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Photo by Michael Jacobson

In replacing a 1920s-era farmhouse on their Roscoe farm, Alver and Darlene Schlangen opted for durability and efficiency with an insulated concrete home. With seven-inch concrete walls, plus insulation, their new house is nearly twice as energy efficient as stick-built houses, plus they use off-peak heating and water heating and get half the electricity they need for their farm from their wind turbine (see below).

Farm couple stresses efficiency with concrete house

By Michael Jacobson

Towering 120 feet over a farm site on a ridge above Roscoe, a wind turbine stands as a reminder of the past and a beacon of the future on the Alver and Darlene Schlangen farm.

With a new energy-efficient home, and a second wind turbine planned to be erected this summer, the Schlangens are close to producing all the electricity they need to heat and power their house and operate their 44-cow, 188-acre dairy farm.

When they first erected the 20-kilowatt wind turbine in December 2004, they would get questions about it every month, frequently somebody driving into the yard to ask about it. What was the cost? (the expected payback is 8-12 years of operation, depending on wind production. Is there noise? They can't hear theirs, though their new house has seven-inch concrete walls. Are grants available? Supposedly, they might say. Despite producing more electricity than other wind turbines in the region, they still have not gotten any, which puzzles Alver since these grants are supposed to be for "the lit-

tle guy."

Windmills used to be common on farms in the area, mostly to pump water for livestock. "When electricity got so cheap, everybody stopped using them," said Alver. "Now as current prices go up, it's becoming more feasible again."

They can sell excess electrical current that they produce to their co-op and buy additional current as well. Currently, they produce about half of the electricity they need but hope to be nearly self-sufficient for electricity when they erect another wind turbine.

With global warming a concern these days, "Conserving energy is still the best thing a person can do," said Alver. "After that, clean, renewable energy is the best. Everyone knows about oil, with coal there's pollution, and nuclear has waste. (Wind production) is just a win-win."

Their wind turbine stands 120-feet tall and has 15-foot blades that begin to rotate with 4-5 mph winds. About 7-8 mph winds are needed to produce electricity, and the amount of electricity generated doubles from an 11 mph wind to a 12 mph wind, said Alver. It maximizes its electricity production with 25 mph winds.

Unless you enjoy kite flying or sailing, most people prefer calm days, but not the Schlangens. "The days you can't stand outside, we're making money," said Alver.

Alternative energy sources may never replace fossil fuels, but "it'll make them last that much longer," said Alver. Their wind turbine is expected to need to be refurbished every 20 years.

When it came time to build a new house, their emphasis again went to energy efficiency and durability, willing to make an investment for long-term paybacks.

Alver grew up on the farm, the youngest of 13 children, which his father had purchased in the 1940s. He and Darlene were married in 1991 and started living in the farm house dating back to the 1920s.

They considered remodeling someday but were soon convinced to build from scratch. Their estimates for remodeling were that it would cost at least half as much as building new, and they had heard stories about remodeling projects where the costs continued to add up, said Alver, including one where a family spent their entire budget before even getting to the room they were trying to remodel.

SCHLANGENS - see page 2C



Photo by Michael Jacobson

Located on a ridge overlooking Roscoe, Alver and Darlene Schlangen erected a wind turbine on their farm in December 2004. They can buy and sell electricity as needed, depending on the wind, and plan to erect a second wind turbine this year.

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SCHLANGENS – from page 1C

Old houses require lots of upkeep, and as they got closer to building, they stopped spending money on it. “We really held off on doing any fixing up on the old house, and then it doesn’t take much time at all and it looks older,” said Alver.

About a year ago, they saw a poured concrete house at a home show. They were convinced to build one after visiting a business selling the forms, which was actually a concrete building but didn’t look it, according to Alver and Darlene.

“You can build any kind you want. You can have any style house you want,” said Darlene.

“The only difference,” added Alver, “is the window wells are wider. That’s almost the only way you can tell between concrete and stick-built.”

Their concrete house is supposed to be twice as energy efficient as a stick-built home, said Alver, with an R value of 30 for the concrete home and 17 for the stick-built one. Plus, it should be very durable.

The extra cost, which was not a big difference, will eventually pay for itself with at least ten years of living in the house and saving on energy costs. That was fine because they have no plans to move off the farm, said Alver.

They started tearing down the old farm house in April, started construction the third week of May, had the frame covered with a roof by the third week of June, and moved into their new home in September. They hurried to get the roof on the new house and have the frame covered. Leaving the roof off, Alver joked, might have brought more rain and better crops.

They chose a rambler with full basement, since they wanted a simple design, said Alver, and a walkout to the south.

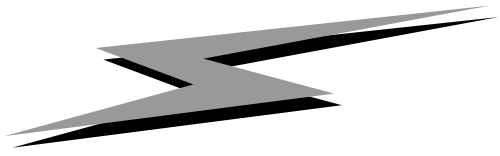
SCHLANGENS – see page 4C



Photo by Michael Jacobson

In picking the design of their new house, Alver and Darlene Schlangen opted for a rambler with a walkout basement to the south. They wanted plenty of southern exposure in the house for natural sunlight and wanted a view of their farm and farmyard, shown from the dining room and front door.

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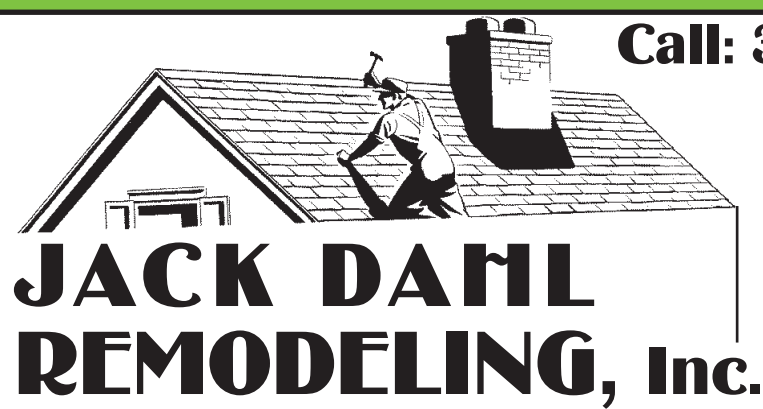
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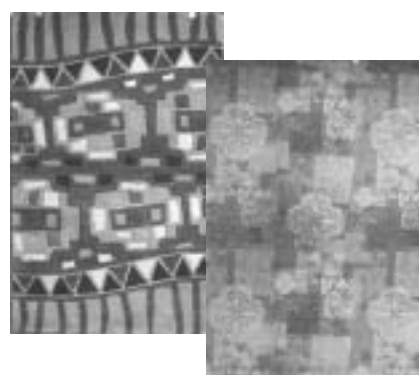
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The staggered heights of their golden oak kitchen cabinets actually made the room seem bigger, said Darlene, who was pleased with the design and colors of her new kitchen. They chose black-and-blue laminate for their countertops, as they liked the look of granite but the price of laminate.

Photo by Michael Jacobson

SCHLANGENS – from page 2C

They wanted a straight roofline, added Darlene.

“We wanted a view of the farm, so we could see people coming into the yard. We wanted a view to the south for the sunlight, and we didn’t want a garage door (facing) to the north,” said Alver. A garage that faces north never has direct sunlight to melt snow and ice, explained Alver, who has heard people with north-facing garages say that they would never do it again.

They did the demolition themselves, as well as the roofing, siding, sheetrocking, finishing, and painting/staining. Their four kids and Alver’s siblings helped throughout the construction, with the family living temporarily in their shop during construction.

“Years ago, anytime you built a house, it was family and friends (that) would be helping. With the busy times, that’s not as common,” explained Alver. Building a house, living in the shop, and running the farm, too, “makes for a long summer,” he added.

They contracted with Alver’s cousins for the concrete work and also contracted for the electrical and plumbing work.

The styrofoam forms have metal braces that snap into place. Arranging these forms shapes the concrete walls. They poured walls on each floor in two parts, first pouring the bottom four feet, then letting it settle and harden, and then pouring the top four feet.

It would take a couple days to get the forms set and then a day to pour concrete. While the electrical wiring could be cut into the two-and-a-quarter-inch insulation of the forms, the plumbers had to put conduits into the concrete walls to save space for the piping. This required a little extra

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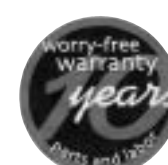
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Photos by Michael Jacobson

One of the only differences in an insulated concrete home is the seven-inch walls, which are only evident on the window sills, or here in their basement doorway to their cold storage under the front porch. The ceiling above is seven inches of concrete, too.



These are the concrete forms that were used to shape the walls and ceiling of the Schlangens' new house. The metal brackets lock into place, and the forms can be used to create any shape or style of house. The Schlangens were convinced to build an insulated concrete house when they went to a vendor and didn't realize that the building was concrete until they were told.

SCHLANGENS – from page 4C

coordination with their plumber to make sure that the conduits he needed were in place before the concrete was poured.

Moving or adding plumbing – like adding onto the house – would require cutting concrete, which is a small drawback to a concrete house.

A seven-inch layer of concrete was also poured as the ceiling in basement.

Each of the insulated forms has plastic strips every eight inches that act like wall studs. Just start at the end and count every eight inches, said Alver; and you can screw into the plastic strip if you want to hang something on the wall.

Their new house – though only one story (the better to stay out of the wind) – has about the same square footage as their old farm house. It is warmer and feels a lot bigger, said Darlene.

It has a lot more useable space, agreed Alver. “We wanted a more wide-open look,” he said. “You know how those old houses have lots of rooms and doors.” The rock-wall basement of the old farmhouse, meanwhile, was so musty and mildewy that it was of little use.

Their three-stall garage sits about where their old farmhouse stood, with the rest of their new house to the south. The main floor – with two bedrooms (one of which could eventually be turned into an office), kitchen, living room, dining room, bathroom, and laundry room – could accommodate one-floor living someday. They wanted the open dining room, living room, and kitchen to face the farmyard, plus plenty of southern exposure.

They staggered the tops to their cupboards, made of golden oak, like the rest of the woodwork in the house. This height variation actually made the kitchen seem bigger once the cabinets were installed, said Darlene. They were told it would be

their cabinetmaker, added Alver.

Darlene said she was pleased with the design and pleased with the colors in kitchen, including the blue and black laminate for the kitchen counter. They liked the look of granite but the cost of laminate. Darlene was talked out of walk-in pantry in the kitchen due to the space it would require, but she likes the pull-out drawers in all the kitchen cabinets, which makes it easy to get to the back of the drawer and makes the storage space more useable.

Just a flooring line – tile in the kitchen and dining room and carpet in the living room – separates the rooms on the main floor. “We wanted to split the area up, so it didn't look all like one room,” said Alver.

They put the stairway to the basement at end of the house, next to garage, so it would take less room, said Alver. Downstairs, which is still not completely finished, will eventually have two bedrooms and a family room, as well as a bathroom, which is done already. Because they needed to have footings under the front porch, they built a cold storage, under it, which is nearly full already.

In the utility room is a state-of-the-art electric thermal storage that uses a heat pump to heat 3,000 pounds of brick during off-peak hours and then uses this heat from the bricks to heat the house during the day. It can heat to ten degrees below zero, with a plentium heater as back-up.

They had considered a corn boiler as the heat source for their house, but the heater was the same price, cleaner, and involved less work. Their water heater, too, operates on off-peak hours.

They still need to finish the basement, add a deck off the living room, attach a railing to the front porch, and finish landscaping.



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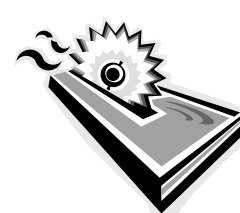
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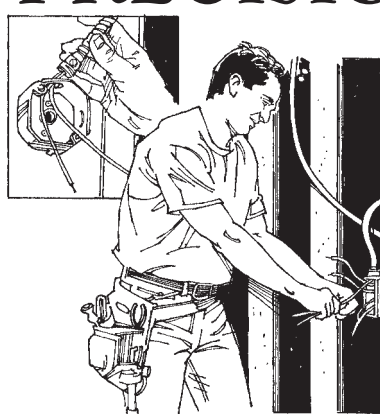
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