

# A WEEK OF TIMBER FRAMING AT THE JOHN.C. CAMPBELL FOLK SCHOOL

## SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED



### KEEPING THE ART ALIVE

It was at least a week after the accident that the doctor was confident enough to venture the guess that the

foot would mend well enough so that he could walk again without some support. All he could remember was the initial moment when he knew something very



bad had happened, but there was no pain....yet. The big timber had fallen off the sawhorse because of some mistake, maybe because everyone was moving too quickly, maybe because they weren't familiar enough with the layout, maybe because they weren't used to working together as a team. Whatever the reason, the fall of less than three feet to his foot was life changing...his foot just below the ankle took the blow full force, and that moment was still with him when he knew what had happened and all he could do before screaming was to wish for that second before the fall when all was well.

Fortunately, *none* of this happened. But like most short stories, we need to provide an opener to catch your attention.

And that opener is in praise for the timber framing class I had the great good fortune to take the week of 22-28 May, 2011, at the John C. Campbell Folk School in the



charming far reaches of western North Carolina, over 100 miles beyond Asheville where the Cherokee Nation once thrived.

Charles Judd, who owns Blue Heron Timber Works west of Knoxville, Tennessee, taught the class along with his talented and forgiving shop foreman Cliff Wilson. The pergola we built is not the first timber-framed structure that Charles has erected on the Campbell campus, but is part of a pattern of constructing timber-framed additions to the various workshops that make Campbell so varied. The jewel in his crown is the addition to the blacksmith shop that a small army of inspired and dedicated guys and gals from the timber framers guild built last year over an amazing two weeks. It's truly a marvel to the eye to see this



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astonishing building which links those who pursue different but complementary ancient crafts.

So this year Charles continued his theme and designed a massive pergola to place in front of the woodturning shop named after the late Willard Baxter, who was not only a great presence in the woodturning world but also a homespun philosopher.



When I think back to my first class at Campbell many years ago, I can still see him telling stories while he had us make endless coves and beads as exercises. My favorite anecdote was his tale about how he and his wife Sarah taught pre-marriage classes in his church. When someone asked Willard if he and Sarah had ever considered divorce, he paused in a way that would have made the late Senator Sam Ervin proud and finally said, "No, never divorce....long pause...but murder possibly."

This year's project then took on special meaning as our class of 12--ten men and two women--grouped around Charles and Cliff after supper on Sunday night to unload the massive coastal Bald Cypress timbers that would eventually become our addition to the woodturners' shop and an enduring tribute to Mr Baxter.

At Charles' direction, we formed into 2-

person teams. I was fortunate to pair up with Robin Smith, a psychologist from Asheville. We had hit it off from the proverbial get-go at dinner and formed a tight bond, partly over our similar senses of humor and partly over the home-made brew I had brought to tip off the end of the night.

The word "orientation" may mean many things to all of us, but in timber framing it takes on more than a simple directional guide. When you start to think in three dimensions and begin picturing posts and girders with tenons and mortises coming



in and going out of the same piece of wood in various places, you might get some idea how some of us felt when we were told to lay out the many components of our pergola based on a site inspection and a drawing with no dimensions. What if we got topsy-turvy and drew the mortises on the wrong side or an inch too wide or on the far rather than near side of the face of a post?? Lions and tigers and bears....

Charles didn't let us panic, however, and walked us through the process and emphasized the importance of

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customizing a design that fits its site. He said he hoped we would have an actual pergola by week's end, but what he really



wanted was for us to know the process of building any timber-framed structure, not just this particular one. He was our chef who was going to teach us techniques, not just recipes. An intense and demanding man, he also knew how to



build a team and to get us to think on our feet rather than just follow direction. He was constantly challenging us to take "ownership" and solve our own problems, answer our own questions and to anticipate the next step we had to do.

And, most importantly, he emphasized safety all the time, so we could go home at the end of the week under our own power with fingers, hands and feet intact.

We all loved the shirt he wore the first day which proclaimed "By hand and hammer, all things are built." No pumping floppy discs for us. This was a class where satisfaction came from learning to use new hand tools as well as mechanical beasts that ate through wood quickly and efficiently. We knew early on that this was a world that welcomed the techniques of Roy Underhill of the PBS program *The Woodwright's Apprentice* ("Just say No to power tools") and those of Norm Abrams of the *The New Yankee Workshop* ("We are just one power tool away from greatness"). So our days alternated from using large hand-held chisels or "slicks" to grappling with



monster tools like the chain-saw mortiser that was an impressive and downright intimidating wood eater that commanded everyone's attention.

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My other classmates came from a number of states as well as Canada and ranged in age from their early 20s to grey beards like me. One quality we had in common, though, was a comfort with tools and an eager willingness to learn and help one another. Unlike most Campbell classes which allow you to proceed on your own individual pace, this class emphasized our team effort.



In no time, we melded into a good team for a variety of reasons, but I suspect there was a pool of DNA in common. We all had great respect for this ancient art of joinery that holds walls and ceilings



together with tenons, mortises, and pegs, not nails and screws. I suspect we also must have been born with hammers in our hands and with eyes that focused on any scrap of wood we could whack into shape. But above all, I believe we had the good luck to grasp this opportunity to stretch our curiosity and self-reliance.

I have wandered about the campus over the past few years taking pictures of the earlier timber-framed structures and marveling at how they linked the grounds in a common theme. To any curious mind, you have to wonder how all the cuts were figured and laid out so that everything fit together with such precision.



So when I saw the class offered, I jumped at the chance to see how this stuff all worked. And after a week, I found much in common with my fellow classmates, despite age and professional and geographic differences. We might have had different life experiences but we shared a strong need for substance in our lives. In addition to visualizing a general idea of the value of building something to last, we all actually saw and felt the strength and durability of how wood could be cut and crafted so as to endure for many years. This way of construction

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serves as a metaphor for what we all should strive to accomplish, something that reflects well on our craftsmanship, is a testament to quality and will live on to inspire our children and grandchildren.

So as the week progressed, we all worked hard and built up that sweat equity--rivalled only by the blacksmiths--so that we were not as welcome on day four as we were on day one at just anyone's dinner table. But I think our bright eyes and enthusiasm mostly won



over those who might have had second thoughts about our sweat-soaked shirts and failing deodorants.

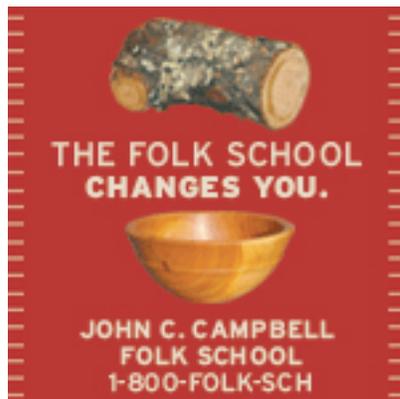
And so at Friday's lunch when one of the hostesses reminded everyone that show-and-tell was on the schedule that afternoon in the Keith House, she was quick to add that fellow students had to go to the timber framers since we couldn't bring our week's labor to them. When we finished installing the last rafter and posed for our picture, we knew we had created a handsome and enduring structure that would become part of the overall John C. Campbell campus. And before we knew it, people were appearing

to admire and ask questions about the new pergola.

Of the many and varied classes I have been most fortunate to enjoy over the years at John C. Campbell, this class was far and beyond the most satisfying. May there always be room for more timber framing!



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