

TIMBER FRAMING

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Ken Rower

Citizens and builders alike fill the newly-opened Speed River Covered Bridge the Guild built for the City of Guelph, Ontario, as part of its Eighth Annual Conference June 9-13, at the University of Guelph. The 132-ft. Town Lattice pedestrian bridge forges a long-sought link in the city's park and trail system.

Bridge Triumph in Canada

THE bridge, the bridge. Here was a bridge that wanted to carry people. The moment it was dedicated, still wet with champagne from the bottle Scott Murray broke over the east portal, the people of Guelph flowed effortlessly through the bridge, filling it shoulder to shoulder, rank close after rank, smiling and chatting.

This was an even happier achievement than the vaunted Guild-Habitat houses of 1989. There, though a true gift, the structures were conveyed to two families for personal use, with a hint of sectarian do-goodism. Here, though paid for, the structure was conveyed to a city—to all its citizens and guests for generations—in the spirit of pride and utility. The bridge yields new environments: the Speed River, the riverbanks, the sky, the celestial bodies all take on new aspects seen through the lattice. For the Guild, the bridge represents a triumphant common achievement and a seamless binding in of the vigorous Canadian membership. "I feel now it is truly a North American guild. I'm proud to be a timber framer," Scott Murray told the happy crowd. For the other members of the "Bridge Club," as the group soon came to be known—Ed Levin and Ben Brungraber (engineering), Joel McCarty (design and drawing), Jonathan Orpin (volunteer coordinator and treasurer) and Jan Lewandoski (lattice manager and general authority)—the bridge is the reward for a long and circuitous effort. A project this size produced plenty of local heroes, too, in all styles—Terry Clark, Kenny Hess, Mike Goldberg, to take three—the sort of people who appear when a thing needs doing, and do it.

The assembly and setting of the bridge during the conference week of June 8 concluded a month-long construction process and the better

part of a year's planning and negotiation with the City of Guelph. Of course, all was not sweetness and light at every instant. When the city council first considered the proposal to build a pedestrian bridge for its park system, it voted 10-1 in favor, but within two months a newly-elected council, obliged to confirm the recent decisions of its predecessor, voted only 6-5 to do so. The local conservation authority was displeased to have any construction whatsoever in, on or over the river. Negotiations between the Guild, represented most of the time by the tireless and remarkably good-humored Scott Murray, and the city, represented by a perhaps overly-defensive Andrew Goldie, grew difficult at many points.

The Grand River Conservation Authority, which has jurisdiction in the Speed River, was not pleased to have a major construction project shatter the fragile (and newly-restored) ecology of the river. It defeated a proposal to erect temporary cribbing in the river to sup-

port rails along which the bridge could be drawn into place—the customary and proven method of setting covered bridges. Instead, a gravel pad was placed in the river, blocking one-half of its width (or leaving one-half undisturbed) and an unreasonably large Krupp mobile crane sat on it to help lift the 147,000-pound bridge onto its piers.

The non-Guild-designed piers themselves look and are much too slender for a large wooden bridge—another concession, probably, to the conservation authority—and so, instead of white oak bed timbers under the bridge and bed blocks on the piers, we find the bridge fitted with steel beams and the piers with roller bearings. It is unlikely the rollers will ever prove necessary since the unseasoned chord timbers (24-ft. pieces in a run of 132 ft.) will shrink significantly in length and thus the bridge will create its own expansion joints at each butt joint in the chords. Still, the rollers will save the piers if push comes to shove.

Guild members who volunteered their time to work on the bridge before and during the conference at the University of Guelph made a substantial gift to the Guild. The difference between the cost of running the Guelph conference and the sum of conference fees and bridge payments will be what the Guild lives on for a good part of the coming year.

Conference attendance in 1992 continued at last year's reduced level of about 400 total, including family members, staff and trade show exhibitors. Having reached levels of 600 and more in the years before 1991, the figure still seems low, though by now it may represent a true level of interest rather than a one-time aberration to be explained by the absence of work in '91 (too poor to come) or the presence of work in '92 (too busy to come). Those who did come were



Ken Rower

The lattice trusses being raised four days earlier.

CALENDAR

Conferences

Timber Framers Guild
Seventh Western Conference
November 6-8
Bend, Oregon
Timber Framers Guild
Box 1046, Keene, NH 03431
603-357-1706

Timber Framing Workshops

Jack Sobon and Dave Carlon
September 30-October 4
Hancock, Massachusetts
Dave Carlon
Box 223, Windsor, MA 01270
413-684-3612

Scott Murray
October 3-5
Markdale, Ontario
Thistlewood Timber Frame Homes
RR 6, Markdale, Ontario
Canada NOC 1H0
519-986-3280

Symposiums and Seminars

The Center for Oak Studies
Symposium on Oak Regeneration
September 8-10
Knoxville, Tennessee
Edward R. Buckner
Dept. of Forestry, University of Tennessee
Box 1071, Knoxville, TN 37901
615-974-7126

Red Suspenders
Home Design Classes
October 31-November 1, November 7-8
Nacogdoches, Texas
Wynter Chauvin
Rt. 7, Box 8383, Nacogdoches, TX 75961
409-564-9465

Timber Framers Guild
Traditional Timber Frame
Research and Advisory Group
Second Annual Symposium
February 12-14, 1993
Casanovia, New York
Randy Nash
RD 3, Box 146, Canastota, NY 13032
315-697-9833

TIMBER FRAMING

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faced with the usual feast put together by conference director Ed Levin: a score of seminars and five hands-on workshops, which, together with the ongoing bridge work a mile away that drew off quite a number of people during conference hours, meant fairly small sessions across the board. Certainly the plenary sessions were impressive this year. Tedd Benson argued passionately for "new paradigms" to be adopted by timber framers as we approach the millennium, and Lance Lee, director of the Atlantic Challenge Foundation and the genius behind three boat-building apprentice shops in Maine, proposed in a sophisticated illustrated talk a kind of salvation through craft.

THE remaining plenary session, the Annual Meeting, was packed and not long enough. Bruce Gardner, retiring Guild president, gave a short, pro forma speech looking briefly back and briefly ahead at timber framing and the Guild, then thanked the Bridge Club for its sustained efforts and particularly Scott Murray, whose glory this achievement creates, for having chosen "the largest and the most improbable project" for a group effort. Bruce then moderated the meeting with considerable wit and aplomb, answering most questions himself, but with less charity than some might have wished.

Ross Ramsey-Grier immediately asked if the Board would now hire a new executive director to replace Jim Young, who, having been hired amidst almost universal smiles in 1991, was abruptly dismissed at the end of February after less than a year's term, with a rather anguished explanation from the Board that it had lost confidence in Jim vis-à-vis the '92 conference. "No plans," said Bruce, adding that others on and off the Board were now handling the tasks to be done. But what happened? "The Guild was perhaps asking too much of one person and perhaps erred with the choice of that person," Bruce replied. "The responsibility correctly lies with this board and with me and I accept it." The "too much" was (all at once) to execute the orders of the Board, attack long-standing problems (in record-keeping and video cataloguing, for example), arrange and direct the upcoming conference and other events and at the same time earn back for the Guild all or most of his salary and office expense—in toto some \$45,000 annually—via new initiatives. It is worth remembering that Jim Young was hired by a long-serving board that had concluded it could not accomplish very much of what it conceived but that upon his hiring more than half of that board retired, and with it some of the rationale for an executive director position. Over the course of the year, the new board found itself grappling with the question of the proper work for the executive director and viewing the outflow of funds for the position with increasing dismay, until it seemed to some on the Board a kind of hemorrhage that must be stanching. And so, suddenly, it was. "Was Jim Young given advance notice or warning?" asked a voice from the floor. "Not enough, probably," Bruce responded.

CHRIS MADIGAN asked about the latest official thinking on the possibility of changing the Annual Conference, now sometimes called the "North American" or even the "International" conference, to a biennial schedule. The Annual "remains the Guild's pancake supper," said Bruce, and as the single largest source of funds for the Guild's activities it will likely continue as it is. "Do we have a strategy then to meet financial problems?" asked another member. "We do not have a five-year plan," Bruce answered. "We do need more variety as to how the funds roll in. We have had a fair amount of conversation about this but taken no action."

Joe Toomey then asked his perennial question: why not put up a building, perhaps as a headquarters, perhaps as an archive or a retreat? "Is it time or place or money or what?"

Joe asked. Here Bruce was curt: "Yes," he said. And that was that. In truth, the first question to be answered about this worthy building is where to put it. At the geographical center of the membership? In Keene, New Hampshire, where the office now is? At the foot of the Guelph Bridge? There is no question that the Guild could build a headquarters in the course of a conference. The question is where.

Frank Baker observed that without a permanent structure, without an executive director to give continuity to the leadership, "we can't realize our dreams. We need some concept of where we're going. Have we reached the limit and fallen back, or are we going to grow? We had better chart a course." Bruce countered: "Would you like to help to do that?" Len Brackett wondered, "Has anyone thought about those timber framers who are not in the Guild?" Bruce's answer, if amusing, was uninformative: "We're all a little out of the norm," he smiled. "Timber framers who aren't in the Guild are just a little farther out."

Financial arrangements for the bridge project had been puzzling people for months. Duncan Keir asked for an explanation and Jonathan Orpin, the director in charge of the matter, responded. First, this job was not a gift: the Guild was to receive from the City of Guelph \$104,000 (Canadian) for the labor only. This sum was intended to defray costs of the conference at the University of Guelph—indeed combined with conference fees it was hoped to yield a profit for the Guild treasury. The sum was not a reflection of the value of the labor but was originally calculated to cover room and board for 650 at the university. To its credit the city later agreed to pay that sum regardless of attendance (which, as we have seen, was much lower). So it was to be understood that all those Guild members slogging away at the bridge site were really contributing their time to the Guild. Second, bridge builder Jan Lewandoski, with his crew, had a separate contract with the city to oversee the lattice truss construction, all of which took place in advance of the conference. Third, although Jonathan did not take the time to explain these details, the city had agreed to pay the Guild additional fees of \$2,000 (Canadian) for project management, \$5,000 for engineering and \$7,500 for design, but at that moment it wasn't clear how much of that money would be forthcoming.

The Timber Tax, as it is willy-nilly coming to be known, grows closer to enactment. Brief review and discussion of the notion—whereby framers would ask their clients for a donation or a matching donation equal to \$10 or \$20 for each 1,000 board feet of timber used in a frame (an average frame contains, say, 6,000), with the money to be used for long-rotation reforestation—led to a straw vote of the membership showing universal acceptance of the proposal. Randy Joseph leads this effort, with assistance from director Merle Adams. It remains to figure out the administration, accounting and disbursement. Since the Guild does not own or control any forest land, how will the money be spent? "We'll start by collecting funds," said Randy, "then decide how to spend them."

TEDD BENSON's talk—a reasoned exhortation, really—which he said grew out of his "need for more and deeper meaning in the work" and was built on six months' reading and reflection, briefly praised the short history of

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the timber frame revival, its achievements, aspirations and practices: the Guild has “affected the building industry across the country” (and an innocent glance through *Architectural Digest* at the Toronto airport before my flight home did indeed show exposed timber of one sort or another in every featured house), and in its business practices of the 70s anticipated the fashionable thinking of today. But all is not well: our innovations have become our “conventional wisdom” and the world has changed while we have not.

We need, Tedd declared, a “paradigm shift,” a change in the imaginary models that establish our mental boundaries. To the Japanese, for example, time is an ally, an abundance; to us it is generally a scarcity. The simple question to ask is, “What business are we in?” The proper answer, Tedd insisted, is not “building timber frames” or even “building houses.” The proper answer for our time is rather that we are in “the business of enhancing and improving lives.”

This proposition represents a step beyond his earlier “Whole House” thesis, which Tedd has been defending since at least the first Guild conference at Hancock ’85, but the earlier thinking is the foundation for the new edifice: “A timber frame by itself is not a viable commodity without everything it takes to change somebody’s life.” And here a surprising possibility arises. “A frame built of poor timbers poorly-joined can become a fantastic living space, a great frame with perfect wood, fitting to a thirty-second, a lousy living space.”

Do we even admit the deficiencies of the timber-framed house? No, answered Tedd, we expect the dominant aspect to account for the deficiencies. A timber-framed house takes more work from the client, our production systems are slow, the job takes 50 per cent more planning time (every mechanical system needs special design) and some of the systems we use don’t work very well. If the existing “paradigm” is “This product is so good, the flaws don’t matter,” the new paradigm ought to be “A timber frame is so good that it should not suffer these deficiencies.”

As for business practices, “We’ve got to stop apologizing for the fact that we are in business (‘I’m a craftsman—I’m not a businessman’). We have the opportunity to create a visible model. Good businesses are aligned with good human principles.” When we compete with each other for jobs, the pool of clients is our “commons” and we as a group have the capability of expanding the commons rather than using it up. “Every job should create several others. For you, for me.”

Realize, Tedd observed, that “you cannot extract yourself from the environment. This life is ephemeral. Success and failure as we hear it from the marketing moguls is a sales pitch. Success is what we feel in our hearts and hands when we have the opportunity to serve other people.”

LANCE LEE would not disagree. “It’s all a torch race,” this human entrepreneur commented as he reviewed his experience as founder of successive boat-building apprentice shops in coastal Maine. “Whatever boat we built had to pass a three-person jury: a neighbor, a teacher, a craftsman.” As a boat builder, he reminded us, “You are your brother’s keeper, since others will go to sea in this boat.”

Using slide illustrations from a range of sources (“books, people, boats, I draw from them”), Lance proposed that we must (as a society) “invest in great skills as pure education,” since these are “the way to self-possession.” Competence leads to self-esteem, which can yield a reverence for where we came from. Why, he asked rhetorically, do people put home woodworking shops in the basement? “I would like to see the bench in the living room, shavings on the rug. Your children should see what you do. Very important.”

Lance’s immediate effort these days is trained on Russia. A group in St. Petersburg

has asked his assistance in setting up an apprentice shop on the River Neva, with the first task to build a copy of Peter the Great’s personal boat—a 20-ft. sailing vessel that still exists and for the Russian people of today represents more than ever an icon of its spirit. “Can you take utter novices in woodworking and conceive of them making Peter the Great’s boat? They must,” said Lance. At the time of the conference a young Russian working in Maine had built most of a one-fifth-scale half-model that will later be used as a knock-down pattern for the new boat. Lance sees the boat-building effort as the pattern for the rebuilding of Russia, a revitalization through craft.

“Are we truly *Homo sapiens*?” he asked. “I can’t quite buy that. Try on *Homo faber*. Perhaps. But we are really *Homo ludens*—man the player,” as the Dutch historian Huizinga found us. Citations: Rodin’s “Gates of Hell” (slide)—“Rodin was a playful man with a serious theme”; the bell-tower built by The Timber-Frame Workshop for a man who needed a doorbell for his rather unusual house, which we had seen during the annual slide show (and which later won the Design Contest); and finally, Dick Zimmerman, developer of the “Ice-Cave Dugouts” in Salmon, Idaho, a vacation community of fully-recycled cabins we had also seen in the show. “Through the loving conspiracy of playful making,” Lance proposed, “we can get away from this sad world of television, Disneyland and Big Macs. I hold to this view of history: we create, we destroy, we restore. You see it everywhere.”

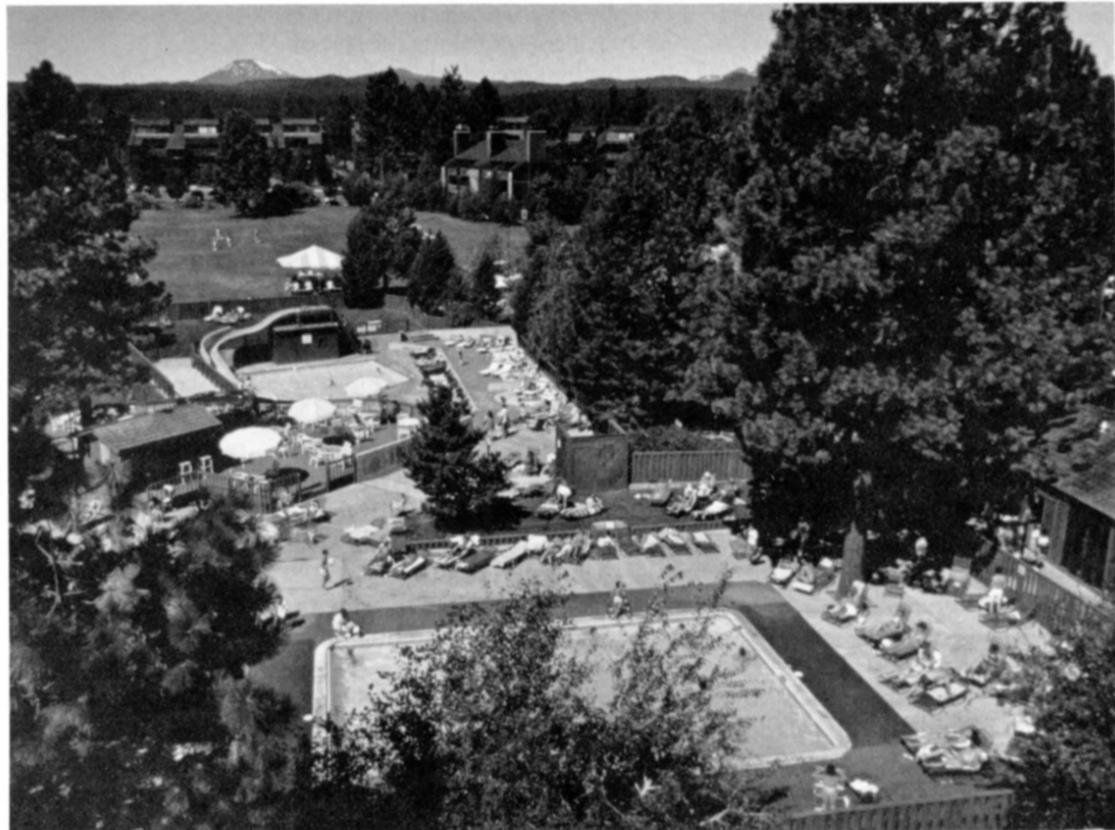
ELECTIONS, a quiet, routine affair this year, brought three new people to the nine-member board, Will Beemer of Massachusetts, Jake Jacob of Washington and Doug Lukian of Quebec. With Scott Murray reelected, the three positions are now filled that were left open by the retirement of Bruce Gardner, Mack Magee and Charles Landau (though Charles refused to go quietly, repeatedly appearing over, under and inside the bridge during the course of the conference). The Board met after the conference to change the guard (Bruce bade the group goodbye and good luck), get new members acquainted, and choose (by consensus, its customary method) a new executive committee for the coming year: Scott Murray (President), Nancy Wilkins (Vice-President),

Jonathan Orpin (Treasurer) and Joel McCarty (who remains Clerk). Merle Adams and Mark Witter continue as ordinary directors. The Board also acted to support Lance Lee’s Russian effort by promoting it within the Guild. A swift letter to the membership brought some seed money (Bruce Gardner was first), then further contributions from friends of the guild, and finally a dozen Guild members led by Ed Levin flew off to St. Petersburg on August 2 to spend 10 days helping out the Sea History Club there move a building and set up a shop. The contributions were matched by the Board and then, saving a small reserve, distributed to the Atlantic Challenge Foundation, the Sea History Club and the cost of Ed’s passage and subsidies for three willing but impecunious craftsmen. So the Guild now has a Russian Fund. The Board also voted to send a \$3,000 grant to the joint TFG-Yuba Watershed Institute forest planning effort in Nevada City, California. The directors will meet again face-to-face this month for their regular annual intensive weekend of laying out the goals for the year. “I found the new board’s youthful exuberance and disregard for pomp and circumstance quite refreshing,” said Mark Witter later. “The new guys jumped right in.”

SATURDAY night’s party after the bridge dedication—and after Jim LeRoy and Vickie Jones had their wedding ceremony at the east portal of the bridge—followed a good feast, with fireworks and a rock band, provided by donors who had taken a fancy to the timber framers. Marcus Brandt, who will now vie with fellow-Pennsylvanian Ben Brungraber (it must be the water) for the honor of loudest voice, sang the bridge song he and Arkansan Karl Manzer composed for the occasion. A fairly dangerous three-day work party (much longer for some), in which the mandatory hard hats and shoes were no protection against the cacophony of chain saws, crane trucks, electric drills, Skilsaws, scissors trucks, fork lifts—even a thickness planer—nor against the overmanning of most tasks except the lifts and pulls—a wild and dangerous time ended with one injury to the bridge (fixed) and one personal injury (healed), a remarkable performance. Or perhaps the Guild, and this is likely on other evidence, has a guardian angel.

—KEN ROWER

’92 Western Conference at Bend



The back yard at The Inn of the Seventh Mountain, Bend, Oregon, where the Guild will hold its Seventh Western Conference November 6-8. At the foot of Mt. Bachelor in the Deschutes National Forest, Bend is famous for its dry, mild climate and exceptional Ponderosa pine forests. A brand-new competition this year will be directed by Merle Adams on the ice-rink at the Inn. Teams already signed up include the Spotted Owls, the Quakes, the Potatoes, the Whales, the Loonies and Southern Comfort.