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The art of timber framing lives on



—Photos by MARY BERRYHILL

Collins Beggs sits on his shaving horse to shape wooden pegs using a drawing knife.

Collins Beggs continues to practice centuries old framing method

By MARY BERRYHILL
Staff writer

SANDPOINT — Collins Beggs recently brought to the area the revival of "Timber Framing."

According to Beggs, there are quite a few timber framers in the nation, but only a handful who use only hand tools to fashion these incredible wooden structures that are fastened together with wooden joinery using 19th century tools and methodology.

Beggs takes us back in time. To watch him work in his shop on Baldy Mountain Road is like watching a craftsman work centuries ago.

"The craft is very old," he said. "And modern carpentry has no history without timber framing. Many cultures have a tradition in timber framing which is a craft dependent on heavy timbers joined together using wooden pegs. So that

method is centuries old."

The earliest surviving examples from Northern Europe include structures from the 12th century, and the oldest surviving example of a wood-framed house in the States is the 1637 Fairbanks house of Dedham, Massachusetts.



Collins Beggs bores a mortise in a Douglas Fir with a Millers Falls boring machine.

CRAFTSMAN

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The revival of timber framing began in the 1970s and was supposedly sparked by a curiosity of old buildings along with a desire to build more lasting homes. Beggs got caught up in the revival at an opportune time.

He grew up in the small Alaskan town of North Pole. He's been fascinated with the use of natural resources during his childhood, and later, as a full scribe log builder his interest led him in the direction of what is called "vernacular" architecture, which in turn introduced him to the craft of timber framing. He was fascinated with it all and wanted to learn all he possibly could.

"The shop was high volume so it was a perfect place to 'cut my teeth' in the craft," he said.

At about the same time, Beggs met a craftsman who used traditional tools and techniques, and he worked with this craftsman on the weekends. When the opportunity arose to further study on a full time basis, he began working on historical restoration projects, new homes and barns using these traditional methodologies. One of these projects was restoring the home of Mormonism's founding prophet, Joseph Smith, in Palmyra, New York.

"We rebuilt Joseph Smith's cabin from the diaries and documents that the church provided. We reassembled Brigham Young's father's barn on the same site," he said. "We were helping to recreate Joseph Smith's family's homestead."

Beggs and his wife eventually headed to the New England states where he began studying in a small tim-

ber frame shop there. He ended up working in three different shops over a period of five years.

"I worked in a more modern shop where we'd put out a frame structure or two in a month's time, and then at the same time I worked with a 19th century restorationist using tools and methodology from that era."

Later, he once again moved — this time to Maine where he worked in a small timber frame shop for three more years before setting out on his own. Six years later he returned to the West and settled down in Sandpoint.

Beggs continues to practice the age-old method in his work today. The structures he's built over the last five years have been using the old technology, and remarkably five of the buildings he built entirely by himself using only hand tools.

Most of his Beggs' construction is of new residential homes.

"Ninety-nine percent of all timber frames going up are residential," he said. "Some, but few, are commercial."

Beggs said that timber framing nearly died out in the British Isles once, and in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

"By the 19th century, tim-

ber framing was coming to an end pretty much," he said. "I mean there were still pockets of the craft, but it was really declining."

France, he said, has maintained a continuous tradition from at least the 13th century, and today continues to offer an ongoing apprenticeship program.

"So with the whole revival of timber framing, a Timber Framers Guild came into existence and is now large enough to be considered an industry."

Nearly 2,000 members form the timber frame industry.

"We're all timber framers, but the methodology is very different," Beggs said. "There's really only a handful of hand tool timber framers — the true traditional timber framers."

Beggs, as one is the hand-ful, banished the use of anything but hand tools in his work. He said he was able to compete economically that way.

"Also, I don't have the dust and pollution. As far as my own health, it's a lot better for me personally," he said. "The end result is wonderful and fun. I found that timber framing —

whether one uses machinery or only hand tools, has really grown in relationship with each other and work very well

together."

The time that it takes to build a timber frame structure is surprisingly short. In his shop, he draws in with shaped pegs. He uses a club, froe and shaving horse to rive pegs from billets. He cuts each joint using traditional hand tools and then completes the framing. After delivery to the site, he spends a day or two assembling the structure, and in about six hours the average building is standing.

"Each house is so particularly determined in and of itself. People want to be able to see the beam work," he said.

"Medieval frames utilize the open timber roof system which means we were just out of the caves in Europe, and what we did was burn a fire in the center of the room. The smoke escaped through a

thatched hole. It was like a wooden tee-pee."

He said that it wasn't until the 19th century that the fad of covering up the timbers with wood or plaster was used.

"Timber framing is a proven system as far as longevity," he said. "And it really makes the most sense as far as the utilization of trees in our area — making sure that the resources aren't going to be wasted. Timber-framed structures have a proven history of lasting for three, four and five hundred years."

The Timber Framers Guild holds two annual conferences each year — one in the eastern United States and the other in the West. Beggs is hoping that in the year 2007 the Timber Framers Guild will hold one of their two annual conferences here in Sandpoint.

For more information about the art of timber framing, contact Coffin Beggs at (208) 290-8120 or e-mail him at coffin.beggs@verizon.net.