



Home sweet turtleback

Downsizing from 1,600 to 400 sq. ft. with intention, the Smith family's off-grid dream has become a reality

By RACHEAL FLINTOFT Crossroads This Week

In a modern world, full of overconsumption and unaffordable living... wouldn't you like to unplug?

"We have been living in our camper for the past six months," explained Ashley Smith, First Nation owner and operator of JA Smith Construction Management and Turtleback Homes in Onanole. "We currently are building our Turtleback home as well as our workshop to build future Turtlebacks."

Smith and her husband Jason made the choice in April to achieve what many of us often dream to do – walk away from conventional living, sell their 1,600 square foot home in Binscarth, and purchase an 80-acre parcel of land in Onanole that is situated next to Riding Mountain National Park.

In a matter of weeks, their dream quickly became reality – the Smiths had taken a chance on an off-grid aspiration to live simpler in a 400-

square foot Turtleback.

Standing at what will be Turtleback Ranch, a calm simplicity fills the air as spruce and poplar trees silhouette the skyline. A natural spring passes through the property, with sprinkles of wild mushrooms and flowers alongside. Adding to the postcard perfect view, it's hard not to also notice that progressive innovation is in the air.

"The Turtleback home is a personal passion project that I had envisioned to do for the past decade," Smith smiled. Aimed at providing an alternative living option to Canadians in every scenario, "the Turtleback is geared towards the First Nation communities, consumption conscious individuals, as well as communities, and cities looking to reduce their environmental footprint."

But what simply is a Turtleback?

Similar to a tiny home, a

Turtleback is a forward thinking off-grid living option that offers luxury finishes at the helm with essential needs all in one. The Turtleback is a self-contained home, equipped with waterlines, a water pump, and a water tank. Functions include a non-electric/waterless toilet, a battery bank with solar panels to run the basic needs such as a water pump, lights, and a fridge. The Turtleback has the capacity to run "on and off" grid, also able to use the back-up generator which makes for a total of three different power supply options accessible. Additionally, this tiny home is on steel skids for easy transport functionality if needed. It's also turn-key – according to Smith the unit is move-in ready minus appliances and furnishings which can be added upon request.

As an Ojibway woman, Smith decided on the name, Turtleback, because of its connection to her ancestral

roots of Turtle Island.

She pointed at the design and started to explain.

"Just as the turtle has his home, it's the perfect size for him... a safe shelter away from the elements of life," Smith gleamed. "The Turtleback structure replicates the strength and durability of the turtle's shell. He can take it wherever he goes depending on the travels of life, being reliant on himself."

Purposefully, the Turtleback is built from steel structural insulated panels, with no wood used for the structure of the frame, and there is also no foundation required. The structure is built on steel skids purposely to allow the Turtleback to move with ease, designed specifically for sustainable off-grid capabilities.

"My main focus was to stay away from layered materials with siding, shingles, insulation, poly, and drywall – these require on-going repairs

and maintenance," Smith explained. "My focus was to eliminate extra costs and apply a one-pass system for the interior and exterior... using insulated structural metal panels, we were able to eliminate the excess materials and future repairs."

In a time when Canada's housing affordability crisis is at an all-time high, Smith's visionary answer to many of the longstanding environmental problems faced in Canada, as well as both high building supply prices, and the cost to secure a home is quite simple – putting a stop to overconsumption.

Since 2000, housing prices have risen 160% in inflation-adjusted dollars. Because of this staggering increase, housing supply has exceeded growth and affordability, causing a historically high vacancy level. The only factor moving the market forward is size – the average size of a regular household has gradu-

ally fallen over the past 50 years, and actual housing square footage is just finally starting to catch up.

"I know it's time to build with longer lasting material that require less repairs and maintenance," Smith explained. "With hydro prices rising it was important for the Turtleback to have higher insulation values with minimal thermal bridging to keep living costs down. Furthermore, the wood stove is our main source of heat with back up electrical set on minimum thermostat settings when not occupied."

As a construction manager by trade that is immersed in the housing market, Smith saw the housing crisis firsthand. Frivolous spending, and low interest rates have led Canadians to live beyond their means, facing an unprecedented level of insecurity.

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"With all the uncertainty surrounding job security or if someone runs into financial difficulty, you can simply shut off the hydro and go off-grid to help lower the costs of living," Smith said. "If needed, you could also skid your Turtleback anywhere. I see the Turtleback being a great housing solution for all."

She added that a Turtleback can also be a great starter house, as it can be a home that when transitioning to independence, young adults can afford to buy and then become a homeowner.

"Most people are just tired of the excess in life, by living off-grid, I feel our life is better managed – less stress, more time," she affirmed. "I feel free now that we are living a different way; my kids are all planning on living in their own Turtleback when it's time... family and friends are also on board for the Turtleback lifestyle."

Receiving both her First Nation Housing Professional Certification as well as her National Construction Safety Officer Certification, as a First Nation woman Smith knows that affordable, mobile, and sustainable homes like the Turtleback will be beneficial if used in First Nation

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-Ashley Smith

communities.

Growing up in a trailer park in Gillam, she experienced desolate living in the isolated north.

"The trailer park homes were no match for the harsh weather conditions, shovelling snow off the roof and then piling it up around the lower skirting for warmth... heat tape on the waterlines and yet they still freeze... the floor was so cold in the mornings it hurt to walk on," she described. "I was 14 years old when I asked my parents if they would lend me money to buy a mobile home to fix up in my early adulthood. I have always had a vision for making housing better."

Smith's family grew up building log homes in the north, working in construction camps and often living off-grid. When you live through difficulties, it seems easy to see what is significant and what is essentially not. Through repetitious adver-

sity, Smith learned how to be forever purposeful in her choices.

Once completing school, she then moved to Rivers and started a renovation company. Smith eventually moved again to her home reserve at Gambler First Nation, near Binscarth, where her father is Gambler's Chief David LeDoux. Because of her experience, Smith was quickly recruited to assist with their housing department.

Living on-reserve for eight years, "during that time, I jumped into learning all I can about housing, and attending almost a decade of housing related trainings and workshops," she explained. "We now manage mostly large-scale commercial projects for First Nation communities."

Through personal and professional experience, the Turtleback solution was created – a means to solving a long list of social and environmental

problems. Instead of contractors building homes with a footprint double of that needed, a strong focus should be placed on alternatively thinking about long-term sustainability, affordability, goods and resources consumed overall by each, and the amount of waste generated as a result.

"I see a few companies building small homes and that's great to see – addressing the housing crisis will take a lot of joint effort, as so much is needed in so little time," Smith said. "Growing up in Gillam, paired with my eight years' experience living on my reserve in a band home quickly drove me to find solutions for a better way."

Over the course of the last seven months, Smith's family has also become skilled with an off-grid lifestyle many seek to experience.

She chuckled. "While we lived completely off-grid for the first three months, we quickly learned to limit our water consumption as having no water to wash dishes, shower or flush the toilet was really challenging," Smith said. "Sub-zero temperatures within the month of April, living without a washer and dryer early on, charging the laptops and phones was a challenge, limited television or should I say, 'DVD time' as we have no cable or internet... our family unit has endured some uncomfortable situations throughout this process and required teamwork to overcome unforeseen events."

"The Turtleback will have one model to start, as a lot of engineering and design went into the functionality and intent for the unit," Smith explained. "Hopeful that the first prototype will be completed by this fall." Popularity is already growing, along with the long list of potential clients excited to experience the Turtleback lifestyle.

"I have a goal to build Turtlebacks and rent them from Turtleback Ranch as well," she said, excitedly. "People can get a feel of the lifestyle and see if it's for

them throughout the four seasons. Most people are not familiar with the lifestyle and would like someone to tell them what they need... we can now do that with expert experience!"

Living now with a few more amenities – hydro and water installed into the workshop and available throughout the ranch as a backup option – the Smith family, and their three children, Jaylee, Keeson and Dawnjae, feel that their move to unplug has been an impactful way to make an overall difference... inspiring perhaps a few along the way to consume less too.

Soon the family of five will be living not in their trailer but in their Turtleback home, with a footprint one quarter of the size that they needed less than a year ago.

"By choosing to live this lifestyle, we will consume less in our energy footprint through water, clothing, toys, food, etc.," Smith stated. "There is no room for excess, and it naturally teaches you what you need, and what value they bring, you quickly recognize your wants and areas of waste. Everyone is a little different, but I think we nailed it through what the Turtleback is based on – less consumption in all areas of life."

Killarney debuts new fire hall

Killarney: The Guide – The mighty Jaws of Life were fired up to snip the 'ribbon' on Oct. 2 to mark the grand opening of the new, million dollar Killarney-Turtle Mountain Fire Hall. The big day drew around 300 well-wishers.

Moosomin: The World-Spectator – For the second time in five months, students and teachers at McNaughton High School in Moosomin are reeling from the tragic death of a student in a collision. On May 6, Grade 12 student Colleen McPhee lost her life in a rollover on Highway 8 south of Langenburg, just weeks before graduation. On the evening of Oct. 6, Grade 11 student Carter Lawrence lost his life in a collision on a grid road south of Fleming. Principal Jeff St. Onge says Carter's loss is being deeply felt by students and staff, and the death being the second of a McNaughton student in the space of five months just makes it worse. Sincere condolences are extended to family and friends.

Minnedosa: The Tribune – A donations account has been set up for Dave and Jasmine MacDonald and son Alex, who lost their Minnedosa home to fire on Sept. 30. The family is now renting in the community, so Alex can

Paper Clips

News from MB/SK weeklies

complete his grade 11 year in town.

Roblin: The Review – Solely the chimney remained standing after fire destroyed the Petlura Parish Hall southeast of Roblin. The local landmark on PR 366 – the Inglis/Grandview Highway as it's known – was the site of countless church celebrations and regular Saturday night dances over the years. It is believed the fire was electrical in nature thanks to raccoons chewing on the wiring.

Virden: The Empire-Advance – A little piece of railroad history still stands in Reston. Dating back to 1908, a Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) Engine House, which became seed storage in 1930, still remains a highlight of the branch line between the southwestern community and Wolsley, SK. The CPR Reston Subdivision was abandoned in September 1960.

Moosomin: The World-Spectator – With shovels in hand, Rocanville Golf Club President Cory Woywada, Rocanville Mayor Ron Reed, and R.M. of Rocanville Reeve

Melissa Ruhland, official turned the sod for a new clubhouse in the form of a 3,000 square foot building formerly used as a restaurant at Archerwill.

Whitewood: The Herald Sun – Bernard Steele, a member of the Windthorst Lions Club, says the community's Pumpkin Growing Competition began with a 'seed' personally planted nine years ago. The pumpkin seeds used are 'Dill's Atlantic Giants' from Howard Dill, a Nova Scotia seed company. This year's winning pumpkin, weighing 998.4 pounds, was grown by Andrea Johnson and her son Zach, from the Broadview/Grenfell area. Their pumpkin far exceeded the previous record of 684 pounds. Money generated from the contest goes back into the community, and in 2021 first responders were thought of.

Yorkton: This Week – Flyers from across the prairies enjoyed showcasing what their remote control planes could do in the wild blue yonder recently on the outskirts of Yorkton. The fun fly, the first for the Yorkton RC Flying Club, in a number of years, allowed people to experience and learn about the hobby.

PRAIRIE MOUNTAIN HEALTH

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APPOINTMENT PREFERRED | WALK-INS MAY BE ACCEPTED
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Birtle #1	Friday, Nov. 5	11 a.m.-6 p.m.	Birtle Community Hall
Birtle #2	Friday, Nov. 19	11 a.m.-6 p.m.	Birtle Community Hall
Hamiota #1	Wednesday, Nov. 3	11 a.m.-6 p.m.	Hamiota Community Hall
Hamiota #2	Thursday, Nov. 4	11 a.m.-6 p.m.	Hamiota Community Hall
Miniota	Wednesday, Nov. 17	11 a.m.-6 p.m.	Miniota Community Hall
Rosburn	Thursday, Nov. 18	11 a.m.-6 p.m.	National Ukrainian Hall
Shoal Lake #1	Wednesday, Nov. 10	11 a.m.-6 p.m.	Shoal Lake Community Hall
Shoal Lake #2	Tuesday, Nov. 23	11 a.m.-6 p.m.	Shoal Lake Community Hall