

Life at Home: Shelter

JOE KOPELLE AND FRANZ ERKELENS lived in a tree house on the edge of Home. Nearby on the ground, they hosted many a meal in the canvas tent that served as a dining room. There was rarely a vacant spot at the dinner table but always a spare seat. They'd just saw off a section of log, adjusted for the visitor's height, thump it onto the boards, and roll it into place.

Joe Kopelle remembered the setting as if it were a vision of Big Rock Candy Mountain. The fare was bountiful and varied. Franz usually cooked, but a guest sometimes commandeered the stove: a vegetarian, Tildenite, Hungarian, or some other chef professing a superior diet. The person at the head of the table could lean slightly to dip a cup in the cool clear spring that ran beside the platform. The person to his or her right could reach everything on the stove without getting up, as well as the strong box kept as a cooler in the creek behind the platform.

The tree house even had an automatic dishwasher. Franz and Joe would slide the dishes, pots, and pans into the stream, and the current stripped away the remaining food. The trout would jab their heads inside the cast iron pots and nibble off any stubborn remnants. Once a boy was lying on his stomach, letting the water run through his fingers, and one of these fish swam into his fingers. "Look what I caught, mom!" he exclaimed, lifting the writhing creature out of the water.

"Hey, young fellow, put that dish-washer back in the creek!" Franz said with a laugh. "He's our friend!"¹

Wearing a broad-brimmed hat and thick moustache, Joe had first gazed upon the tree when he was investigating the property. Long ago, strong winds had sheared off the top, leaving a massive trunk. In the years since the storm, new growth had sent shoots skyward that were stout enough to support a platform. Joe cut them level with the main trunk, nailed slats like a circular staircase up the trunk, and then constructed a floor. Four low walls and a roof provided shelter. Franz and Joe slept on bunk beds softened with cedar boughs and read books from a well-stocked shelf. "From up there the air was warm and a grand view could be had of the bay," recalled Joe. "We could see all that went on in every direction."²

Although Joe claimed he was drawn to the spot because he was a landscape gardener by trade and “a worshiper of nature’s wonders,” his decision to move to this particular parcel in 1908 also reflected that most of the prime lots in Home had been taken.³ “The establishing of the Mutual Home Association opens up a way to many to obtaining a home,” Oliver Verity had written; since he first published these words in *Discontent* in 1898,⁴ a succession of people had answered his call.

A time-lapse film of the community’s growth would show the Douglas firs on the hillside falling one after the other as men notch their trunks, whack with axes, then cut with crosscut saws, and roll the logs down toward the water. With the land cleared, acre by acre, the colony members converge to sink posts and piers into the loam for a foundation, raise the wall frames, and lift the roof beams. Soon enough walls are sheathed in board and batten or bevel siding, enclosing and protecting spaces that just a season ago knew only the shelter of trees and the course of wind through the forest. This happens over and over again as more and more members join the Mutual Home Association. Hammers drive nails, shovels dig wells, hands stretch stockade and slat fences between parcels. Roads and paths slice across the hillside, gardens and orchards are planted in neat rows, and in some places ornamental vines begin to climb toward the gables. As the hasty procession of the film progresses, the houses get larger and more impressive: there is the Allens’ shingle-sided house with a sagging two-story porch and the Kings’ huge box-style house with a wrap-around porch.⁵ By the time Joe Kopelle arrives in 1908, around two hundred people live in Home in over fifty homes.⁶

“You’ll find it damp,” people told Joe when he bought the lot,⁷ and perhaps this is why he built the tree house; or perhaps he thought it would be easier to live in the tree than remove it. In the accounts of his tree house, he only explained what he did, not why, but he certainly enjoyed his rustic living arrangement. Although Franz left in 1910, Joe stayed until 1917. Only then, when the shipyards were booming in Tacoma during the war, did he climb down through foliage that still grew upon the shoots and set foot upon the ground for good. He worked a while in the city, and when he returned to Home, he moved into a house. What he remembered of the cold seasons, of shivering through wet and windy nights, he kept to himself; when he spoke of his famous tree house, it was always summertime.