

WHEN we first received the notices of the June conference in Canada, it seemed impossible for us to attend. Phil accepted the disappointment without complaining, but I fretted—mulling over the objections and difficulties with persistence. We needed the conference. We wanted to learn from the seminars and workshops, to hear survival stories from other builders, strengthen friendships and take part in the construction of the bridge. The year had been as hard as any we could remember. Even the New Hampshire spring had seemed to mock our despondency with frost late into May and a wet-cold so bleak it almost discouraged the black flies.

So, I prioritized—that newfangled word which helps you get your own way. On June 7th, after dropping our Chinese daughter-in-law and two grandchildren in Boston for their flight home to Bangkok, we turned and headed in the opposite direction—north to Ontario.

Looking back over the time in Guelph is like recalling an excellent meal. You know that each course is superb, but recognizing all the ingredients isn't easy. I decided to examine the elements on paper as if I could reconstruct for myself the recipe of success that the conference was for us.

Before our arrival, I had studied the course offerings carefully. As the non-craftsperson, I

TOPICS

Organic Circles

chose to go to those seminars which would help me be a better helper. The smorgasbord of possibility was inviting, and I sampled photography, the export trade, history of timber framing, growth of strong businesses, 'Inimim Forest, philosophy session and sustainability. It was a rich diet. When you're hungry, it's easy to overeat. Sometimes I felt bloated, but in retrospect, the food for thought was healthy and nourishing. This is without even mentioning the desserts—Tedd Benson's talk, Christine Benson's meeting—the evening of inspiring slides or the closing remarks of Lance Lee.

Two phrases from Tedd's talk resonated in my mind: "paradigm shift" and "organic circle." The organic circle is our forests; the organic circle is our families and the beautiful houses built by timber framers; the organic circle is our species amongst the rest—our planet as it evolves in the universe of which we know so little. To illustrate: an aspect of the conference beautiful to behold was the presence and behavior of the children. How child-like they were running with paper streamers

in the dark at the farewell party or sliding down the balustrade outside the dining hall! It is strange to compliment children for being childlike or men and women for being masculine and feminine, but it was so. I was struck by the tenderness of the mothers who cared for their children through speeches and seminars or watched while their men participated at the bridge. Timber framers build beautiful houses. Various people emphasized the importance and possibility of happy customers. They spoke of the market that waits to expand under the influence of the warmth and intimacy inherent in timber frame houses. Happy customers may be satisfied with quality work and special attention to their needs, but the most beautiful house cannot make a home. On one of her first visits to America, our daughter-in-law said, "Big houses in America, Mom. Nobody home."

Without necessarily owning timber-framed houses, members of the trade do seem to live in an "organic circle." The children at the conference were at home in the presence of their parents. The beauty of the conference was the web of relatedness, but the miracle was *the bridge*.

Like every other doubter, I need to be shown. I want proof. We came to the conference early enough on Monday afternoon to

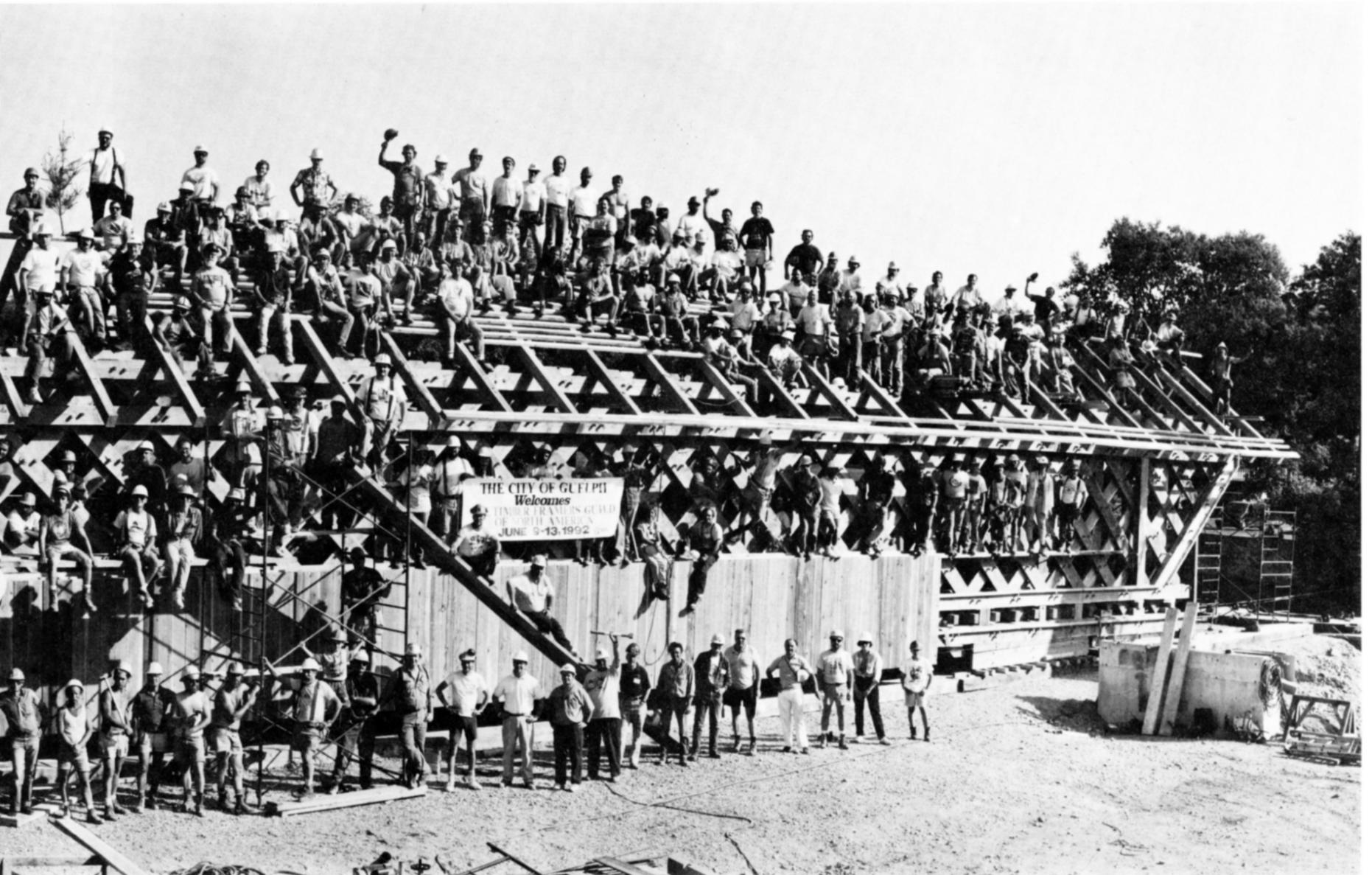


Pullers, pikemen, lifters at the ready. There were 120 pikes in three lengths, all made by Marcus Brandt.



Pullers strain on the six sets of tackle, pikemen push up, lifters peel off to grab longer pikes.

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look over the advance preparations. Under normal conditions, the planning for the project would have been formidable, but the phenomenon of hundreds of eager, competent workers descending on the site was mind-boggling. Whoever thought of starting this phase of the project by giving each participant a peg to drive into the 40,000-pound lattice trusses lying assembled on the ground had experienced a stroke of genius. It was a very personal entrance into a titanic group effort.

At the truss raising, I positioned myself as the camera eye. I had attended photographer David Brill's seminar which dealt particularly with lighting. On site, he was appropriately raised high in a basket where the needed light was best of all. Even for me, the light below seemed exquisite as the western sun gleamed off the dust particles stirred up by the waiting "pushers" and "pullers."

Without any apparent confusion, the crowd of raisers divided into "rope-pullers," "underneath-pushers" or "pole-pushers." The amount of instruction seemed sparse considering that a few hundred people were about to lift 20 tons. There might have been questions or hesitancy, but instead, a magic circle of energy seemed as visible as the afternoon sunlight. This was the moment for "unambiguous commitment" and

it was palpable, dispelling fear. The answering "Ayes" were given to the question of readiness, and with the "Yo, Heave!" the structure rose. It was miraculous and a torrent of hopefulness and confirmation was released. One of the joys of timber framing is the challenge of the project. The result is solidly tangible—often a small or large wonder.

The theme of the "paradigm shift" was woven in and out of the discussion at Joel McCarty's philosophy seminar. For some years, I have been watching for such shifts. They require a long inner preparation and are of major significance when they occur. As members of Joel's group spoke, I was reminded of a humbling experience I had had.

Some time ago, I was teaching in a home, and the three-year-old younger brother of my student presented me with a picture. I studied the black and yellow swirl with a puzzled expression that I tried to conceal.

He explained, "It's the planet."

"Of course," I replied.

Driving home, I wondered when it was that children had stopped seeing the world as a grassy field with a tree in the center and a line halfway up the page dividing the earth from the sky. Suddenly, I realized, I had seen a "paradigm shift" in this child. The newest generation sees the world differently. And so, it is

also a "paradigm shift" that—without any apparent controversy—timber framers accept the importance of the planet and are voluntarily searching to demonstrate their commitment to both the past and future in new ways.

The subject of "money" was not prominent during the conference. Nancy Wilkins did exhort us to succeed financially in order to acquire the power needed to enact change. She pointed out that, in our culture, power does not lie in individuals or government agencies but in economic groups. The work on the bridge, however, testified to our preference for *contribution*, as the work itself was done for something in addition to money. In the organic circle, there is no bottom line.

On Thursday evening, we walked to the bridge site after supper at the university dining hall. We approached the ever-growing crowd of townsfolk watching the work from behind snow-fencing set around the construction.

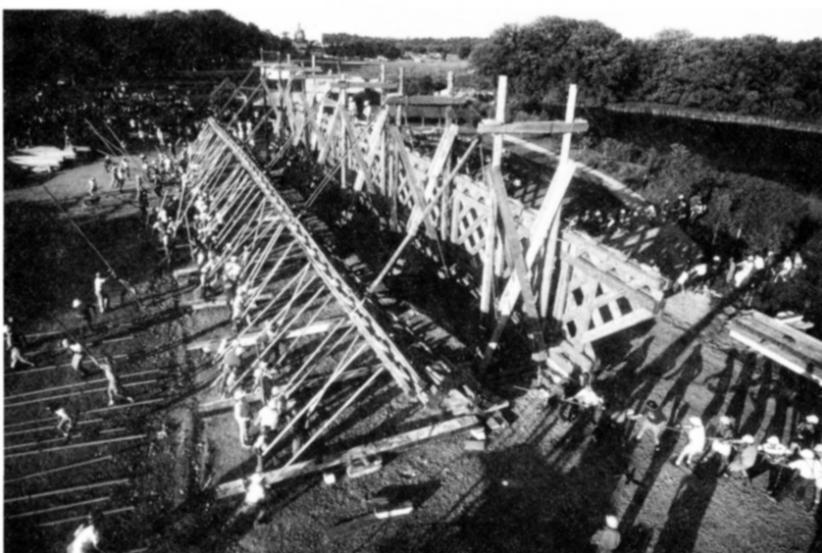
A pretty teenager in a passing pickup called to us: "Hey, what are you guys doing?"

"We're building a bridge."

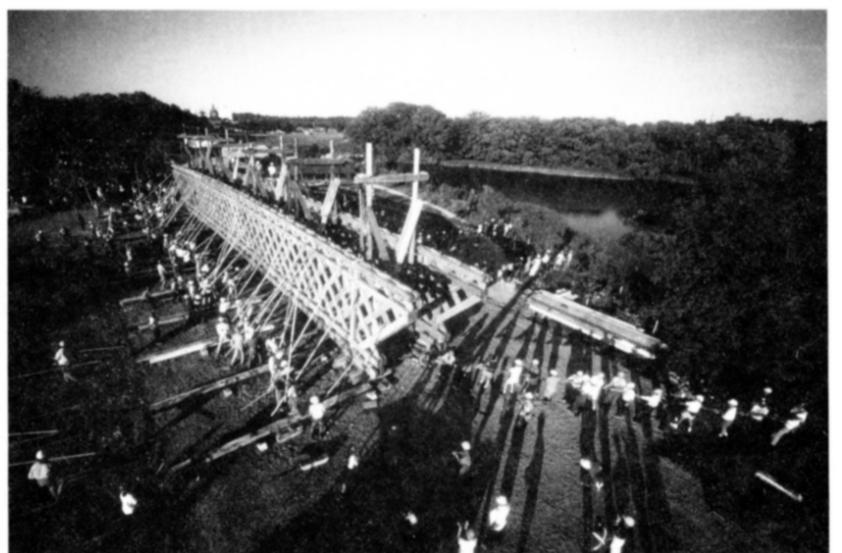
"Is that all?" she replied with disappointment. We laughed. No, that certainly was not all.

—NANCY JANSEN CURRIER

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Pullers keep a strain on the lines and the long pikes come into play. Pikes are fitted with hand-forged tips.



The 40,000-pound truss erect. The lift was well calculated—with the mechanical advantage of the tackle, no one was overstrained.

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