

BY JOHN CARROLL

Mission Creep

In 2002, I was storing tools in the lower end of my North Carolina home's crawlspace. At the door, I could stand, stooped slightly, but the grade went up, and about 12 feet in, the headroom was about 4½ feet. I decided to dig out a 12-by-16-foot section near the door so I could store and retrieve my tools without stooping. At the same time, I'd beef up my underbuilt 50-year-old foundation. Then, after digging down about 2 feet, it occurred to me that by going down a mere 24 inches more, I could have a very nice space, with a concrete floor and a full 8 feet from the top of the concrete to the bottom of the floor joists. I decided to go for it (1).

And so began a 20-year odyssey. At first, I planned to dig out across the lower end of the crawlspace to create a nice, 12-by-32-foot half-basement. But then, I decided to go back another 6 feet to the next main beam of the floor system above. Around this time, a friend who came over to see the progress on the big dig observed that "this thing has become bigger than you." He was right, of course, and now I won't stop until I reach the full 54-foot length of my crawlspace.

I've divided the basement into nine sections (based on the structure of the frame it holds up). After excavating a section with a shovel and storing the soil in 5-gallon buckets until I can haul it away, I form and pour the footing for the next section of reinforced block retaining wall I'm building around the inside perimeter (2). This

wall is spaced 4 feet in from the existing brick crawlspace wall and capped with a concrete slab to provide useful storage and seal the space from moisture in the soil (3, 4). The slab floor for each 12-by-15-foot section requires about 3 yards of concrete from a ready-mix truck, while I mix up the concrete for the perimeter slabs—which require about 30 80-lb. bags of concrete each—by hand.

I recently completed the block walls for Section 7 and have excavated and poured the footing for Section 8—that wall will take about two weeks to lay up. I've now finished digging eight of nine sections and removed 18,000 5-gallon buckets of hard clay (5). As I've moved farther into the crawlspace, the grade has continued to rise. Now, at the farthest point, I need to dig down 74 inches to get to grade (6).

So far, I've gotten rid of all the clay without spending a cent and spent about \$8,000 on concrete, mortar, and blocks. By the time I get the final section done and pour the floor for the entire basement, I hope to have less than \$20,000 in the entire job. I've put a lot of man-hours in this project but always when I could squeeze them in between paying jobs. And though this has been hard-earned real estate, the end of the project is in sight.

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Photos: 1, Bill Phillips; 2-6, Matthew Navrey