



After umpty-ump columns for the good reverend's paper, I'm running a hair scant on material. That old dog thinks I can just scratch this stuff out of the dirt every month! He thinks I've got a juicy stash of bones cached away. Shoot, I haven't had a fresh idea in a decade, eat dreary tuna sandwiches for lunch every day, tell the same stories over and over again like a recorded phone message. Besides that, it's spring time, the sun's coming out, and I've got other cattle to brand. Since I'm pretty much stumped, I thought maybe I'd give a few observations on the building trades for lack of a better topic.

In the twenty-plus years I've been sawing and pounding, significant changes have occurred in the typical building process. Wood, our primary regional material, has undergone substantial degradation. Fine, straight, vertical grain fir, once the standard dimensional lumber, has virtually vanished from lumberyards in this country. Current Green Douglas Fir, Grades 1 and 2, "Standard and Better," bears scant resemblance to the sound, lightweight, tensile strong boards of two decades ago. When a unit of 2x4's shows up at a job site, the sticks of wood are a sorry mockery of the boards I knew as a young man. Green as Ireland, swollen with water like a Safeway ham, barked on both sides of a 3 1/2 inch board, two growth rings to the inch, a fellow needs to be a Sumo wrestler to lift one of the brutes. In a pile of lumber, roughly half the boards will be waned, warped, checked, scabrous things, scarcely fit for kindling wood.

My working partner, Mike Capper, and I laugh about the turn things have taken. As the years pass by, we get slightly more feeble and shrink in stature. The houses seem to get bigger and bigger and the boards heavier and heavier.

Most clients want structures with few interior walls, enormous open spaces, huge banks of windows, nine-foot ceilings, vaulted areas, massive decks. The current changes in seismic and wind-shear calculations translate into beefier timbers, monstrous beams and laminated members, exponentially more grunt work for the carpenter.

Last week a kid stopped me in the coffee shop. He'd been watching us frame up a big new residence, two green troglodytes huddled in a driving southwest rain squall.

"Man" he told me, "I've been watching you guys. You're animals!"

"Yeah," I said. "We're animals all right. Besides, between us we've got 112 years of experience!"

The English poet William Blake wrote of "fearful symmetry." In the construction of single family residences in recent decades, I've noticed a creeping trend toward homogeneity in design and assembly of structures. We all use essentially the same materials and techniques. The most common question posed by prospective clients is "How much will it cost to build this house per square foot?"

To remain competitive, contractors necessarily pare construction time and material costs to a minimum. A handful of corporate interests drive the market: Weyerhaeuser, Trus Joist MacMillan, Delta, Louisiana Pacific, Simpson Strong Tie Co., Anderson Window Corporation, Milgard, Stanley, Pabco, Schlage, Velux, Formica, Dow-Corning.

In the past five years, for example, virtually every house we've framed used engineered wood/glue composite joisting, sheathing, and sub-flooring produced by Weyerhaeuser Co., in association with Trus Joist MacMillan. In simpler terms, the entire skeletal structure of these expensive homes is formed of bark chips and glue! I daresay, most new homes built in the Northwest this past decade used the same material. A small shudder travels through me when I recall the failure of Louisiana Pacific's bevelled siding in the late 90's. If that glue binding the wood fibers ever went South on us, an unlikely prospect admittedly, then all the houses we built in the last two years would be nothing more than piles of goo and Bark-O-Mulch!

Our current project has 18 foot walls studded with 4x6 timbers. In order to erect the walls, we hired a crane to lift the tons of assembled framing. In the past, two average blokes, using conventional tools, could build a house. Now cranes, fork lifts and other heavy machinery increasingly appear on construction job sites.

Monday morning the roof trusses arrive. Mike and I will be scrambling around like two aged Rhesus monkeys twenty-five feet off the ground, my heart beating like a rabbit. It just don't seem to get easier. I guess I should have stayed in school.



OREGON COAST  
SUPPORT GROUP  
P.O. BOX 50  
CANNON BEACH  
OREGON  
97110  
503 436 0527  
503 368 4858  
FAX 503 368 7518



A JOURNAL OF ART AND OPINION  
PUBLISHED MONTHLY IN ASTORIA  
OREGON 524 1/2 1/2 STREET 97103  
MICHAEL PAUL MCGHEE'S EDITOR  
503 325 2158

4 UPPER LEFT EDGE MAY 2000

For your Deck, Cedar Siding, or Log Home...

A Wood Finish that Works in All Kinds of Weather



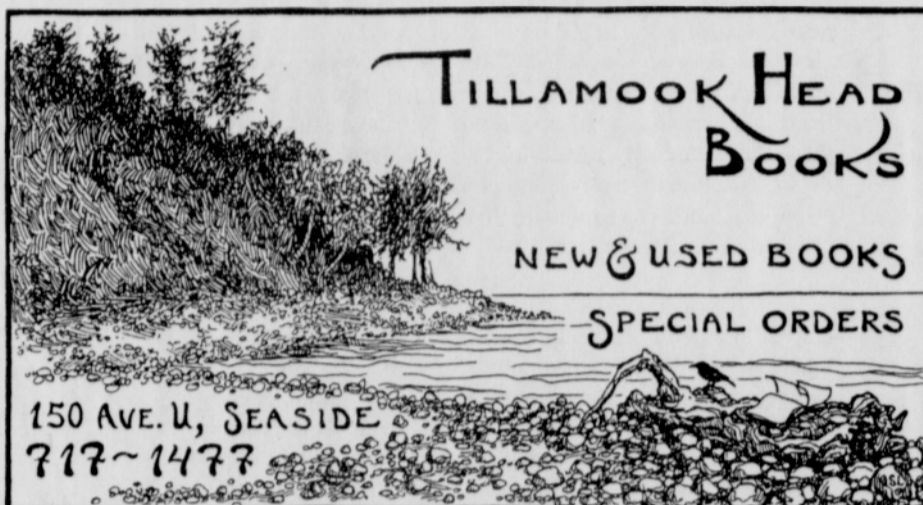
Sunlight and water rob wood of its natural strength and beauty. DEFY's unique water-based formula penetrates deeply to keep wood moisture-free and has powerful sunscreens to block damaging UV rays.

The Professional Solution For Wood

- Highlights the Natural Beauty of Wood
- Will Not Flake or Peel
- Easy to Apply and Maintain

Sun Country Log Home Store

Timber and McMinnville, Oregon (800)827-1688  
www.TheLogHomeStore.com



Do infants have as much fun in infancy as adults do in adultery?

•MARINER MARKET•

WE NOW HAVE A WIDE VARIETY OF ORGANIC PRODUCTS

ORGANIC PRODUCE	TOFU & SOY CHEESE
CAGE FREE EGGS	ORGANIC
FREE RANGE CHICKEN	GOLD MEDAL FLOUR
ORGANIC MILK	ORGANIC CORN MEAL
FRESH HERBS	FANTASTIC SOUPS & MIXES
ORGANIC CORN CHIPS	WHOLE WHEAT FLOUR

A LARGE SELECTION FROM BOB'S RED MILL  
...AND MUCH MORE

•139 N. HEMLOCK CANNON BEACH 436-2442•

Best of the  
Northwest  
Photography  
Workshops



Photograph the Northwest's spectacular rainforests, beaches & mountains at these weekend nature photography workshops!

COLUMBIA RIVER GORGE - May 19-22, 2000  
MOUNT RAINIER - September 22-25, 2000  
LONG BEACH PENINSULA - January 26-29, 2001  
OLYMPIC PENINSULA - Mar. 30-Apr. 2, 2001  
NORTH OREGON COAST - May 4-7, 2001

Supported by Kodak Professional

Toll-free information: (888) 609-6051

Pelican Productions • PO Box 278 • Cannon Beach, OR 97110

FROM THE LOWER LEFT CORNER

Victoria Stoppiello

Not so optimistic

A friend asked a provocative question the other day: Would the human race get it together and solve some of the big problems facing us, such as global warming, water pollution, overpopulation and the descent into poverty that is happening in so many places? I've tended to believe that once the discomfort is great enough, and once natural resources are scarce enough, a combination of pain and money-to-be-made will generate innovation and solutions.

Although I want to be optimistic, I'm also reminded of a story I heard about ten years ago while camping in central Nevada. A few miles from US 50, the site had been a mining camp and was strewn with relics from the mining operation. The treeless landscape swept down to an ancient sea bed lying between north-south running mountains, the kind of place that could be hot as Hades in the summer and bitter cold in winter. The attraction was a set of hot springs that flowed into several tubs set among sagebrush and behind tailing piles for a bit of privacy.

There were two other couples camping there, one with a four year old daughter. One man taught at the University of Utah, the other at the University of California in Berkeley. Both were engineers. Long-time friends, the two families had picked this remote spot as a mid-point rendezvous for a weekend get-together.

The little girl's family had camped at a spot with a tiny stream the night before and she had loved it, didn't want to leave, and was grumpy about this spot. She didn't seem to be able to get comfortable. I commented that perhaps it was something about camping at an old mining site, and described the odd feeling of dislocation I felt when we camped in the National Forest near Morenci, Arizona, where a huge open pit mine was just down the road.

The engineering professor from Cal, in all seriousness, said "Oh, that's because the earth has been wounded there, and you can hear her screams." He talked about the insensitivity that seems to go along with mining and oil exploration. Then he went on to tell a story.

He had worked for a major oil company for a number of years, and had developed a technique for containing underground oil spills, recovering the oil and reducing the potential pollution of ground water. The technique would save the company a lot of money and be better for the environment too—but the company wouldn't adopt his new method. That's when he quit the corporate life and became a college professor.

I asked, "Why would the company not do something that would make them more money and be good for the environment at the same time?"

The engineer said, "They just wanted to keep doing what they were used to doing, even though it wasn't in their own financial interest." He went on to say he understood why the public suspects oil companies engage in price fixing. He believes they do. The world of big oil is in fact small, run by a handful of men who could literally get on the phone and call each other at home: "Hey Louie, what do you say we charge XYZ?" and "Louie" in turn would call Hank, and "Hank" would call "Tom" and the small circle would be complete.

There are a few uneasy lessons in the engineer's story. One is that we humans are reluctant to change our ways—not only when it's in our invisible long-term interest, but sometimes even when it's to our immediate short term advantage. Another lesson is that in a world addicted to oil, there is no limit on the price the pusher-man can charge, and therefore no incentive for efficiency or innovation. When oil runs out in about 2050, those guys on the phone will all be dead, and the consequences of their actions in the late 20th century, whether global warming or water pollution, won't matter—to them.

It's a sad commentary that sometimes knowledge, science, even potential profit, just aren't enough. As long as we're reasonably comfortable and can accommodate gradual change in our circumstances, we don't take action. We're the proverbial frog in the slowly heating water, coming to a boil. A crisis, such as World War II, might spring us into action, recycling all our aluminum and planting Victory Gardens. But a slowly emerging problem like global warming and climate change just doesn't seem to be dramatic enough to break through our inertia.

Victoria Stoppiello is a writer living in Ilwaco, at the lower left corner of Washington State.

