

Barn

By Catherine F. Smith

August

“I don’t like this!” We are standing with Henry Speicher, master carpenter and barn builder, in our old barn looking up at large beams. It is a Pennsylvania-German bank barn built and rebuilt since the early 1800s to serve farming. In 2020 we want to recreate the old barn’s character in a new barn to serve conservation.

To our surprise, Henry exclaims again “I don’t like old barns.” His eyes darting around our old barn, he says, “Look at the rot in that beam, see how this joint has spread apart, look at how that corner is racked from wind damage. I get calls all the time to come fix this old stuff. It’s hard!” We have told Henry that we want to use large-dimension lumber like the timbers in our old barn. Traditional builder that he is, Henry nonetheless prefers to use smaller lumber and other modernizations that mean lighter work. “But,” he sighs, “I’ll build whatever you want.”

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September

The old barn is down. For two weeks a demolition crew of five young men removed weathered siding; loosened worn floor boards; pulled forged nails; cut and lowered long

beams to the ground before maneuvering them onto flatbed trucks for transport to the reclaimed wood yard for sale.

Sometimes loud music plays from a battery-powered boom box sitting on a beam as the crew works fast in coordinated moves. They quickstep along high beams to loosen boards, yank hardware out with a crowbar, chainsaw massive, intricate joints apart. They joke when mistakes happen. “Figure how far you want to fall before you jump next time,” they tease a crewmember who, moving too fast, had slipped off a beam. They wear no hard hats, gloves, or goggles.

Dave King, 33, formerly Amish, is the crew boss. A good boss with eyes on everything, he skillfully pilots a Bobcat skid loader carrying heavy timbers around the work site. “Bobcat ballet,” I call his tight turns and spins. Henry Lee Glick, 17, is enjoying the exploratory period for Amish youth before they join the Order. In his off time, jaunty, muscular Henry Lee plays goalie on a semi-professional ice hockey team. Reuben, 22, a lithe 6-footer with a sweet smile and dry wit dresses in the black jacket and pants, plain light-colored shirts, and low-crowned, round-brim straw hat of Old Order Amish men. In his off time, Reuben sells his family farm’s produce in local and New York city markets. Other crewmembers are Stephen (Old Order Amish), who takes teasing well when he falls off a beam, and James (‘English’ or non-Amish), who works without talking.

When only skeletal corner posts and rotted beams hold up the barn’s rusting tin roof, the crew goes quiet and focuses. Attaching a chain between a beam and the skid loader,

James slowly backs, pulling the structure down. It collapses in a cloud of wood dust. A lone bat flies out of the billowing dust. In those few seconds, the barn built from oak and white or yellow pine trees growing (according to growth rings) in the late 1600s is no more. James begins pushing debris into piles. Others resume work with crowbars on the now crumpled roof and broken timbers.

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October

In warm autumn weather the new barn's cement block foundation goes up. Henry and his crew arrive to lay block at 7:30 each morning in a crowded pickup truck with an 'English' driver. No radio plays for these traditional Amish. They talk and joke among themselves, mixing Dutch (Pennsylvania German dialect) and English. We watch and ask questions. Too many questions, Henry thinks. "You worry too much" he says. "Do you ever pray?"

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November

A few miles away, hemlock logs are guided one at a time through the air-powered saw at Zook's Sawmill. Only days ago, they were tall trees growing on nearby ridges. Soon, stacks of rough-cut, untreated posts and beams are loaded onto trucks headed to our site.

Winter weather comes on. Deer hunting season begins, so loggers won't risk going in the woods to cut trees. It's Amish wedding season too, so the crew take days off to attend.

Except on wedding days, Christmas Day, New Year's Day, and Epiphany, they work outdoors in a nearby field to make the parts of a timber frame building.

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December

Timber frame architecture is a box formed by vertical posts, a network of horizontal beams, and interlocking joints. Posts and beams are notched to make the joints. Notching means cutting extensions (tenons) at the ends of some timbers and cutting holes (mortises) in other timbers to receive the tenons. Notched timbers are assembled in frames (bents) that are raised upright, fitted to a surface (seated), connected by other timbers (nailers), and braced to form the box. Pegs (pins) are hammered into holes at the joints to secure the structure.

Day after day in a muddy field and snowy weather, Henry's crew notches timbers. Using hand tools, they saw tenons, auger and chisel mortise holes, and auger more than 600 peg holes for this barn's joinery. Henry artfully chainsaws rounded beam ends into what the crew playfully calls pecker heads.

On this crew are Henry Speicher, two men named Samuel N. Hostetler, another named Steven Hostetler, and Henry's son Jacob (Jake) Speicher. The two Samuels, distinguished by hair color, are called 'red' Sam and 'brown' Sam. Jake is Henry's son and apprentice. All are farmers as well as builders. The older men have the beards and wear the tall-crowned, rolled-brim straw hats, brown pants, jackets, and bloused white shirts typical of

Nebraska Amish married men. Jake, not married, is beardless and wears his hat and shirt with dark blue jacket and pants. Sometimes temperamental in his dealings with us, Henry comfortably interacts with his crew--the two Sams (wry jokesters), Steve (calm peacemaker), and Jake (occasionally grouchy athlete and daredevil).

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January

“I always tell the guys the heat’s in the tools. Get to work to get warm.” Smiling at us, Henry says “ Maybe it’s cold for you ‘English’ guys, but not for us.”

On January 14th the main barn’s frames are raised. Amish barn builders sometimes raise frames by hand with 70-100 men using ropes and long poles called pikes. For our job, Henry rented a 90-foot crane lift with ‘English’ operator.

On this raising day, there is no wind, thankfully. Temperatures are mild, in the 40s. Henry was on site at 7:30 but the crane operator came late. With hand signals and English shouts, Henry directs the crane operator to hoist each frame to hover over its intended position on the floor. It hangs suspended as the crews guide it with pikes until the tenons at the base of posts line up with mortise holes in the floor. As soon as the frame is seated two men quickly climb up its posts to straddle the corners, ready to grab lifted nailers and peg them to posts.

The crane motor whines and the crew occasionally shouts to each other in Dutch. There is no joking or laughing. It is tense, dangerous work. Again and again, the Amish crew anticipates what is needed and moves quickly to perform it. Nobody has to be told what to do or when to do it. The 'English' crane operator is a different story. Sometimes he lifts too fast or too high. Henry, obviously annoyed, does not complain, not in English anyway. The crew's teamwork is pleasurable, if nerve-wracking, to watch. Frames, each 20 feet tall and weighing several tons, hang swaying over their hats as they crouch ready to fit frame to floor. Or, straddling a seated frame's top beam, they lean back to grab a lifted nailer or lean out to hammer in a peg. Eight frames are raised over two days.

After the first raising day, we congratulate the crew. Henry, smiling, says only, "Nobody got hurt." At lunch, they come in our house to see our video of the raising. Nebraska Amish do not oppose photography as some Old Order Amish do. Still, the crew's eagerness to see the video surprises us.

When the first scene shows the crew poised to wait for a frame as it is being lifted, Henry chuckles "Bunch of maniacs" They laugh at everything, asking us to replay a scene so they can see something again. They laugh most at the riskiest moments, as when the crane's rigging brushes a crewmember's head, knocking his hat off. At the video's end, Steve quietly remarks "There's a big difference in seeing the work from a distance and seeing it up close doing it."

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April

The new barn is built. Birds nest in their usual places. Bats have returned. Hemlock posts and beams make soft popping sounds as they dry and settle. Sunlight streams between pine siding boards, illuminating massive timbers and the high ceiling, cathedral-like.