There's a part of Arizona where the saguaro cactus and the juniper trees meet with the mesquite, where three corners of bioregions overlap. David and Pearl moved to this land from south Texas, where they had lived with Catholic nuns developing and promoting appropriate technology and working in the immigrant community around them. They enjoyed their work in the greater community, but sought a situation where they could delve deeper into the questions of simplicity, balance, and alternative technology. David, who was formerly a sailmaker, had recently built a solar oven so hot it burned paper, and was beginning to build composting toilets. Pearl has always preferred the aesthetic of clean lines and a minimum of stuff.

Their cottage is indeed clean and smooth, like a tiny yacht somehow beached in a canyon, protected from flash floods beneath a spur ridge, with the land fanning in waves out around them. They built it of industrial materials: clad in T-111 exterior plywood, with a varnished plywood floor and a white painted ceiling. Some might fancy more natural materials, but since human circumstances and desires are subject to change they wanted something mobile. It needed to be light, and to fit on the axle that is under it.

"We had built with earth and straw, and enjoyed it. We did notice in Texas that an adobe house with a mud floor—well, it was typically the last thing the Mexican immigrants wanted. They wanted modern and bright. They wanted a concrete house, and they'd settle for a new trailer.
We started to wonder for ourselves, could we build a trailer that was durable, aesthetically pleasing, and adapted to the desert? In any case, a 120-square-foot house is almost certain to use fewer industrial materials than a 1,200-square-foot house made of natural materials. Some of the developments of the industrial age—bolts and screws, for example—are just so adaptable. Unscrewing and unbolting allows materials to be reused and reinvented in different forms over time.

They built their home in a year of discussions, drawings and redrawings, three weeks building the shell off-site, and three weeks building in the cabinets, bed, porch, and composting toilet. They believe every joint, every cut in the design is easy enough for a handy, patient, but unskilled person to duplicate.

The details are ingenious. The doors are counterweighted with fabric bags filled with sand. The gates latch with simple bent pieces of metal strapping. A metal shelf, suspended directly over the oil lamp on
the dining table, holds a kettle of warm water whenever the lamp is lit. The entire structure is leveled on nine three-quarter-inch bolts, placed on stones. The effect is streamlined, like a boat ready to float.

A breadbox-sized army tent woodstove, placed in one corner, is sufficient to heat the home. Opposite the stove, the bed is raised to window height, for good cross-ventilation, and storage below; the empty wall space behind is a backrest for reading. Bookshelves dominate one end of the space. Their priorities greet the visitor clearly: the Encyclopedia Britannica receives 6 feet of shelf space. Pearl insisted on 8 feet of kitchen counter space, which was no idle desire: besides cooking every day, she cans fruit and vegetables, and dries meat and herbs.

The south side of the house is lined with a porch, enclosed by a trellis, covered in vines in summer, and open to the sun in winter. The house is fed by a well, pumped by a windmill 700 feet away, and piped to a metal stock tank next to the dwelling. They could have a pressurized tank and a spigot instead, but they prefer scooping pails from the stock tank as it allows them to feel the water they are using. To ensure their drinking water is perfectly pure, they bottle it close to the source.

Dishes are washed outside, in a few basins on a table, next to the water tank. On the opposite side of the tank is a drip rack for wet laundry that allows water to drain to the vines. Next to the rack is the shower stand. A dark five-gallon container is filled with water, placed in the sun, then dumped into the shower bucket once the water is hot. The “tool shed” consists of garden tools held by the branches of a mesquite tree. “This way,” says David, “we don’t have to buy lumber for a shed.”

Pearl and David often eat straight from their garden. Intrigued to see how much of their food they can grow and gather themselves, they dug twelve garden beds in a semicircle opposite the house. This design allowed them to hand-water with a minimum of walking, and made it easy to fence the area with one continuous circle of 4 foot high galvanized steel “cattle panels.” Thirty steps from the entrance to the homestead, goats bleat at passersby. Beyond the goats, the land offers cactus fruit, edible salt weed, and most importantly, mesquite pods which the couple dries and then grinds into high-protein flour, which they cook into sweet pancakes and cover with homemade cactus fruit jam for breakfast. Behind the house the circle is completed with six fifty-five-gallon steel drums, outfitted with shelves that store hundreds of jars of fruit and vegetable preserves, dried meat and herbs, and flour, and topped with a steel cap that protects their food from ringtail cats, coati, raccoons, and a host of small rodents.
[Q] Do you have any suggestions for others?

[A] DAVID: Think small, think simple. Build below your means. Maintain a margin of time, of money, and of your energy. One promise we've made is whatever we have will be something we use daily or at least seasonally, things that actually work, and are easy to build, clean, and maintain. We've had experiments, like an evaporative food cooler, that could in fact cool food and looked intriguing, but the fabric rotted fairly quickly, so we abandoned that project. It's important to acknowledge when things aren't working.

Q] Why have you chosen this life?

[A] PEARL: Because I like it. This is my favorite dwelling that we've ever lived in.

David thinks I should mention my Mennonite roots, but my siblings aren't living this way, so I'm not sure that's it. We like to be outside, and be connected to the world. It feeds us. This is not a life of deprivation. Self-denial just doesn't inspire.

I am inspired by the words of Jesus, "Heaven's imperial rule is like some trader looking for beautiful pearls. When that merchant finds one priceless pearl, he sells everything he owns and buys it." It's a lifetime quest. We both put a very high value on freedom and flexibility. Consider this: you might be freer without something than with it.

Then there's also the issue of how much of the world's resources can we justly lay claim to? My feeling, my gut feeling is that we are still using more than our fair share.

_**EPILOGUE:***

In 2001 the couple started spending four months of summer each year with friends on a farm in Oregon, where they plant and harvest a big garden, and gather berries. In 2005, the riverbed near their desert cottage seemed to be slowly migrating, covering the wide, natural passageway to the road. They worried that eventually they would have to use heavy machinery if they wanted to move the trailer out. And after 8 good years in the canyon they wanted to live closer to friends and neighbors. So they disassembled their garden, bolted the tongue and wheels back on to the trailer, and with a friend's pickup truck towed their cottage out of the canyon 3 miles away to a friend's acreage, near the social "heart" of their rural community. They are happy to be a 5-minute bike ride from a large community garden, and they're happy to watch the land repair and erase the various indentations they made on the earth's surface at the old site.