

Biography

Katherine de Marne Werner



I was first drawn to construction when my father, Henri de Marne, decided our side porch would make a dandy office for himself. Then seven years old, I offered my services by hanging around until he found something useful for me to do. Soon, I could name all the nails and hand him the right ones at the right time. I learned all the tools and their functions. I'm sure I took a few whacks at boards in my time, but with my slight weight at that age, I didn't make much of a dent, much less pound in too many nails. As a reward for my efforts, Dad made me my own tool box for my little set of tools. I still have it.

It wasn't long before I was fixing things as well as taking them apart. I was learning this stuff. One of my early jobs was working as the Assistant Buyer of Lamps at the Hecht Co. in Washington DC. When I had enough of the office, I could be found upstairs in the back storage creating new lamps from busted parts. My one-of-a-kind specials were put on display and sold. The tough part was when a customer wanted a match. Later, I was hired by a flooring company to sell flooring. I enjoyed playing around with the merchandise and ended up running the warehouse. I furnished my first townhouse with scraps of carpet, padding, carpet samples and plywood. Sold all of it when I moved to Germany for a year when I married Peter.

Back in the States, we moved to Vermont where we ran an old Vermont farmhouse as a ski lodge for a winter. Not only did we run out of water the first day we had guests (Christmas Day), but I had to cook for them as well. (I'm not a cook, my sister is.) Dealing with the fix-it issues of old dryers, temperamental heating systems, cranky plumbing, mazes of "put-together" pipes and wires, wells, and chimneys was an education in survival! Our guests didn't starve, either.

Eventually we bought our own house. As our family grew to include two children, the house grew. We fixed electric wiring, replumbed fixtures, finished off a bathroom, added a large addition, dealt with lightning storms blowing out our water supply, electric lines coming down, days without power and water, and all manner of exciting events.

As a homeowner, I've had 26 years of practical on-the-job training to write this book. My father, syndicated columnist Henri de Marne (*First Aid for the Ailing House*, United Media), was also a remodeling contractor before writing his columns. He is now a home inspector and expert witness. My husband, a masonry contractor of 38 years, in business for 23, has given me an amazing education in safe installations of chimneys, what can go wrong and why, how to correct the problems, or more importantly, how to find the right person to do the right job the first time.

I also noticed that there isn't one homeowner's manual for women who don't want to do-it-yourself, but do need to know how to run and maintain their house. Sure, there are plenty of books on how to fix things, but what about the people who aren't handy with tools? While millions of women own their own homes, what is the percentage of those who know how to maintain the house, much less fix it themselves? Or how about the women married to men who can't use a hammer? Or the homeowners who don't have the time to DIY?

Over the last 20 years, I've helped many of my friends with their homeowner problems—from giving advice to actually doing the job. It was time to write the book.