

# Closing up the cottage

By SHEILA GARRETT  
Special to the Record-Eagle

As the spectacular days of autumn come to a close, the last summer residents prepare to leave the north for warmer locations.

Cottage and summer home closings begin right after Labor Day and continues until snow fall, said Rick Furtah of Cottage Care in Interlochen observed.

"A lot of people might stay to see the fall colors. But most have gone by mid-October," he said.

The best advice for those facing the job of closing a summer home is to hire a property manager, said Pam Leonard of Resort and Rental Real Estate in Elmwood Township. An expensive solution? "A manager does not always have to take full management," she said, "but could still keep an eye on things."

As part of his service, Rick Furtah routinely drains pipes, shuts off the water, checks during the winter for the snow load on the roof and watches for seasonal damage, such as trees falling. He also turns on water and heat when residents are due to return.

Another solution for the homeowner is to arrange to have a snowplow clear the drive when the snow is more than four inches deep and also check on the home, Leonard said.

Linda Ihme of Leelanau Vacation Rentals in Glen Arbor had another suggestion.

"The best advice I can give for someone who is unsure how to close their home or cottage for the winter is to hire a plumber. They are insured, they know what they are doing and the cost is minimal," said Ihme. "In the long run, it will give the homeowner peace of mind knowing that their home has been closed correctly. And

one call in the spring will get it reopened for them."

Shirley Garthe of Lake Leelanau has started a new business, Northern Michigan Home Watch Services, which she describes as providing "a guardian angel for your home."

"I do a regular check of the home or cottage," she added. "This includes the entries, such as windows, doors and screens. I check the security system and smoke detectors. I check rodent traps and look for mildew. I also look for water damage on the ceilings, and snow damage on the roof. I remove it, or get someone to do this."

Garthe also acts as a referral person.

"I advise homeowners new to the area in finding the help they need, for example, a reliable snowplow," she said.

For those who plan to winterize and close their own summer homes, the experts have advice.

"Owners need to guard against break-ins," warned Leonard, "although in this area there would not be many, except by animals."

Furtah said that a homeowner can successfully block a chimney by putting a board or brick on top, to prevent animals or birds from getting in. Many summer residents put wood shutters over the windows when they leave, he said.

Chimneys should be checked for obstructions, such as nests or dead animals. This is particularly important for those who intend to visit their holiday home occasionally during the winter. An obstructed chimney can cause carbon monoxide poisoning to anyone, safety experts caution.

Any exterior wood surfaces that need painting should be done before the temperature drops below freezing. If the paint is peeling from the wood, there is

Record-Eagle/John L. Russell  
Cottage Care owner Rick Furtah flushes out the water lines at a Traverse City area cottage for a customer.



moisture in the wood, which must be removed. Local hardware stores can provide products to help dry the wood. Exterior primer and two to three coats of paint can be used to protect surfaces through the winter for years.

Trees should be inspected for cracked stems and branch forks, broken limbs that may be hanging or lodged in the tree. This is most easily done after the leaves have fallen, experts point out. Perennials should be pruned, and refuse composted. Fresh mulch can be applied to protect garden beds from harsh weather.

"Heavy snowfalls are a danger, and it is desirable to keep the drive plowed throughout the winter so that the cottage or summer home remains accessible," said Leonard.

"For year-round customers, snow is usually plowed at two inches," Rick Furtah explained. "For summer residents, it can be done at from four to six inches. If you don't move it then, you can't, not with a truck. It is too hard on them."

A check list of practical tips for closing a home or cottage for the winter would include:

- Give the entire dwelling a thorough cleaning.
- Clean appliances thoroughly.
- Remember to bring in all outdoor furniture and lawn equipment to protect them from the weather.
- Unplug the light fixtures.
- Strip the beds.
- Cut back trees.
- Check the windows. Look for broken panes or failed weather seals on windows and exterior doors.
- Put antifreeze in the toilets. Blow out the sprinkler systems.
- If you plan to come regular-

ly during the winter, turn the heat down to 55 degrees.

■ Leave contact phone numbers with someone in the neighborhood.

Here are some other situations to avoid:

"Don't close the fridge doors. Clean out and turn off the fridge and freezer, and leave the doors open or you could have a real mess in the spring," said Leonard.

"Turn off the breaker for a well," Furtah advised. "If a pipe should break, it could flood the home."

"And remember," said Ihme, "When you do a fall cleaning before you close a property, it makes opening up in the spring just that much easier."

Sheila Garrett is a local freelance writer.

# For homeowners, a handyman is good man to find

By NANCY SUNDSTROM  
Special to the Record-Eagle

If you live in a house, you can count on having things to fix. You may be one of the fortunate few who has a spouse who can effortlessly do anything from fixing a leak to installing a window, upon your request. But chances are that you are one of the many frustrated homeowners who has a big list of tasks, but no time or skills to deal with them.

Enter the handyman, who seems to possess the near magical ability to repair anything in the home.

According to industry experts, approximately 15 percent of all U.S. household repairs and odd jobs are done by solo contractors who call themselves a handyman, meaning they are skilled in a wide array of primarily minor projects in the \$200-\$600 range. Many of them also specialize in at least one specific area, such as painting, woodworking or plumbing.

The majority of handymen are, in fact, men, and a sizable number of retirees who have years of practical experience, free time and enjoy the extra income the work can generate. Oftentimes, they work under the umbrella of a business, and most reputable handymen tend to be fully insured and bonded, licensed and willing to provide references.

What was once an unorganized portion of the remodeling industry has turned into a specialty field that is in growing demand, especially by women ages 40-80 and younger families who prefer spending time on recreational activities, vs. home improvement projects.

In Traverse City, there is a locally owned and operated franchise of the Handyman Connection, which has 180 shops in the USA and Canada. Deb Irwin is one of three owners of the 5-year-old business here, which performs about 2,000 primarily small- to medium-size jobs that range from shaving down doors to putting up a gazebo.

Her agency employs 22 handymen, the majority of whom are either retired or have more than 10 years of experience. She says about 70 percent of their clientele comes from repeat customers.

"One of our main advantages is that we have independent workers who are well-rounded in terms of what they can do, and when we get a request for a job, we can get it accomplished fairly quickly, which people really value," explained Irwin. "Scheduling and dependability are big issues when someone needs work done, and we're very picky about our craftsmen. We also give a range for pricing and work by project, not by the hour, because work can go very slowly when it's on the clock."

Virginia, a widowed 76-year-old resident of Traverse City (who asked that her last name not be

used for security reasons), began using handyman services four years ago, after her husband had died and she found herself unable to do most of the jobs he had previously done. They had retired to the Traverse City area and their children had remained downstate and out-of-state. She was reluctant to ask for the help of neighbors or friends, though she said they had offered assistance.

When she saw neighbors having their house painted and some new windows installed, she asked them first for a reference, and then approached the worker to inquire about his availability for some jobs. She still depends on the same retired gentleman, who does odd jobs for her and now for some friends.

"I hoped that if this would work out, this could be someone I could depend on for a few years, and that's turned out to be the case," said Virginia. "I didn't want a number of different people coming into my house and wanted

someone who would be honest with me, respect my privacy, and not charge me an arm and a leg. For someone of my age and situation, it's turned out to be a real godsend."

Bill Floto is the licensed and bonded owner of Elite Design, a Traverse City business that specializes in interior and exterior painting, staining and wallpapering. But he also handles an assortment of handyman requests. Much like the scenario Virginia described, Floto said that most of his work comes from referrals or people seeing him work on other projects. Word-of-mouth has been significant enough to keep him and his small staff steadily busy.

"I service everything from simple jobs for regular homeowners to resorters with estates who need buildings looked after while they're away from town," said Floto. "Most people prefer to call just one person they feel comfortable with, and once you have that sort of relationship, it builds

from there. You get known as someone who can take care of things, and if you can't, then you can help connect them to someone else who can."

Like many his line of work, Floto quotes prices for his jobs based on time, materials and other particulars like square footage. He urges those who think they might benefit from a handyman to be sure to ask for references, and establish that the worker is insured and bonded. If you are satisfied with their credentials, he said, you are on your way to knocking some of those projects off your "honey do" list.

"Time is money and there are times when you need to call on someone with a special skill to make sure a job gets done right," he concluded. "Most of us really enjoy what we do and are very particular about the quality of our work, because that gets us the next job."

Nancy Sundstrom is a local freelance writer.

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