the man and his home.

Even if a family plans its house, the architect in too many cases aims to follow his own ideas instead of trying to properly interpret the individuality of the family. Or, if he sincerely tries to carry out the desires of his client, he fails in the difficult task of making them practical and aesthetic, and at the same time acceptable to the man whose house it is.

If every person who starts to build a house, could divest himself of all preconceived notions of what is necessary in a house, and could see himself set down suddenly on his plot of ground, and obliged to make for himself a structure which could best serve the purposes of his daily life, we should soon have houses almost perfect in balance and design, although the man who built them was neither artist nor architect.

This is well shown in the houses of European peasants, and, though we admire the picturesqueness of their buildings, and the appropriateness of these buildings to their use and surroundings, we seldom dream that our own houses should follow the same laws in choice of essentials.

There was once a bride and groom who, in violent revolt against all convention, started out to keep house with nothing but a mattress and some cooking utensils. They soon discovered what

furniture was really essential to people of their pursuits, and, as it became necessary, added to their stock, tables, chairs and many things which are found in the most conventional houses. Strangely enough, bookshelves were discovered to be of the utmost importance in this particular case, and were soon given a prominent and dominating place in the principal room. The rest was furnished always with reference to that book-lined wall.

Then there was another family, who, having reluctantly disposed of “parlor” and “bedroom suites” when moving to the city, could not bring themselves to part with a monstrous engraving in a six-foot walnut frame, and always had to consider that picture when they wished to rent another apartment. Finally they built a house more or less after their own hearts, and that engraving hangs permanently enshrined in the most conspicuous place above the living-room mantel. And to tell the truth, it seems to suit the place, and the house and its occupants, very well indeed.

Now these two families certainly had a very definite idea of what they considered important, and if they followed out, step by step, in the building of their respective houses, this method of attending first to the essentials, they have made themselves admirable homes.

So few people know what they really want when it comes to houses. They admire this and that house along the road, never taking into consideration that probably what appeals to them is the extreme fitness of the house to its present use and owner.

Who has not seen a place, which, almost ugly in the hands of a certain family, suddenly, through a change of ownership, took on a charm and interest not to be accounted for in any external or visible alterations?

Or again have you not seen an empty house about which lingers the characteristics of its one-time occupant?

Who can doubt that houses lose or improve in beauty according to their adaptability to the life of their inmates?

It is not always the person who *wants* to live in a tiny house and considers the tiny house the best expression of his personality, who is obliged to confine himself to four or five rooms.

But even to this supposed misfit in the tiny house, there are words of comfort if he will but heed them, and, if he chooses, his small house may become his castle, with boundless space for his lonely meditation.

First of all he must rid himself of traditions, and be willing to set his little house on its plot not according to the prevailing custom, but with no guide but the land itself and the points of the compass. Let him stand on that plot on a hot day, on a cold day, on a windy day, on a wet day, and let him determine the location of each and every room according to his own needs, and be not afraid to put the kitchen on the street and his front door at the side, if that seems to him the best arrangement after due consideration of the elements.

The ground-plan and the site will determine the style of architecture, if our client has the strength to put aside his pre-conceptions about “periods” and let himself be guided purely by the shapes and proportions he has marked to represent his rooms.

He will find it easier, if he traces the plan on a clean, white paper, then goes over it, room by room, noting the direction each one faces, taking account of the sunshine which will enter, and at what time of day in the different seasons, remarking the view to be framed by each window when the house shall stand built upon its plot.

Next he must think about all his furniture, and find on his plan a space large enough to hold each

and every necessary chair and table. And not only must they fit, and leave space for getting about, but they must seem to stay where they are put and not come looming from the white sheet in uncomfortable blots, nor look like islands in a map of the South Pacific Ocean.

To be really happy in a small house, one must renounce. I say in a small house, though as a matter of fact, every house is the more livable for containing only what is absolutely necessary.

But if the man of the tiny house happens to have some special furniture which cannot by rights be included in the plan, and is not to be renounced, he must not make the mistake of thinking he will find a place for it once the house is furnished. This would be to damn his tiny house and make it just another misfit.

So if he possesses a typewriter, or a bicycle, or a baby-carriage, which is essential to his happiness, he must find a niche for it in his plan, before the house is built. And when he has successfully done this he will have come upon the secret of happy life in a tiny house; that is, a place for every necessary thing, every necessary thing in its place, and plenty of clear floor space left over.

Now I dare say, if most of us thought about it at all, we should discover that many things we take for granted in the average house, can be quite well eliminated in *our* house. This is especially true in a tiny house.

Take dining rooms, and dining-room furniture, for instance.

No one doubts that a large family, living in a fair-sized house, may probably need a room set apart in which to take their meals. This is especially true where there are servants.

A large family in a small house will find that, with only a few rooms at their disposal, they will be more comfortable, if, instead of giving up a room to be used only three times a day as a place in which to eat, they shall make two living rooms and eat in one of them.

As for the small family in a tiny house, they may discover that a kitchen, planned also as a dining room, will solve the question of adequate breathing space for them in what would otherwise be cramped quarters.

“Eat in the living room!” says a horrified upholder of all that is orthodox. And when it comes to eating in the kitchen, even some of the radicals and independents seem unenthusiastic.

And yet in houses all over the country – especially on farms – dining rooms stand empty and unused through more than half the year, attesting to the popularity of kitchens as places to eat. And who ever disputes the charm of Sunday evening supper eaten off the laundry tubs!

As for living rooms, some attempt has been made to build combination living and dining rooms, but they are usually unsatisfactory because they are neither one thing nor the other and fail as both.

What we need is an out and out renaissance of all ideas on the subject of dining rooms, and a consequent honest putting-by of our old associations and prejudices, in order to see them rejuvenated and usable once more.

The dining room more than any other room is a place where the family assembles “en masse.”

It should, therefore, be the largest room in the house, especially if the family is a hospitable one which often entertains at meals.

But in a house of only a moderate number of rooms it seems a shame to give up the largest room to be used only three times a day. In a tiny house it would be absolutely stupid.

So the logical thing to do is to make the largest room a real assembly room at meal time or any other time when the whole family is to be together. “But,” some one objects, “how about dining room furniture?” And I reply that any one who has thoroughly divested himself of his old prejudices,

will find that in this day of well-planned pantries and built-in cupboards, sideboards, china cabinets and other bulky furniture (all belonging, by the way, to a formal age when rooms were never less than thirty feet long) are only an encumbrance and have outlived any use they ever had.

A dining table and chairs may be as integral a part of the living-room furniture as any other table and chairs. And a small serving table is certainly not out of place when it may take so many different forms, and range all the way from a simple side table to one of the ornamental consoles so popular at present.

There you have, then, a large room which comfortably holds the family at meals and other times, which is, in fact, a real "living room."

The next step is to provide an "other room."

We have all suffered a bit from that tendency which, some years ago, induced us to build houses in which the living room occupied the whole first floor. We liked the feeling of space it gave us to dispose ruthlessly of all partition walls and step through our front door into an apartment where we sat, ate, entertained, worked, and amused ourselves all together – a joyous ideal family around a field-stone fireplace!

But lately we have had a reaction.

We found it was not quite comfortable to sit in a room into which opened a stairway and a front door. No matter how close to the fire we got there were draughts playing about, and, as a nation, we cannot abide draughts.

The room was no work-room either; for in spite of the numerous alcoves and nooks, we could never seem to get far enough away from the chatter about the fire really to bury ourselves in the subject of our thoughts.

Then it must always happen that on the very day when we felt least inclined to ask any one to eat with us, some one arrived just as lunch was set forth in the living room, and we hastened to lay another place at table and be hospitable whether we would or no.

And oh! the tragedy of tragedies when, on a hot afternoon, we dallied and lingered over late magazines instead of going up to dress, and were caught by a formal caller who was ushered in before we could make a dash up the too-open stairway – the one and only stairway in this "back-to-nature" house!

By such circumstances we have come to believe in "other rooms."

The other room may take many and various forms according to the tastes of the family. As a library, a salon, a music-room or a study, it does duty both as a quiet place of retirement or as a formal reception room when the living-room is out of the question; and no matter what name it takes or how it is furnished, the "other room" is not to be dispensed with if the tiny house is to be a success.

So if there are to be only two rooms on the first floor of your tiny house, be sure to have one of them an "other room."

Of course, you must have a kitchen. Some effort has been made lately to suppress kitchens under the delusion that they are horrible places where women drudge their lives away.

It is far from our thought to dispute the fact that drudgery and kitchens are certainly linked together in some indissoluble way. On the contrary, let us admit the fact, and set about a reform in kitchens and consequent abolition of drudgery.

Of late years – all the time we have been constructing kitchenettes and kitchenless apartments, in fact – we have fallen more and more under the charm of American Colonial houses, and have

imitated as nearly as possible, under modern conditions, the architecture, the furniture, and decorations of the time when our ancestors were adapting themselves to life in a new country. But we have seemed to overlook entirely one of the most charming features of the simple Colonial house – its kitchen.

It is never wise to try to resurrect the past, no matter how much we think it an improvement on the present. On the whole it is only very near-sighted people who cannot see that whatever was worth bringing out of the past has lived, and is now so incorporated with the present that we no longer distinguish it as part of the past.

So the charming Colonial kitchen has survived, but not as a kitchen. We have kept the living-room idea of it, and discarded the kitchen part that got mixed up with drudgery and women's wasted lives. And so kitchens are in danger of quite going out of houses at all, except as they exist in laboratory-like spotlessness in some homes, or as the dens of shiftless servants in others, or as toy kitchenettes in still others.



Thatched-style Cottage for American Suburbs

If, some fine day, all housewives awoke to the fact that most of the trouble in the world originates in the kitchen, there would shortly be a little more interest in kitchen problems and not so much distaste for and neglect of this important part of the house.

Of course, women will cry out that we have never in our lives been so intent on just that one subject, kitchens, as we are today.

I admit that there is a good deal of talk going on which might lead one to believe that vacuum cleaners and electric-washing machines, etc., are to bring about the millennium for housekeepers; and there is also a good work going forward to make of housework a real profession.

But, until in the average home there comes the feeling that the kitchen – the room itself – is just as much an expression of the family life and aims and ideals as the living room or any other room, we shall be only beating about the bush in our endeavor to find a remedy for some of our perplexing troubles.

Nowadays, women who are doing much work out in the big world – the so-called “enfranchised” women – are many of them proving that they find housework no detriment to their careers and some even admit that they enjoy it.

But so far most of them have standardized their work and systematized it, with the mere idea of doing what they have to do “efficiently” and well, with the least expenditure of time and energy. And they have more than succeeded in proving the “drudgery” plea unfounded.

Now, however, we need something more. We need to make housework attractive; in other words, to put charm in the kitchen.

There is one very simple way of doing this, that is to make kitchens good to look at, and inviting as a place to stay and work.

For the professional, scientifically inclined houseworker, the most beautiful kitchen may be the

white porcelain one, with cold, snowy cleanliness suggesting sterilized utensils and carefully measured food calories.

But to the woman whose cooking and dishwashing are just more or less pleasant incidents in a pleasant round of home and social duties, the kitchen must suggest another kind of beauty – not necessarily a beauty which harbors germs, or makes the work less conveniently done, but a beauty of kindly associations with furniture and arrangements.

Who could grow fond of a white-tiled floor or a porcelain sink as they exist in so many modern kitchens! And as for the bulgy and top-heavy cook stoves, badly proportioned refrigerators, and kitchen cabinets – well, we should have to like cooking *very* well indeed before we could feel any pleasure in the mere presence of these necessary but unnecessarily ugly accompaniments to our work.

We have come to think of cleanliness as not only next to godliness, but as something which takes the place of beauty – *is* beauty.

This attitude is laziness on our part, for we need sacrifice nothing to utility and convenience, yet may

still contrive our kitchen furniture so that it, also, pleases the senses. With a little conscientious reflection on the subject we may make kitchens which have all the charm of the old, combined with all the convenience of the new; and woman will have found a place to reconcile her old and new selves, the housewife and the suffragist, the mother-by-the-fireside and the participator in public affairs. The family will have found a new-old place of reunion – the kitchen!

Granted then that our tiny house has a kitchen-with-charm, and an “other room,” the rest of the available space may be divided into the requisite number of bed and living rooms, according to the needs of the family.

There is only one other very important thing to look out for; that is the matter of closets. There is no rule for the number of closets which will make the house livable, but I should say, the more the merrier. If there is ever question of sacrificing a small room and gaining a large closet, by all means do it, for absolute neatness is the saving grace of small quarters, and storage places are essential, if one does not wish to live in a vortex of yesterday’s and tomorrow’s affairs with no room to concentrate on the present.

Inside and outside the tiny house must conform to one law – elimination of non-essentials; and the person who has a clear idea of his individual needs and has also the strength of will to limit his needs to his circumstances, will find in his tiny house a satisfaction more than compensating for any sacrifices he may have made.

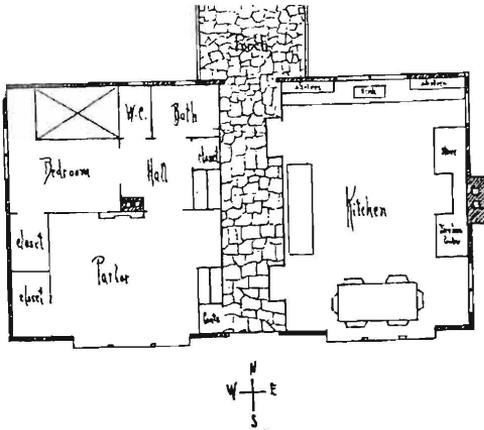
No one doubts that it *is* a sacrifice to give up a lesser pleasure even to gain the “summum bonum” and that it *does* take will power to keep oneself from weakly saying in the face of temptation, “Oh, well! What does it matter! My little house would perhaps be better without that, but I have grown accustomed to it, let it stay!”

Such weakness is fatal in a tiny house.

But how much more fatal in a tiny garden!



Kitchen for Thatched-style Cottage



First-floor Plan of Thatched Cottage

Oh! The waste lands which lie beneath the sun trying to call themselves gardens! Oh! the pitiful little plots, unfenced, unused, entirely misunderstood by people who stick houses in the middle of them and call them “gardens”!

No amount of good grass seed, or expensive planting, or well-cared-for flowers and lawns will ever make the average suburban lot anything but a “lot,” and most of them might as well, or *better*, be rough, uncultivated fields for all the relation they bear to the houses upon them or the use they were intended for.

It is to be supposed that when a man gives up the comforts of town apartments and hies him to the country, it is the garden, the outdoors, which lures him.

Why is it, then, that he seems to take particular pains to arrange his garden so that it is about as much his own as Central Park is?

It might give the average man a great deal of pleasure to be able to say to all the passersby on the Mall, “This little bit of the Park belongs to me! I cut that grass, I weed those flower beds in the evening when I come home from the office; and every Saturday afternoon I take the hose and thoroughly soak that bit of lawn there, you may see me at it any week in the summer.”

But then, we are not dealing with the fictitious average man, and we firmly believe that many “commuters” wonder deep down in their hearts why it is they get from their gardens so little of the pleasure they anticipated when they came to live out of the city.

Any one who has traveled abroad, has admired and perhaps coveted the gardens of England, France, and Italy. Their charm is undeniable, and thought to be too elusive for reproduction on American soil without the aid of landscape gardeners and a fair-sized fortune.

Just why we, as a nation, are beset by the idea of reproducing instead of originating beautiful gardens is a question apart from this discussion. But as soon as we try to develop, to their fullest extent, the advantages of our climate, and soil, in combination with our daily life as a people, we shall produce gardens which will equal, without necessarily resembling, those of other countries.

In every case we must, however, follow the same procedure which every successful garden is built upon, whether it be in Mesopotamia or in Long Island City. That is, we must study the place, the people, and the circumstances.

The most general fault in American gardens is their lack of privacy.

No one claims that the high walls of Italy and France or the impenetrable hedges of England would invariably suit the climate here. But there are many ways to obtain seclusion without in any way depriving us of much-needed air in summer and sun in winter. One way is by placing the house rationally upon its lot. Our custom has been to invariably build so that we had a “front yard,” “back yard,” and two side yards, all equally important, equally uninteresting, unbeautiful and useless.

Of course, we have the porch which in a way takes the place of the outdoor living room, always so attractive in foreign gardens. And recently some laudable efforts are being made to incorporate

the porch into the house, where it belongs, as a real American institution, instead of leaving it disconsolately clinging to the outside and bearing no resemblance to the house either in shape or detail.

But after all, a porch is a porch, and a garden is a garden, and one does not take the place of the other.

Especially is this true of the tiny property.

If you have only ten feet of ground to spare outside your tiny house, plan it so that every foot contributes to your joy at being in the country. Arrange it so that on a warm summer evening when the porch seems a bit close and dark, you wander out into your garden and sit beneath the stars in quiet as profound as on the Desert of Sahara. And in the winter, let your garden provide a warm corner out of the wind, where on a bright Sunday morning you may sit and blink in the sun.

Once you have got the desire for a room outdoors, a real garden, which is neither flower beds, nor lawns, nor hedges, nor trees, but a place for your comfort, with all these things contributing to its beauty, you will know as by divine inspiration where to put each flower and bush and path. Your planting will be no longer a problem for landscape architects, but a pleasant occupation for yourself and family. So then will your successful tiny house stand forth in its real garden, an object of pride to the community and a tribute to one man who has refused to be the impossible average, and has dared to build and plant for his own needs.

May he live forever and ever happy in his tiny house!

To Make a Tiny House

Oh, Little House, if thou a home would'st be
 Teach me thy lore, be all in all to me.
 Show me the way to find the charm
 That lies in every humble rite and daily task within thy walls.
 Then not alone for thee, but for the universe itself,
 Shall I have lived and glorified my home.

Ruth Merton