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Raising the barn: Timber-framers invite the community to help

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By **Evan Harris**

The idea of a barn raising is pure Midwest: that unique bootstrapping blend of self-sufficiency and community, grit coupled with the elegance of simple living. It is also a task that brings together utility with deeper principles of respect, resource and long-term thinking. Barn raising brings to mind living not just off the land, but with the land. Less than two centuries ago, barns were erected all across the Midwest through collaborative effort within farming communities, with townsfolk, tradesmen, laborers and everyone in between pitching in.

The spirit and practice of barn raising will return to Geneseo, Ill., Aug. 12–22 when Trillium Dell Timberworks, in conjunction with the Timber Framers Guild, will host a community event to raise a timber-framed barn to serve as the new home of the Antique Engine & Tractor Association (AETA). As in the old days, volunteers are needed.

Rick Collins is owner and lead tradesman of Trillium Dell Timberworks, based in Knoxville, Ill., since 1999. This event will be the sixth he and his company have hosted in the last eight years.

"We put on these events to help people rediscover respect for their buildings and communities. We get people involved, and then the community 'owns' the building. It shows the incredible things we can do with local resources that are often cut up into firewood," Collins says.

Collins and Trillium Dell Timberworks specialize in timber-frame construction, a building technique – really the only building technique until about 100 years ago – that uses wood-to-wood connections through joinery and wooden pegs to support the structure.

"Timber-framings as a construction technique is at least six or seven thousand years old," says Collins. "The tradition was broken in this country during the Industrial Revolution, but it's been rediscovered in the last 20 or 30 years."



Submitted

During a community event in 2003, Phelps Barn, located in Elmwood, Ill., was restored and raised.

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In addition to the mortise and tenon joinery that defines timber-framing, it is known for its clean, classic and spacious aesthetics, reliance on local resources, longevity and community involvement. With "sustainability," "local resources" and "energy efficiency" currently buzzwords of the highest order, each hinting at so much more than the physical materials used in construction, it seems timber-framing somehow embodies these same principles.

Case-in-point: The Geneseo barn will be framed entirely with local, Illinois White Oak, sourced within 100 miles of the construction site.

Joel McCarty, Executive Director of the Timber Framers Guild, based in Becket, Mass., has participated in 60 such events worldwide over the last 25 years. As a nonprofit, educational organization, the Guild's participation in barn-raising events is at least as much about education and community involvement as it is about the structure to be erected.

"We want everyone to come down and watch or participate. We won't be behind a construction fence. It will be open to the public. So at the very least we hope folks come down, sit in the shade and get curious about building this barn," McCarty says.

Incredibly, this will be the first barn built out of local materials and utilizing skilled joinery in the county in over 150 years. The structure is "a classic Midwestern barn" and, at 48-by-70 feet, represents the shape, proportion and design typical of barns built in the area between 1820 and 1920. After 1920, deforestation and changes in construction techniques brought on by the Industrial Revolution forever changed the building practices of the area. Collins has also replicated the joinery techniques of that time, and not just for historic value: They are time-tested and proven to withstand the tornadoes and snow guaranteed to come.

This project for AETA, as well as any timber-framed structure this large, is a labor of love, planning and precision. The wooden frame itself is the product of two months of work at Trillium Dell, while the barn-raising event is two-and-a-half years in the making. And all of it comes on the heels of decades of renewed interest in Midwestern barns, the methods by which they were built and the principles they embody.

Chuck Bos of the AETA says that the genesis of this project, which seems sprawling, was really just a matter of one thing leading to another.

"We received some donated land, and the donor happens to be in the timber business. He suggested a timber-framed structure and offered to donate the timber. We started looking into that, and it all came together from there."

The barn-raising event, made possible in large part by Bill and June Cole of Hillsdale, Ill., will combine education, heritage, history and community. Trillium Dell and the Timber Framers Guild will have workshop and volunteering opportunities. Just like in barn raisings of the past, whatever their level of skill and interest, there will be a part for volunteers to play.

"This will be a 'modern raising,' so people can expect to see cranes, not horses, but they can also expect to see many tools that their grandparents would have recognized. Our workshops will focus on rigging and raising the frame and installing paneling once the frame is up," says McCarty.

For spectators and volunteers, the event is free. Workshops, which integrate parts of the Timber Framers Guild's overall curriculum, are tuition-based and require registration (visit tfguild.org for details).

McCarty works with a different crew everywhere he goes, recruiting local and regional craftsman for two

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reasons: first, for their expertise and skill and second, to show the communities where these events happen that what they are witnessing is not exotic or unrepeatable.

"We want people to see that there are local craftsman in their area who specialize in exactly this type of building. In this case, it's Rick Collins and Trillium Dell."

Having worked on public raisings in the past, Collins suggested a public, educational event for the new AETA building. He feels that the time and effort involved in planning, fabricating and erecting a timber-frame with the community's help pays off in many ways: "It may take three or four times longer to create a structure this way, but it will easily last that much longer than a conventional structure. This barn we're raising in Geneseo will last 800 to 1,000 years." Having personally visited 1,200-year-old European structures of similar size and design as the Geneseo project, it's no wonder Collins speaks with such confidence.

Neither is it difficult to see the emotional and even spiritual appeal of timber-framing and raising a structure expected to last for centuries: Though the literal practice of barn-raising as a practical necessity is all but gone due to various technological advances, its essence resonates. "Barn raising" has become part of our language, symbolic of all efforts to shore up one another, to buoy the community as a whole through a common cause, to transform the potential drudgery of a difficult task into something greater than us. Outdated as its literal meaning may seem, its essence is all-too-appropriate for our times.

Both Collins and McCarty say that 10 days of workshops and community involvement are not necessary to erect the structure. But simply erecting it with the help of a crew would miss the point.

"We want people to find the power in community action and to have an investment in their community and living space," says Collins. "We've seen the respect people find when they are involved in the building process. There's an ownership and pride that wouldn't be there otherwise."

To volunteer at the barn raising, call Charlie Tucker at (309) 887-4653 or e-mail enginetractor267@hotmail.com. For more information, visit Trillium Dell Timberworks: trilliumdell.com; Timber Framers Guild: tfguild.net; or Antique Engine & Tractor Association: atkinson-engine-tractor-assoc.com.

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