



Renovation Reflections

An Antidote to Media Headline Stories

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Lyme, NH

Preface

On Thanksgiving Day 2003, hoping to get some ideas for my Christmas gift list, I asked my brother if there was anything he wanted. His answer, "I would like to spend next Thanksgiving at the farm in Lyme," did not give me a clue as to what I might get him for Christmas, but it gave me a reason to start renovating our family home.

When my mother died in April of 2002 I inherited the old farmhouse that had been our family home for more than half a century. I had been thinking of eventually fixing up the house and restoring the gardens but had not gotten around to starting the project.

After my father died in 1986, my mother, who was blind for the last decade of her life, did little to maintain the house and property. After she had several oven fires, I made the decision not to replace the stove: a new stove would have given her the means to burn down the house. It was safer for me to bring food and share meals with her. As she became increasingly frail, the house became increasingly drafty. The sills continued to rot, the sag in the floors became more apparent, and the mice set up homes in the walls, drawers, and kitchen cupboards.

In the fall of 2002 I had contacted an architect I had worked with on a previous project. Jay, whose father was a classmate and friend of I. M. Pei, was talented and creative. By the spring of 2003, he, having previously practiced by himself, had acquired a partner. Meetings with Jay at my kitchen table were replaced with meetings around a conference table. Rather than permitting me to ramble on about what I wanted from the renovations, Jay's partner posed questions which I felt had been perfected by a focus group. A project I was hoping would be fun now seemed as if it would become a burdensome task. I put renovating the old farmhouse to the back of my list of priorities.

If we were to have Thanksgiving dinner in the family home in 2004 renovations I had previously thought could be done sometime needed to be done as soon as possible. On Thanksgiving Day 2003 after a brief conversation with my brother I made the commitment to start the renovations. If we were to prepare Thanksgiving dinner in the house, renovating the kitchen was essential, and thus planning the new kitchen

seemed to be a good place to start the project.

Ida had designed the kitchen in my Lebanon home. I liked her work . I knew she was knowledgeable and creative. From working with her I had I learned that she listened well and did not impose her designs on her clients. I also knew Ida didn't have a conference table: she had a dining room table which we sometimes sat around, and an old drawing table that rests on cabinets, over which she and her clients often discuss plans. I decided the first person I would call about the renovations would be Ida.

In looking back I realize calling Ida was one of the best decisions I made after my Thanksgiving conversation with my brother. During the cold winter months I worked with her to redesign the kitchen and to plan an addition to accommodate stairs that would be relocated from the middle of what would become the new kitchen area. After we had settled on the initial floor plan for the kitchen and the small addition, I asked her to help me design the master bedroom.

In the winter and early spring, I found and hired the initial crew of plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and the security-system installers. After work began, I added insulation specialists, an individual to advise me on new windows and doors, a mason, a plasterer, and a painter. Later I added to these a floor installer, floor finisher, roofer, and lightning-protection specialist.

Thanksgiving day of last year I didn't glean a hint of what I might give my brother for Christmas. However, I received a gift from him-a reason to start renovating the old farmhouse. Because of his gift, the past year has been one of the most exciting, and satisfying, years of my life.

I have encountered problems I never anticipated. I have learned about materials, techniques, and processes that a year ago I didn't have the vocabulary to describe. Renovating the farmhouse has given me the opportunity to work daily with intelligent, skilled, creative individuals. From them I have learned about the skills and talents that constitute their stock in trade, and about the best of human qualities: respect, honesty, humor, a sense of self, an understanding of priorities, and a compassion for every living thing. (I will not forget how Walt carried a baby snake curled up in the palm of his leather gloves from the basement to the stone wall, nor how Nate helped free a bat that had been caught in some

old insulation.)

In early February my sister-in-law Linda asked what I was doing about the renovations. In response to her question, I sent her an e-mail about a trip I had taken the previous month to the recycle center with the stove that had been in the farmhouse kitchen for decades. My e-mail was passed on to others, and soon I had requests from many to keep them informed of progress on my renovation project. What follows are the e-mail messages I sent over the course of the renovations. The pieces are arranged in chronological order. I have noted at the end of each e-mail the date it was sent.

My brother's request to have Thanksgiving dinner in 2004 in the house that had been our family home for more than a half a century motivated me to begin remodeling the long-neglected home. Linda's request that I share my writing about the renovation's progress motivated me to record what follows.

9/12/2004

The Old Stove

On a cold January day last week, with the old stove in the back of my green pickup, I drove to the recycle center at the Lebanon City Landfill. The stove that would soon be crushed into a small cube had been purchased in the 1950s. At the time it was a top-of-the-line electric range. It had two ovens and a burner with a thermostat, so we could accurately control the temperature at which we cooked blueberry pancakes, homemade sausage, and cheese sandwiches. In its prime, standing rib roasts, venison, turkeys, geese, lots of duck, and even an occasional possum had been roasted in the lower oven. Each August a peach pie was baked in the upper oven. After the open-faced pie had cooled, a candle would be placed in the center and the pie would be served to celebrate my brother's birthday.

We often gazed through the glass door of the upper oven at other pies—apple, blueberry, and my favorite, cherry. Chocolate mint brownies, crisp oatmeal cookies, muffins, and coffee cakes baked in the upper oven. The burners brought large pans of water to a roiling boil. Into the boiling water we would plunge live lobsters or fresh corn. The burner on the right front heated sauté pans that held just the right amount of butter so my mother could cook the wild mushrooms—chanterelles, boletus, and puff balls—she collected, or the trout she got from the pond above the house. My mother fished with worms. To assure that she had a ready supply of fresh, healthy worms, she kept them in a wooden box in the basement and fed them dirt and coffee grounds. My mother described herself as a meat fisherman, which to her meant we ate what she caught. She didn't believe in throwing a fish back unless it was too small, and then only with an admonition to the fish that it grow fast so the next time she caught it it would be big enough for her to serve for breakfast.

The stove in the back of my pickup was long past its prime. By the time my mother had lost her eyesight and could no longer pick wild mushrooms, the burner on which she had heated the sauté pan no longer worked. By the time she stopped roasting 20-pound turkeys for holiday dinners, the lower oven door didn't shut very well.

When I left the stove at the recycle center last week, I pictured it being crushed into a little cube that would be transported on a big truck to some giant furnace, where it would be melted down and recycled. I

hope some of the metal from the old stove will in time find its way into new stoves, which will in turn become a part of the memories of families yet to be defined.

If that stove riding in the bed of my pick up could write, what a tale it could tell!

2/6/04

Holding it All Together

As we have been taking apart the kitchen and master bedroom, I, as an old metallurgist, am gaining a renewed appreciation for the contributions made by my branch of engineering.

Two hundred years ago nails were individually hand-wrought. They were precious and expensive. Buildings and ships were often burned for no other purpose than to recover the nails. Those who have visited Monticello, as I did last spring, may remember that the nail-making operation on Mulberry Row was one of Jefferson's most profitable businesses. Because of developments in the past several hundred years in manufacturing techniques, nails can be produced easily and cheaply, as a result it is now much easier to put buildings together.

Nails were not used to hold together the skeletons of the original farmhouse and the old barns on the property. The structural beams were held together by the use of tabs that were cut onto the ends of the beams and shaped to fit securely into holes that were cut into mating structures. John Porter, author of *Preserving Old Barns*, told me that the barn components would be shaped in the winter months. After carefully hewing, chiseling and cutting, until a tab and its mating hole fit together properly matching marriage marks would be put on both pieces and the pieces set aside until spring when the weather was warm, the days long and the structure could be raised. When the structure was raised, the marriage marks were used to identify the mating pieces much as stick-on letters are often used today to aid in the assembly of toys and fitness equipment that are often shipped unassembled. In the upper barn, which is located near the old farmhouse, the marriage marks can still be seen on the short uprights and the long horizontal beam that define the barn's south bay. Hand-hewn wooden pegs were sometimes used to secure the tab in the chiseled hole.

Nails were not used in the frame of either the original house or the barns. The structural pieces that defined the frame of the original farmhouse were fitted together much like the pieces in a balsam wood airplane model. The headers at the top of the door casings were trapezoidal. The beams that defined the

edges of the door casing were notched. The base of the trapezoidal headers rested on the notches that had been cut into the beams that defined the sides of the casing. The beams that defined the outside corners of the original farm house were connected to the vertical beams on the sidewalls by short beams that were positioned at about 45°. Tabs were provided on both ends of the short beams. The tabs on each end of the short 45° fit snugly into holes that had been cut in the corner beam and a neighboring beam on the adjacent wall.

After the frames of the old barns and of the original part of the farmhouse were assembled, the precious hand-wrought nails were used to attach planks used for floors and walls, and to secure the wood roofing shingles.

Since I will be using old boards from a corn crib in the lower barn in the renovated kitchen, I am glad nails were used sparingly-fewer nails mean there will be fewer nails to be removed, and that there will be less likelihood a piece of nail will be left in a board. Many carpenters do not like working with old boards because if a piece of nail is left in the board can damage the power tools they use to cut, plane, and sand old boards.

Although nails were expensive, and used sparingly when the original part of the farmhouse was built, they must have been rather inexpensive and readily available when the underlayment was put down for the yellow and grey vinyl flooring I found under the several layers of kitchen linoleum. Hundreds and hundreds of nails spaced at 2 inch intervals were used to hold the old underlayment in place.

Since one of my priorities has been to expose the original beams in the ceiling of the master bedroom, one of the first demolition projects was to remove the plaster and sheet rock that covered the beams. Now that they are exposed I look at the hand-hewn beams and wonder who cut them. Were the rougher beams cut by someone young and just learning the trade? Were they cut by someone old and tired? Maybe they were fashioned by the carpenter who had enjoyed the most hard cider? When I look at its skeleton, I often wonder who built the house, how they built it, and which rooms were their favorites. I hope the farmhouse sheltered a lot of happy times; and I hope that if any of them are hanging around as ghosts they will be pleased with what I am doing.

I often wonder if some future observers will find the farmhouse, and its history of building techniques, interesting. When I complete the renovations, the house will have exposed beams that were hand-hewn around 1800, fireplaces built in the 1900s, and a new fireplace built this year. The renovated house will contain many items and materials that were not even anticipated when the frame of the original house was raised nearly 200 years ago: plastic pipe, electric lights, electronic furnace controls, CO detectors, telephones, radiant and baseboard heating, a refrigerator, a freezer, the closed-cell foam insulation, as well as many plastic and composite components.

Only a crystal ball or a good science fiction writer could give me a clue about some of the items that might be added to the house if it is renovated again after the passage of another hundred years. I don't know if there are ghosts—but if there are I hope in a hundred years I will be a ghost who gets to come back for a visit.

2/27/04

The Fireplace

When we lived on the farm, the fireplace in the dining room crackled and sent off waves of warm, dry air almost daily from late August until May, and occasionally on cool mornings in June and July. With the exception of pans of water that we boiled when the power failed and the occasional marshmallows we toasted, the dining room fireplace was used only for heat and ambience so I had little experience cooking in a fireplace.

By the time I left home for college I had lugged thousands of pounds of fire wood and laid hundreds of fires in the dining room fireplace. However, my experience lugging wood and laying fires in no way prepared me for designing a cooking fireplace, a feature I plan to include in the renovated kitchen.

Thanks to some good advice and some good books, I know more than I did a few months ago about the construction of cooking fireplaces and about hearth cooking. There are three books from which I have gained much of my newfound knowledge: *The Magic of Fire: Hearth Cooking*; *The Bread Builders: Hearth Loaves and Masonry Ovens*; and *Old American Houses, 1700-1850: How to Restore, Remodel and Reproduce Them*.

My knowledge of cooking fireplaces and hearth cooking took a major leap forward when I spoke with William Rubel, author of *Magic of Fire*. When I told William I wanted to build a cooking fireplace, he offered a wealth of information. His first comment, "You can cook in any fireplace," sent my confidence soaring. Some of the specific advice he offered was:

\$ The fireplace should be no more than 22 inches deep.

\$ The design Count Rumford published in 1796, and at the time proclaimed to be the solution to the smoking chimneys of London, remains a superior fireplace design.

\$ Having the hearth at counter level, 34 to 36 inches from the floor, is convenient.

\$ The hearth should be from 18 to 24 inches deep.

\$ The best way to determine the optimum height and depth is to make a model and see what dimensions work best for the people who will be cooking in the fireplace.

\$ Cranes are only useful if you like to heat water for tea, and most of the cranes are not very attractive.

After speaking with William, I had more appreciation for his book, which I had purchased several months ago in anticipation of the fireplace project. The hearth cooking equipment his book recommends has developed into my birthday and Christmas wish lists. I strongly recommend *Magic of Fire* to anyone interested in cooking in a fireplace. It is an attractive coffee table book that is packed with interesting recipes and useful information.

After talking with William, I received a return call from Paula Wolfert. Paula, an award-winning author of cookbooks on Mediterranean cooking, including *Mediterranean Grains and Greens* and *The Cooking of the Eastern Mediterranean*, referred me to *The Bread Builders*. She also e-mailed me a long list of references on hearth cooking. Many of the references were to articles by Dr. Alice Ross, a foremost expert on hearth cooking.

In view of Paula's comments, I revisited *The Bread Builders*. I had read it and interviewed one of the authors when the book was first published in 1999. A number of pages are devoted to the design criteria for a bread-baking oven. The authors point out that there is a critical relationship between the height of the oven door opening and that of the oven dome. The optimum ratio of heights has traditionally been thought to be 4:7, meaning that the oven door opening should be 57% of the height of the oven dome. After extensive research, the authors of *Bread Builders* concluded that the optimum oven-door opening should actually be 63% of the height of the oven dome.

Now, after reading some recommended references and talking to acclaimed authorities, I am ready to embark on the project of building a cooking fireplace. Fortunately I have found an experienced mason, Bob, whose father, grandfather, uncles and brothers have built many of the fireplaces in the area.

3/06/04

Seasons

Last Tuesday when I spoke with Ray, the manager of the local John Deere dealership, he said, "I think we can bring your dump trailer up tomorrow morning; it is going down to about 10° tonight." Wednesday morning before the road thawed, Ray brought it up. The need during mud season to find those occasional times when the roads are frozen reminded me how weather-and season-dependent life on a small New England farm was when I was a kid.

In March and April, freezing nights and thawing days brought mud. During mud season, if we had to go to town, we would leave the hill early, do our errands, and try to return before the mud got too deep.

The spring thaw that brought mud also caused sap to flow from the roots of trees up the trunks to nourish the emerging foliage. Thus, mud season and sugaring season overlap. We tapped the maple trees when the temperature rose above freezing during the day and dropped below freezing at night. We started sugaring before the roads became muddy, and usually before the snow was out of the woods. If there was a lot of snow in the woods when we tapped the trees, we would place the taps near the snow line so we could reach the buckets after the snow melted. If we did not tap early, we would miss the best runs: Grade A Fancy was made from the first sap to run from the roots to the tender, budding leaves.

The weather determined how much sap we collected each day; on warm sunny days we got more sap than on cold days. If we did not boil the sap soon after it had been collected, the quality of the syrup we produced would be poor. So as soon as the sap was collected we poured it into a 3- by 5-foot metal pan that rested on stones and bricks. Under the pan we would build a hardwood fire. We kept the fire going until the sap had been boiled down to the right consistency for syrup. We determined if we had boiled it enough by dropping some of the sap into a glass of water. If it formed a soft ball we banked the fire and poured the finished syrup into glass jars. If we had a good sap run, we might be up most of the night keeping the fires going under the metal boiling pan. On the spring days that followed good sap runs, my brother and I would arrive at school smelling of wood smoke and so tired it was hard to stay awake in class.

Particularly in the spring we were often teased and chided for our country ways by our classmates who didn't have to do farm chores because they lived in town where their fathers taught at Dartmouth College.

In late April or early May, as soon as the mud dried and we could work the soil in the garden, we planted peas, spinach, radishes, lettuce, and other cold weather crops. The less hardy seeds, like beans and corn, were planted after the full moon in late May or early June-when there was no danger of frost.

In the summer, farmers needed stretches of warm, dry days to get the mown hay into the barn. If the hay was damp, it might rot, or worse yet, if damp hay was stored in a barn, spontaneous combustion could occur and cause the barn to burn. More than one barn in the area burned because the hay was not thoroughly dried before it was put in the loft.

In late fall we started bringing in firewood from the wood lot for heating the house. We had to get the firewood in before the snow became too deep. Deep snow could bury the wood we had cut, and freezing rain and icy snow could make it difficult to separate the individual logs from a pile of cut firewood.

We ate with the seasons. Fishing season opened after the streams had thawed, and the brooks ran swiftly with water melted from the snowpack that lay deep in the woods and high in the mountains. Trout on the first day of fishing season always seemed especially tasty.

Every spring we looked forward to asparagus, freshly dug parsnips, and rhubarb. In June we ate the first wild strawberries, usually with breakfast and a bit of ceremony. I remember one June morning after my mother had found the first nine wild strawberries of the season. She laid out four tiny dishes that had in earlier times been used for salt. In one she put three berries for my father. She put two berries in each of the other dishes. My father, mother, brother, and I ate the berries one at a time. Between berries we remarked on their aroma and praised their taste. The first blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries received a similar welcome. The blueberries were more prolific, however, and we usually started our blueberry season with several dozen berries.

Today, life on a small New England farm is less weather and season-dependent. The roads are better. We have black plastic to put on the ground to help keep the seeds warm. We can bale damp hay in white plastic and store the big, white marshmallow-like bales in the fields from late summer until spring. We can drive to the grocery store for asparagus, berries, or trout almost any day of the year. If you live on a dirt road in northern New England the season that now is most impacted by seasonal changes in the weather is mud season; during mud season life on a small New England farm is still dependent on the weather.

Last Wednesday Ray delivered the dump trailer. Now it is collecting lumber from the demolition of the kitchen and master bedroom. As we watch the trailer fill we want to empty it, but we must wait for another very cold morning, or for the end of mud season, before we can take it across the open field to the dump at the bottom of the hill.

3/14/04

Money

Not to acknowledge that money is a huge part of the project I am undertaking would be like going to a dinner party with a giraffe and not acknowledging that my gentle, quiet dinner companion was a bit tall.

When I was a kid, hardscrabble farmers had no regular income. In the spring, when school taxes were due, they would sell enough maple syrup or some other farm products to cover their tax bill. If the missus, or one of the kids, got sick, the patient's family would offer barter—a venison roast, some firewood, or a side of beef—in exchange for treatment. Labor was not something you paid for, it was something you exchanged. Neighbors helped neighbors build barns. If someone helped with the animals when you were laid up, you might cut them some wood the next fall.

Maybe it was the thought of money, or maybe it was the big, wet snowflakes that came in squalls yesterday, but I found myself thinking about the Sapis-Whorf Hypothesis (we think about what we have language for, and the words we have influence our thoughts). The most popular demonstration of the hypothesis is that the Eskimos have many words to describe snow, which is something they think about a lot. In the last few decades we have added many money-related words to our vocabulary. When the farmhouse was built, no one would have understood words and abbreviations such as debt card, ATM, OTC, S&P 500, credit card, or margin accounts, let alone puts and calls. As money transactions become even more complex and we think more about money, the Sapis-Whorf Hypothesis would predict that we will be adding new money-related words to our vocabulary and continue to think even more about money.

When I spoke with my sister-in-law this morning and reported the pricey list of items I purchased for the renovations, which last week included the refrigerator, range, and dishwasher, Linda said, "Spending money is fun." She's right. It is fun to spend money for things I believe in and for things I want. It is fun, and satisfying, to share what I am fortunate enough to have with the people working on the project. I think the fun of buying a really special item, or supporting an individual for a few months so he or she

can afford to spend time utilizing their special skills, is far greater than the fun of buying thousands of little ordinary items.

Not spending money can also be satisfying. Thursday I decided not to make a purchase at Walmart; I don't like some of their policies. I believe the local Little League teams, community theaters, and homeless shelters receive less money from local businesses when a Walmart comes to town, and small, independent retailers that previously were part of the fabric of the community are put out of business.

My parents taught me the importance of saving. When I graduated from college, I made a commitment to save half of my pay. One check went into savings, the next into my checking account for expenses. Sometimes, by the time I received my next spendable check, my meals were none too tasty. However saving every other paycheck soon became a game, and I stuck with the savings game until I got married.

Today I am glad I played the game. I had more fun saving little sums than I would have had drinking cokes, eating chips, and buying clothes I would throw out after a few seasons. Now I am having more fun spending than I would have watching stocks appreciate or interest accumulate. I'm having fun because it is exciting to see a creative project develop; because I get satisfaction from my belief that I am saving a truly special old house.

I fear that if I had not decided to spend money on it, the farmhouse would not have survived much longer. Many old houses in the area have been replaced with modern mini-mansions. If the house were left with structural problems and with plumbing, heating, and electrical systems that were out-of-date, a subsequent owner might choose to retain the volunteer fire department to burn the house down. Or he or she might just bulldoze it into the ground and build a modern mini-mansion on this pristine site with beautiful views.

Now, because I am fortunate enough to have the financial means, I am going to enjoy the old hand-hewn beams; I'll be able to point out to visitors the wide boards that panel the living room, the old birch floors, the pegged front door and dozens of other features that have survived for centuries. I hold the

hope that others, after I am gone, will be able to enjoy the centuries of craftsmanship that are part of my family home.

3/20/04

Trash

We moved the dump trailer a week ago Monday. We had filled it to nearly overflowing with old floorboards, rotting sills, and other biodegradable materials. For more than two weeks the ground had been too muddy to move it. Then, over the weekend, a cold front moved through. Monday morning the temperature was 5°F. The prediction was for highs in the teens and temperatures below zero by Tuesday morning. Monday morning we drove the trailer to the dump at the bottom of the hill. Then, with the fields still frozen hard, we refilled the trailer with the deteriorating wood that had been littering the lawn and made a second trip.

Yesterday afternoon, with the bed of my pickup filled with old heating ducts, some sash weights, and other bits of scrap metal, I drove to the recycling center at the Lebanon Landfill. Sunday I will be taking bags of insulation, along with the nests and remains of mice, squirrels, and other creatures that made their homes in the farmhouse walls, to the garbage truck at the Lyme Town Garage.

When I was young, dealing with trash was simpler. Food scraps went into the compost pile. Paper was used to start fires in the fireplace. Boards, broken glass, brush, limbs cut when we trimmed the apple trees, and worn-out rags of old wool and cotton clothing went to the dump at the bottom of the hill. We used the old Sears and Roebuck Catalog in the outhouse. Yes, we, like the other families in town had an outhouse. With pride my father would say our outhouse had the best view. Yes, we did use the old catalog, which in the days when catalogs were rare, was read with attention to every detail when it arrived and again at the end of its useful life. We dumped chemicals used to kill bugs and varmints in the brook.

In hindsight, we would have gotten mixed grades as environmentally responsible citizens. By today's standards we would have gotten good grades because we used and reused, and recycled. I remember as a kid flattening tin cans before we took them to the metal recycler in town. But dumping the chemicals, with names we could not pronounce, and which had potential impacts on the environment we did not understand, was not a good thing to have done. Nowadays, when I drop a plastic water bottle in a garbage can, or get a large coffee to-go in a Styrofoam® container, I wonder how environmentally responsible my generation

will be judged. I wish we did not have to buy so much packaging with almost every item, especially small items. I recently bought a jump drive to carry my computer files. The drive is about 2 inches long, less than a half-inch thick, and less than an inch wide. Its thick, hard plastic packaging dwarfed the tiny jump drive. The bulky plastic casing may have provided advertising, protected the drive during shipment, and reduced the likelihood the drive would be pilfered, but, it took me several minutes to remove the drive from its bulky plastic encasement, and the hard plastic cut my finger, dulled my scissors, and will soon contribute to our local, nearly overflowing landfill.

Making environmentally responsible decisions is not easy. The materials I am putting into the house now will eventually become someone's trash. Many of the materials-the closed-cell insulation in the walls, the plastic piping, and the air-jet whirlpool-are not biodegradable. I can find environmental justification for some of the decisions I make; the closed-cell insulation, for example will reduce my use of fossil fuels. Some decisions I have made for selfish reasons. I cannot make a good environmental case for buying the air-jet whirlpool; I'm buying it because I want it. The whirlpool bath is one of two features of the renovated house I am most eagerly looking forward to using; the other new feature is the cooking fireplace in the kitchen.

The dump trailer is now back by the kitchen door collecting worn floorboards and the rotting walls of the wine cellar. It is so far into mud season now we will probably have to wait several weeks for the mud to dry up in the field before we are able to move the trailer again. I take some comfort in knowing that the rotting wood collecting in the dump trailer will nourish the soil it will be dumped on, and in so doing will be efficiently and naturally recycled.

4/2/04

Time & Change

I live in Lebanon, New Hampshire, a small city about 20 miles south of the old farmhouse. There I have cable television. When I turn on the TV, I get caught up in a desire to know the events that make up the news of the moment in a world that stretches far beyond my daily travels. Is the Dow Jones Index up or down? Were the troops engaged in any major conflicts in Iraq? What weather is predicted for Illinois, where I used to live, or for Florida and California, from which so much of our fresh produce comes? Is it raining in Rome or Paris or Holland, where I have friends vacationing?

On the hill in Lyme I have no television. I have not turned on a radio in months. My disconnection from instant information has caused me to think back to how we were connected to news years ago, and to speculate about what our connections will be years from now. While I'm rewiring the house, I am having outlets for phones, cable, and DSL access in most of the rooms. When the renovations are done, I will have the kind of instant access to information from around the world that has become a part of my city life.

When I was young, news came from the weekly paper that was delivered to our mailbox, from the newsreels shown in movie theaters, and from the crystal radio set I kept in my room. On my crystal set, late at night, I could often pick up KDKA in Pittsburgh, WOR in Newark, and WJR in Detroit. (Yes, I did have a crystal set-and, yes, I spent many evenings huddled in my room wearing a black Bakelite headset as I tried to get a signal.) I don't know when we got a radio with a big dial and a volume control. In the forties my Grandmother in Michigan had a big radio in her living room, and after dinner we would often gather there to listen to WJR. Because we could not get a strong signal on the hill in Lyme we did not get a radio until many years after my grandmother had gotten hers. I think it was sometime in the fifties when we put a big TV antenna on the roof and got a black and white television set. Initially we could only get two channels on good days, one channel on most days, and no television signal on some days.

I've been asked when we stopped using the outhouse. This week I have tried to recall when we wrapped a chain around it and hauled it to the dump. I can't remember; it was probably sometime in the mid- to-late-fifties. We had a flusher in the '40s, but because water from the ground wells was in short supply, the flusher was reserved for special situations. Before we dragged our outhouse down the hill, our neighbors got a "chemical," which they set up in their kitchen. The week it arrived, we, and most of their other neighbors, stopped by to check it out. For a brief window of time in our locale, there was great debate as to whether the future lay with the flusher or the chemical toilet. Because news reaching this small piece of geography was so limited, for all we knew the debate on our hill about the toilet of the future was a debate of national proportions.

While cleaning out the closets and the old wine cellar to provide the carpenters access to the exterior walls, I've come across items that at some time for some reason were put down or put away and not taken up again. On a shelf over the kitchen, I found my mother's high school yearbook. In a cabinet in what will be my dressing room, I found my father's army ribbons and medals. I uncovered a pipe wrench from my grandmother's house in a drawer filled with dust, dirt, shredded papers, and the decomposed carcasses of mice and insects.

In the basement, I found some old washboards next to the double soapstone sinks. When I was a kid, my mother and I would fill one of the sinks with soap and warm water. We would then rub the dirty clothes on the wavy washboard surface to "loosen up the dirt." Then, with a stick, we would swirl the clothes in the sink until we thought they were clean enough. The clean clothes would be fed through a wringer into the rinse water in the adjacent deep soapstone sink. After being swirled in the rinse water until most of the soap had been removed, the rinsed clothes would be fed through the wringer into a basket. The washed and rinsed clothes would be taken outside to be hung on the clothesline to dry. I don't remember when we stopped using the washboards, but I do know that we used them for many more years than our neighbors used their chemical toilet.

I cannot recall when I started or stopped using the outhouse, the washboards, or the axe I found in the workshop that I had used each weekend when my father and I went into the woods to trim the trees. Nor for

that matter, can I remember when I ceased to use the slide rule in my desk drawer. I do know that for some period of time these and many other items were important in my life; they helped to define what I know and who I am.

4/10/04

The Steel Beam

I am fortunate enough to have the right mix of craftsmen who bring their own unique experience and talents to the job, and who work well together. This week they worked together to add support for the large, open room that will be over the kitchen and to make significant changes to the space that will be the new kitchen

Wednesday a steel beam to support the floor joists for the room above the kitchen was secured in the walls. Friday, when Carlton cut the hole in the front wall of the house to accommodate the windows that will be over the kitchen sink, the space that will be the new kitchen became a room with a truly incredible view.

Positioning and securing the steel beam was not an easy task. The knowledge, experience and special skills of Ron, Carlton, and Bob were needed to get the steel beam in place. After much discussion about how to get the beam into the kitchen, which included the suggestion that it be passed through a hole cut in the wall, Carlton realized that, if properly positioned, the beam could be angled through the back kitchen door. Ron, using the forks on the front of my tractor with the precision of one threading a needle, moved the steel beam from the side yard to the back kitchen door, then into the kitchen. Bob used large diameter plastic pipe to make rollers on which the beam could be rolled into the middle of the kitchen floor and positioned parallel to the north and south kitchen walls. Then with a comealong attached to the second-floor rafters, the beam was slowly and very carefully raised. As it moved in small increments from the floor toward the ceiling, Bob used shims to readjust the supports for it. When it was nearly in the right place, jacks, chains, and comealongs were used to accurately position and level the beam.

Getting the steel beam in place required the collective efforts of individuals with greatly differing approaches to the problem. The differences in what the craftsmen working on the project do and how they do it extends to the payment relationships I have with them. Ron gives me a bill for his hours and

expenses on the first and fifteenth day of each month. His bills include a detailed description of what he did each day he worked. I don't need to keep a diary of progress; I just keep copies of Ron's bills. Carlton started working with me several years ago doing renovations on the lower barn. Initially I paid him a third of the estimated cost of the project. Since then I have paid him "whenever." I think the whenevers may correlate to when Carlton needs a York rake or a tedder. Sometimes I think I should attach a note to my will saying, "If I die unexpectedly, please pay Carlton. I know I will owe him money." Raye works for a daily rate and gets a check each day she works. I also buy her dinner after work. If the food is particularly good and the workday is short, she gets a better deal; then there are those days we work long hours and don't get a particularly good meal. Ida would rather work on drawings and design than prepare invoices. It seems I only get bills from her when the pressure to pay for something I have ordered forces her to forego the creative work she enjoys and excels at for the drudgery of invoice preparation. My plumbers and electricians are organized and predictable. Maybe it is their need to deal with codes that causes them to be that way, but they dependably bill me monthly for labor and expenses.

The renovation project is just the right size, with enough workers to have a good collection of talent, knowledge, and experience, but not so many workers that they interfere with each other's tasks. Much as too many cooks can spoil the broth, I think too many carpenters could make common and uninteresting a project that is intrinsically interesting and unusual. More hands would not have raised the steel beam faster. It would not have taken less time, been more level, or securely fastened if more people had worked to secure the floor joists for the room over the kitchen. Positioning and securing the beam needed the talents of Carlton, Bob, and Ron; it needed no one else.

4/18/04

The Words We Use

Sunday I had dinner with one guy, Monday, with another. Both responded with a blank stare when I told them I had been using my green pickup to bring materials to the job site because the roads were posted. The blank stare remained after I explained I had met the plumbing supply truck at The Alden Inn, where we off-loaded an air-jet whirlpool, faucets, and other plumbing parts into the bed of my pickup. It was only then that I realized they didn't understand what I meant when I said, "The roads are posted." In an effort to help them understand this expression which I had heard every spring for as long as I could remember, I explained what every 5-year-old who plays in the mud or builds sand castles at the beach and what every road commissioner in a small New England town knows: the deformation properties of sand, gravel, and plain old dirt change with water content. If you drive on a very wet road, you can get stuck in the mud. If you drive on a somewhat wet road with a heavy vehicle, you can damage the road surface, roadbed, and culverts. When a road is susceptible to damage by heavy vehicles, the town highway department nails to a post at the road's entrance a notice prohibiting travel by vehicles greater than a particular weight. From this action comes the expression, "The road is posted."

Spending time with individuals whose vocabulary has not been standardized and sanitized by the major media has made me aware of how words and expressions differ with time, education, geography, and experience. Sometimes new word meanings almost completely eclipse older meanings. For nearly a decade, until her death in her 90s in the 1990s, Gertrude Price was one of my favorite tenants. The first of each month I would stop at Mrs. Price's apartment, pick up her rent check, change light bulbs, or do other small chores. Next to her front door there hung a sampler she had made as a child. I always smiled when I passed the sampler which read, "All my friends are gay." When Mrs. Price stitched her sampler, words such as "lesbian," "homosexual," and "heterosexual" were probably never uttered in her home, school, or church. The word "sex" was probably most often used when the family was trying to decide if a newborn calf would become an ox, veal steaks, or a cow to provide milk for the family; or when examining combs to determine which peeping chicks would grow up to lay eggs.

I don't think Mrs. Price ever knew why I smiled a bit every time I stopped to pick up her check; maybe she thought I was looking forward to her homemade gingersnaps, which were usually offered if I was willing to stay for a bit of conversation.

Sometimes it's hard to identify the nexus between different meanings of a word. I spend my days with individuals who, when they say "Watch out for the crack!" expect me to step over a board. When I read that authorities are looking for "crack," I know it probably has nothing to do with old boards. Specialized subsets of vocabulary are not simply the products of formal education. When the carpenters talk about "tongues," they don't mean the kind that wag when we speak. When they "ferret" out a corner, they are not chasing a skinny, weasel-like animal. When Ron tells me he is going to get some "slips," he is not letting it slip that he is a cross-dresser; he is just going to take a cutting from a plant. When Carlton uses the comealong to cause the beam to come along, it is not his psychic powers that are causing the heavy structure to move with little exertion.

As more and more of us are exposed each day to national media, radio and television presentations, it is not just regional accents that are lost; bits and pieces of vocabulary are disappearing and some are taking on a new meaning.

4/23/04

Decisions

In the last several months I have made thousands of decisions. None have been as clearly right or wrong as the answer to a grade school arithmetic problem. Many were easy to make, such as the location of light switches and wall outlets. Some, like the OnQ media/communication distribution system and the insulation, required a bit of research. A benefit of doing the research is that I have learned about new processes, techniques, and materials.

Some decisions have been just plain hard. For weeks we have been trying to find the best place in the kitchen to locate the dumbwaiter for moving firewood up from the basement so we would not have to lug the wood in from the barn, through the back door and across the kitchen on cold stormy days. Initially we wanted it under the hearth, but the foundation proved too thick. Then we considered placing the dumbwaiter on one of the outside walls. The current thinking is to have it come up into the kitchen's center island. The exact placement will be limited by the location of the carrying timbers. One of today's tasks is to superimpose a drawing of the floor-support structure on a drawing of the proposed kitchen design.

Some decisions I just make, then hope I've made the right one. Yesterday I bought a piece of swordfish. Tonight I will know if it is really good, or if, like the piece I got a few weeks ago, it has a texture and taste I would liken to cardboard. Yesterday I hired a plasterer for the bedroom area. Those who recommended him said he is good; in a few weeks I'll know if I think he is good.

Several weeks ago I made the right decision for a not particularly good reason. I had to decide if I wanted half-screens or full screens for the replacement windows. Full screens would keep the flies out regardless of whether the window was opened from the top and/or bottom. When I called Chris, my window man, to see if I would save money with half-screens, he said almost everyone gets full screens, which has resulted in half-screens becoming special order items that cost either as much, or more, than full screens. Whenever anyone says "everyone," I have images of how boring living rooms would look if

everyone bought the same sofa pillows. In part because the original windows had half-screens, and in part because I thought the half-screens would be a bit more unusual, I decided to go with the half screens.

My office is located in a guest house my parents converted from an old corn barn about a quarter-century ago. Earlier this week a big, wild Tom turkey strutted by my office window. He was putting on a show for the lady turkeys up the hill. Hoping to get a picture of the cocky bird, I grabbed my digital camera. As I centered Mr. Tom in my view finder, I realized the best I could hope for would be a textured picture—all the windows had full screens. When I made the decision to get half-screens, I didn't think what an impediment full screens would present to taking photographs. A variety of animals wander across the old farmhouse lawn. Last summer a moose spent hours in the side yard just a few feet from what will be my bedroom windows. Now, because I made the right decision about window screens, I can look forward to taking portraits of the animals that wander through my yard.

5/2/04

April 29th

The last Thursday of April was the kind of spring day that teaches a bit about addiction. No matter how hard I tried to concentrate on work, I was more creative at finding excuses for being outside. I would type a few sentences, then make a deal with myself; one more paragraph and I could check out the garden. I would promise myself that if I cleaned up just a dozen records in the database, I could go and see how the guys were doing on the renovations.

Mid-afternoon, when I went down to check out the latest progress, I found Ron working in the outside gardens and Carlton pulling off clapboards beside the back kitchen door. As I approached the house, Carlton, holding some newspapers he had removed from under the clapboards, asked, "What day is this?" When I said it was Thursday, the 29th, he replied, "I thought so," and handed me a copy of the *New Hampshire Farmer and Weekly Union*, dated Wednesday, April 29, 1903.

Last night I found time to read the paper Carlton had uncovered. There were advertisements for several competing creameries, for "150 Jacks and two stallions at a bargain price," and of course for Carter's Little Liver Pills - "Small Pill, Small Dose, Small Price." Obituaries offered details about the deceased's last days. "Since his first illness his system constantly became enfeebled." Several obituaries gave the names of those present "at the passing." The paper offered a quantity of good advice. An article advised that it was better to buy the farm than rent and warned that the first few years of ownership would be financially difficult. Another said the housewife "can find no better way to earn new clothes and new furnishings than by raising a few turkeys," and went on to advise that "the old hen should have one wing cut off to prevent her flying over fences."

Under a headline "No Treating" was written, "A new style of saloon is to be opened in New York, backed by a number of men prominent in philanthropic works. One feature of this saloon will be that no profit will be derived from the sale of liqueur and another will be no treating will be allowed." Prohibiting

treating was an attempt to reduce drunkenness since "the custom of treating often leads [the] patron of an ordinary saloon to take more than is good for him."

It was fun last night to read what was of interest when the first addition was made to the farmhouse, a time before my parents were born, a time when my parents' parents were young and looking toward the new century. Tonight I hope to find time to read the paper's May 6th edition.

I so much enjoyed reading about what was of interest when the first addition was made to the old farmhouse I have decided that before I finish the renovations, I will place a copy of my e-mail reflection on the renovations and a newspaper between the walls. I wonder what some future reader will think of what I have written, and the news and advertisements of today. Will they find the words strange? Will they be surprised at what I choose to write about? I hope after reading my words and the news of this time they will appreciate the house a bit more and maybe understand life at the turn of this millennium.

5/6/04

Teachers

My mother was a teacher. My grandfather was a teacher of teachers. The happiest years of my marriage were those when my husband taught. Learning is exercise for the mind. I get a high from exercising, whether it be my mind or my muscles.

The craftsmen renovating the farmhouse teach me, and each other, every day with their examples and their words. I am an eager student. Some of what I've learned is immediately useful information. From Al, my computer consultant, I learned that if you dial 260-1111, a voice synthesizer will tell you what number you are calling from. Carlton showed me the place where hydraulic fluid can be added to the tractor. Paul, the security guy, introduced me to the OnQ system. Jeff showed me a kind of plaster that reproduces the look of old plaster. (I am so pleased with the look, I have decided to leave the plaster between the hand-hewn beams in the bedroom unpainted.) Ida is constantly showing me new fixtures and features. When I told Dennis I wanted a heated towel bar, he suggested we put a thermostat on it so I would have a space heater/towel bar. When Arend, the farmer, or Ron, who takes care of the grounds, uses a new tractor attachment, I watch. I bought a backhoe this spring. After watching Ron work the backhoe the last few weeks, I drove the tractor up into the field and practiced. I did pretty well, though I know I need more practice and there are a few more maneuvers I want to try.

To master a skill requires watching, listening, and practicing. I don't know when, if ever, I will use some of the things I am learning. I know I will never master the skills of my teachers. This past weekend when I planted lettuce and carrots, I knew how to roll the seeds from my fingers as I moved down the row. I knew because many years ago my mother taught me how to plant a garden. I didn't do as good a job planting as she would have done. This summer, looking at the unevenly spaced plants in rows that are not quite straight, I will be reminded that mastering a skill takes practice. Next year, after more practice, I hope the rows I plant will be straighter and the plants more evenly spaced.

Learning is fun. Tests can diminish the fun, much like stepping on a scale can make physical exercise seem like hard work. I am glad this renovation project has afforded me an opportunity to learn from people who don't feel a need to give me a test to ascertain if they have done their jobs. Sometimes I wonder if we give enough tests to know that no child has been left behind, will we produce a population of adults without a thirst for learning and without a love of teachers?

5/13/04

Passion

For a number of years I hosted a local, weekday radio-interview program. The interviews I most enjoyed were those in which my guests were passionate about the topic of our discussion. Bob Averill is a physician who will never read, write, or know enough about Mount Moosilauke. When I interviewed him about his work as a physician, he was articulate and informative, but when we talked about Mount Moosilauke he was energized. John Mudge will never write enough, know enough, or gather enough memorabilia about the White Mountains. When I interviewed John about his work as a financial planner, he was an interesting guest; when we talked about the White Mountains, John became an exceptional guest. One of my most boring and difficult guests ran an insurance agency. As I slogged through the hour trying to extract from him information about insurance, his responses made increasingly obvious the simple fact that he didn't particularly like what he did. He apparently sold insurance because someone in his family had convinced him it was a good way to make money. I think he was making money but I believe at a high cost to him. I know he was a lousy guest.

Passion is energizing. This past weekend I was in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Saturday evening I attended a concert where the a cappella ensemble Sweet Honey In The Rock and their founder, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, were honored. The standing-room-only audience at The University of Michigan's Hill Auditorium was energized by their performance and by those of the three other performers selected to honor Dr. Reagon and her a cappella ensemble: Gareth Johnson, the Sphinx Competition winner; the Mosaic Singers; and the choir from the Michigan School for the Deaf. I had seen Sweet Honey In The Rock before, but they were at their best last Saturday. The group and its founder have a special association with The University of Michigan: they performed for the University's litigation team before the latter argued the landmark affirmative action case before the U.S. Supreme Court. Those who honored Sweet Honey In The Rock with their own performances felt themselves honored to be selected. Their performance was fueled by passion. Their love of performing and feeling of honor inspired the passion which in turn elevated the quality and energy of their performances.

Last Saturday evening, and many times during the renovations of the old farmhouse, I found myself thinking, It doesn't get any better. Yesterday, Bob the mason was looking for something to support a rack in the baking oven. Carlton, the carpenter and barn restorer, looked in the oven cavity and said, "I think I can find you something." He returned a few minutes later with twenty feet of track from the old barn doors. Carlton's plan was to cut short pieces from the old track to support the oven rack. Ida, the designer, upon seeing the track exclaimed, "We can use that. If we put the track on the beam in the ceiling, you will have a place to hang pots." With the energy born of their passion for what they do, they added something significant, even unique, to the renovations. I don't think anyone but my workers and I know that the tabs sticking out between the bricks in the bake oven were once part of a rail for the barn doors. It doesn't matter that others know-we know, and as those much younger than I would say, "It was way cool."

5/20/04

Schedules

This week my brother and sister-in-law came to see how we are progressing with the renovations. Tuesday evening we shared an exceptionally good dinner at Como Va, an Italian restaurant in downtown White River Junction, Vermont. As we talked about the work being done on the house, my brother asked who would be working the next day. He seemed a bit surprised when I told him that I didn't know. If I had ventured a guess I would have said that the mason, Bob, and Roger, his tender, would be working on the chimney.

The next day, neither of them showed up. Thursday Bob and Roger arrived a bit late. Bob offered the reason they had not come up to work on the chimney the previous day: "Looked like it might rain yesterday, so we did a tile job down in Hanover."

I know which tasks need to be done and who is responsible for doing them, but I don't know from day to day who will be working, when they will show up, or what they'll be doing. I don't even know from day to day what I will be doing. Thursday I had planned to move some of the construction debris, using the bucket on my tractor. When it looked like it might rain, I headed back to Lebanon, switched my car for my green pickup, loaded some tile, and drove back to Lyme so Bob would have the option of putting down tile on the bathroom floor if it was too wet to work outside on the chimney.

Most of the workers have somewhat regular schedules. The plumbers usually work on weekends. Last weekend the plumbers showed up a bit later than usual. They mentioned that their apprentice would not be coming. When the apprentice arrived he told us that his son's game had been canceled because of bad weather so he decided he might as well work.

Jeff, who runs the plastering crew, seems to have the most structured schedule. The afternoon before they finished plastering the bedroom, he said he would come by early the next morning to complete the job. The next morning he did not show up early. When he did arrive, he announced, "Seemed like a good morning

for hunting turkey. I got a Jake. It took a while to dress it—all those little pin feathers and the lice."

We have no time clock, no time cards, and my feeling is that no one needs an excuse for being late or absent. Reasons for a deviation from the usual arrival and departure times are never requested though they are usually offered. Thursday Roger offered the reason he, Bob, and Ted had arrived a bit later than usual: "Saw a mother bear with three cubs. You don't often see three cubs. She must have weighed about 150 pounds, but it's kind of hard to tell with the fur and all that. The cubs must have been a year old because they weighted about 60 to 70 pounds."

I was delayed getting started on my Sunday dump run because I pulled my pickup over to stare down a red fox that had just crossed my path (I didn't want to squish a red fox under my tires and was afraid that if I proceeded with abandon he might run in front of my truck.) I found him to be a very cute fox and enjoyed the time I spent watching him. Bob and I often travel the same back road. Each of us has been delayed because of moose, or other wildlife on the road and in the fields.

There are times when rigid schedules are important. For nearly a dozen years I hosted a radio program five mornings a week. Every morning at three minutes to nine I was on the air with my "drive-time teaser" to entice the listeners to stay tuned for my upcoming show. When I ran a retail store, I expected my employees to be on time. On this job, what is important are the tasks, not schedules. Some days are just better for hunting than for working. Sometimes it is more important to get the cows back in the barn than to lay sub-flooring. It's always important to stop and look at a bear with three cubs, because "you don't often see three cubs."

5/30/04

Baked Beans

This weekend Bob washed down the fireplace and put the last bricks in the chimney. As I was admiring his work he allowed, "I'd like to cook some beans in the oven."

The mention of oven-baked beans brought back memories of maple-syrup-sweetened baked beans and the steamed brown bread we had for dinner every Saturday evening before I was old enough to go to school. At that time I thought everyone in the world ate baked beans and brown bread for supper Saturday evening.

I didn't go to kindergarten; nor did my brother and I belong to a play group. Until we went to school we didn't know many kids other than Joan and John Wing, who lived on the farm next door. Sometimes we would visit their barn and help with the milking. During haying season we spent time together, pitching hay onto the hay wagon, leading the horse that pulled the rope attached to forks that were used to lift hay from the wagon and put it into the loft. Joan and John always had baked beans and brown bread for supper on Saturday. Their mother, Mrs. Wing, was known for making exceptionally good steamed brown bread with lots of plump, juicy raisins.

Sometimes Bill and Kenny Sensenig would visit us on the farm, or we would visit their farm. Our fathers had served together in the army during WWII. Bill and Kenny had baked beans and brown bread for supper Saturday evenings.

When I got old enough to go to first grade, I met other kids. I learned from them that eating baked beans and brown bread for supper on Saturday night was not a universal practice. The larger world of the first grade dashed that basic assumption of mine, and a lot of others as well; I learned that not everyone had an outhouse; wrote letters on birch bark; gathered warm eggs for breakfast from under hens; or knew how to put a worm on a fishing hook.

Until Bob mentioned baking beans it had been a long time since I had thought about them, and a longer time since I had eaten any really good home-cooked beans. They are not an "in" food; they don't belong in an Atkins' diet. And when you mix in a big chunk of salt pork, as is called for in most recipes for New England baked beans, they no longer qualify as a vegetarian dish. Moreover, old New England baked bean recipes require soaking the beans for days and cooking them for hours, so they are not a dish you can throw together after work and have ready in time for the evening dinner.

Baked beans may not be an "in" food, but the more I think about them, the more my mouth waters for some. When I unpack my Mother's recipes, I am going to look for her baked bean recipes. Bob's baked beans may be the first cooked in the new oven in the renovated farmhouse, but I am certain they will not be the last. If, in my mother's recipe box, I find a really good recipe, I may frequently bake beans in my new wood-fired oven and serve them with brown bread for Saturday night supper.

6/7/04

Burls

I live in Lebanon, about 20 miles south of my farmhouse in Lyme. My Lebanon house, although only a 15-minute walk from the city center, is surrounded by trees. Last week a violent windstorm swept through the area. Wednesday evening, when I arrived home after having driven from Lyme through heavy rain, wind, and lightning, I found a Lebanon Police cruiser in my driveway, a fire truck in the street, and two trees on my house. The public safety officials had come to confirm that no one had been squished or electrocuted under the pile of tree parts.

The downed trees were large, very burly, old pines. There were burls on the trunks, burls on the branches, and even burls pushing up in the lawn along the roots. Over the years I have had numerous discussions with wood workers, botanists, foresters, and observant friends about the burls. All who noticed them said they had never seen so many in one area. They have served as a botanical Rorschach test: some observers thought a branch looked like a hilly landscape; others saw buxom ladies or Sumo wrestlers. I asked everyone who noticed the massive collection if they knew why my trees had so many burls. Some thought bugs or parasites caused them; others thought they were caused by chemicals in an underground stream. No one had much confidence in his or her theory. Most prefaced their remarks with, "Some think. . ., " "It might be. . ., " or "Maybe it has to do with"

Wednesday evening, the burls that had served merely as a curiosity became an asset. There were dozens of trees down in town, but my trees got an extra measure of attention: friends, neighbors, and passers-by wanted the burls.

By Thursday evening I was glad I had decided to give first pick of the collection to my regular tree man, Chuck. During breaks from cutting up the trees and loading his truck, Chuck told me he wanted to make paneling for his log cabin from the burlled trunks, tables with burlled legs from the branches, and chairs with burlled seats.

Last weekend, when I heard that one of the most popular graduation gifts this year is plastic surgery, I thought of my burly trees. If, when they were young, the owners had found a deviation from perfection to be unacceptable, my trees would never have survived. In their senior years they could not have provided shade, a home for birds, and the stimulus for interesting conversation. In death, they would not have become the wood from which Chuck will make interesting paneling and furniture, Roger unique door knobs, and others their own, singular, wooden items.

6/17/04

Water

For the past two years Ron has been working on the grounds and restoring Louise's gardens. Last week, when he tried to get some water for Grizzly, his part-wolf, part-dog companion, he found that the water hydrants I had put in last fall were dry. The ground well that fed them, which for the past few days had been providing water for the cattle grazing next to the upper barn, had gone dry. We had water problems-again. Last year we could not get water from the ground wells because the galvanized piping my father had laid a half a century ago was leaking like the proverbial sieve. So that we could use the ground well water, I installed two hydrants and ran new plastic pipe from one of the ground wells to the hydrants.

A reality of old New England farms is that the water a farmer has is no more than that which the land can give. The property I inherited from my mother is relatively rich in water sources: I have a beaver pond in the upper woods, a pond and two ground wells in the pine forest, a ground well in the upper field, and a driven well behind the house. Last year we laid new plastic piping from the well in the upper field to the hydrants; last week we realized that the single well did not have enough capacity to provide sufficient water for the cattle.

When I was growing up on the farm we often ran out of water. Even after we had a flush toilet installed, we used the outhouse in the summer to conserve water. When we ran out of water, which happened almost every summer, we carried it in buckets from local ponds and brooks. (A clean block of wood was floated in the bucket to break the surface tension and reduce the amount of water that sloshed out.)

When the days were hot and sunny, and the fields dry and dusty, what my mother called "canary dips" replaced our baths. The entire family used one bowl of water to wash. The oldest family member, my mother, used it first; the youngest, my brother, was last. By the time my brother washed, the water in the bowl was cool, scummy, and gray!

It is probably because of my experiences on the farm that I worry more about running out of water than almost anything else. When I see someone leave a faucet running because they want the running water to get a bit colder, or a bit hotter, I have to fight the urge to turn off the faucet and launch into a lecture about how irresponsible it is to waste water, how important it is to conserve resources that are precious and limited.

Our current water problem has a short-term solution. As I write this, Ron is digging a trench to one of the wells in the pine forest. Earlier this week he had to fell a dozen trees to gain access. Saturday, the plumbers will replace the old leaking pipe from the wells in the forest with new plastic pipe. Within a week I hope we will have enough water so that the cattle can return to the pasture next to the upper barn. I know we may run out of water again. Cattle drink a lot of water-a 1000-pound cow can drink 20 gallons on a hot day. If we do run out again, we will do what we did three, four, and even five years ago-run a pipe from the pond in the pine forest. Then we'll watch anxiously as the level of the pond sinks, and welcome each rainy day as a gift from the Guy in the sky.

6/24/04

The Deli

Sometimes on my way from Lebanon, where I live, to the farmhouse in Lyme, I stop at The Colonial Deli Market.

The Deli, as the regulars call it, is less than a half-mile from Interstate 89, Exit 18. For those looking for coffee and a toilet break on their drive from Boston or New York to the White Mountains, the Deli looks like just another one of the thousands of convenience stores located near interstate exits. For those of us who are regulars, the Deli is more than just a place to get a quick cup of coffee and buy gasoline, diesel fuel, or kerosene. The unusually large number of pickup trucks in the parking lot serves as the first clue that the Colonial Deli is a special place and that its clientele is not limited to inter-state travelers who are passing through.

For more than a decade, nearly every morning a bit after 5 a.m., I stopped at the Deli for coffee and conversation. A few years ago, on a day that happened to be my birthday, I stepped outside a bit before 5 a.m. to find a skunk in my Have-a-Heart trap. That morning the conversation at the Deli concerned how Janine should move the skunk. Later in the morning, I successfully moved the black and white pest out of state—with a rag over the trap so it could not see me and take aim—and a board under the trap so the skunk's incredibly long sharp toe nails could not dig up the car's carpet .

The food at the Deli is simple, plentiful, fresh, and very good. I sometimes get a chef's salad. The plastic container is so full of freshly cut vegetables and good quality ham, turkey, and cheese that the cover has to be held on with masking tape. The sandwiches are so thick I have to remove some of the meat before I can take a bite.

One of the special functions served by the Deli is that of an informal job market and employment bureau for the building trades. People looking for work stop at the Deli. People looking for workers stop at the Deli. It was there that I made arrangements for Jimmy to work on my mother's terrace and for Tim to

repair the roof at my retail store. Harry keeps track of the regulars as he works the cash register. When I wanted to get a message to Jimmy, I would ask Harry if he had been in. If he had not, I might have hung around hoping he would show up, or if my schedule did not permit me to linger I would ask Harry to pass on a message.

This weekend when I stopped at the Deli for coffee, Ted approached me to ask if Bob was going to rebuild the main chimney on the Lyme house. Ted is a retired mason, and like Travis McGee, the creation of mystery writer John D. MacDonald, he works only if the job is interesting. It was at the Deli that Bob made arrangements for Ted to work on my new fireplace. When I told Ted Bob would be rebuilding the main chimney Ted said, "I'd like to work on that job. You don't get any better views than from the roof of your place up in Lyme."

Ted is right. The views from the Lyme house are quite spectacular. I am glad they are; I get to enjoy the views, and in a job market where it's hard to get good craftsmen, the views afford me a little edge and make it easier for me to hire the best help.

7/5/04

What We Fear

When someone calls to say they will be coming by the Lyme house to drop something off or to do a small job at an odd hour, I tell them the house is open. *Open* means the back door is almost framed in, but the door is not actually on. There are three oversized window holes in the addition behind the kitchen, waiting for framing. When there is a wind-driven rain, we sometimes hang up a piece of plastic over the opening where there will eventually be a door from the kitchen to the front terrace. Depending on what work is being done, any of the other windows and doors may be open, or out, waiting for repair or replacement.

Open means that anything and anybody can get in. When it's windy, a few grass clippings and a couple of leaves may swirl around the kitchen floor. Chipmunks have found it faster to go through the house than around it when moving from the backyard to the front. On a number of occasions, especially in the spring when the swallows were looking for good nesting sites, I chased birds out open windows.

I try to remember to close the pocket door from the kitchen into the dining room in order to minimize dirt, dust, rain, and critters getting into parts of the house I am not refurbishing. One day last week when I entered the house to check some of the work I found the pocket door had not been shut. Thinking only of reaching my destination-the master bedroom on the far end of the house-I walked quickly from the kitchen through the dining room into the living room. There I heard the click of toe nails on the wooden floor. I was scared; I froze in place. My fear was that I had cornered a raccoon, a creature that does not take kindly to being cornered. My options were to run (not a good idea), find something with which to defend myself (there was nothing in sight), or just stay in place and pray that the raccoon would be more traumatized and disabled by my presence than I would be by it. While images of a shredded Janine flashed through my mind, out of the corner of my eye I saw Grizzly, Ron's wolf-dog companion, appear as he walked from the hall into the living room. There was no raccoon-what I had heard was Grizzly looking for a shady place in which to take a nap.

Last weekend, when the plumbers drove up to the edge of the woods to start laying pipe from one of the ground wells, they noticed a bear in the corner of the field. At first they stayed in their truck hoping the bear would leave at the sight of their truck. When after several minutes the bear had not departed they made a commotion. Apparently spooked by the noise, the bear finally left. Just a few minutes later I walked up to check on progress. As I tramped the path toward the well, twigs snapped beneath my feet. Unbeknownst to me, the plumbers froze in their tracks: they thought the bear had returned. When I said, "How is it coming?" I heard a collective sigh of relief.

The fear I experienced when I heard Grizzly's toenails clicking on the floor was similar to that I felt many years ago when, at 3 a.m., I had gone to the flower markets in New York City carrying what for me was a lot of cash to buy 60 orchids for my parents' anniversary party. When a figure moved quickly out from between buildings, fear rushed up inside me.

As I move about, I cannot avoid scary situations. I am glad that most of my frightening encounters on my farm are with animals and sounds of nature, such as-snapping branches and claps of thunder-and are not the frights caused by unknown troubled urban dwellers.

7/13/04

The Views

I grew up on an old hardscrabble farm in northern New England. From the windows of the farmhouse we gazed at the fields, meadows, hills, woods, the mountains of Vermont, and, when it was clear, the stars in the night sky, and the clouds in the daytime.

Today, many turn on television or the radio to learn how the world is doing; when I was young we looked out the windows. We could tell how the hay crop was growing. We could see how the snow was drifting. If an animal was down, the vultures would be circling. If there was a fire in town or on a neighboring farm, we could see the smoke.

Almost 80% of the weather in New England comes from the west, so it was to the west we looked for our weather forecast. At a young age I learned that a good haying day was predicted by high cumulus clouds. If cirrus clouds thickened in the west, we would bring in the wash hanging on the clothesline. We looked to the sky and the surrounding hills to gauge the duration of a storm. If we could see Moose Mountain, it would be a brief storm. If Baker Hill was obscured from view, we knew the rain would last a long time.

In the spring and fall, when the moon was full and the sky clear, we would cover the tender crops to protect them from frost. In the winter when the stars were particularly bright, we would bring in extra firewood because we knew it would be a cold night.

Now when I drive by the pasture, I check the percentage of cows lying down. Last Thursday only one was standing; it rained all day. Yesterday all the cows were up and grazing; the day was bright and sunny. If I see the leaves of a silver maple tree turned over, I make certain the windows in my office are closed; I don't want to take the risk of it raining on my desk.

Some judge a view by how far you can see. For them the best view is that from the top of a mountain, where, on a clear day, you can see for miles. From the Lyme farmhouse we have a long view to the

mountains in Killington, Vermont, but we also have a palette of shorter views. The variety of different aspects offers a wealth of information about crops, animals, weather, and the activities of our out-of-sight neighbors.

My appreciation of the views from the old farm has been renewed by my association with the men working on the renovations. When they arrive, they look at the fields, study the tree lines where the fields meet the forest, look to the surrounding hills, then west toward the Green Mountains of Vermont. If I am near, I often hear them predict the weather for the day, the state of the crops for the season, or the health of the animals.

And it is not just the natural environment that we observe. This summer all of us on the farm knew when the fire at Mr. Trottier's house was under control. The smoke turned from black to white as the Lyme Volunteer Fire Department poured on water. Then, as the smoldering embers cooled, the white smoke disappeared from sight.

07/18/04

Why We Buy

On Friday afternoons, the chief carpenter, Willem, always cleans up the work site. I wouldn't tell him this, but if Will ever wants to give up his day job of carpentry, his evening job writing, his weekend job as a public radio commentator, his part-time job as host of *New Hampshire Wildlife Journal*, and his vacation-days job as a guide, I am sure he could find steady work as a custodian. He is good with a broom.

I try not to interrupt the workers when they are working. Distracting someone with a saw has been responsible for more than one severed finger, and, besides, I am paying them by the hour. It is different Friday afternoons when Will is sweeping up sawdust. If I distract him then, he is not likely to get hurt, and a little distraction might cause him to forget how mundane sweeping can be.

One Friday afternoon, as Will was putting away his cordless driver, drill, and saws, he said, "I want to get a cordless tool kit like Carlton has. His is lighter, it holds a charge longer, and has more power than mine. This one is getting old; I need a new one." We make a lot of decisions about the products we buy the way Will made his decision about his next cordless power tools. We rely on the testimonials of those we trust and respect.

The workers on the job are talented, skilled, intelligent, and creative. It is fun and stimulating to spend time with them. I didn't use the yellow pages, the Internet, or media advertisements to find workers. They were either hired on the basis of recommendations, or when they came to help someone already working on the job, I realized they were good workers and offered them more tasks.

I made the decision about the finish for the bedroom floor after talking to Jimmy, the floor installer, and Jeff, one of my painters. I decided not to put polyurethane on the floor but rather to use a Tung oil blend. I felt oil had many advantages: not only would it better penetrate and preserve the wood, but if the floor were scratched, the blemish could be repaired by merely rubbing it with oil. A scratch or gouge

on a floor finished with polyurethane would leave an ugly scar that could only be repaired by refinishing the floor, while a blemish rubbed with oil would be hardly noticeable to a casual observer and would give the floor character in the eye of a careful observer.

Last week I bought a generator. I asked Ron, the gardener, for his recommendations because I knew he owns a generator. I asked Paul, the electrician. I learned what kind of generator Scott, the master electrician, has. Armed with my knowledge, I drove 30 miles North to see, Ray, the manager at Blackmount Equipment. Ray had been recommended to me by Arend and Scott. Because I trust the recommendations of those whose opinions I solicited and I relied on their advice I am confident I will be pleased with the new generator I purchased.

I like making decisions the way Will did about his next power driver. Not only have I hired workers, bought equipment, and confidently made decisions about the project this way, I have had fun learning from interesting, enthusiastic people.

As VCRs with TiVo and commercial skipping options become more popular, and pop-up blocking software gets better, I hope the people who avoid seeing and hearing a lot of advertising will use the method of brand selection we practice in this part of northern New England. We select the brand that has been tried and tested by those we respect. If more people did what we do, companies might save advertising dollars and spend the money saved to make better products, offer better services, and maybe even sell their products for a bit less.

07/29/04

The Site

Much as those who arrive at the farmstand when it opens get to select the best produce, those who settle in an undeveloped area get to pick the best sites. I am fortunate to have inherited a farm located on a site chosen many years ago, when those who cleared and settled the land had many sites to choose from.

I believe the property was originally settled by Native Americans. When they settled this region of New England, they had their choice of hillsides and valleys, river beds and mountain tops. The property on which the house sits would have topped the list of most desirable sites.

The property is located on a south-facing hillside. Because snow melts more quickly on a south slope, the growing season is longer. To the east and west are nearby hills, and all summer we have a cooling breeze. The hill rising behind the house protects the gardens and grounds from cold north winds.

From the home site, settlers had early warning of weather changes. On a clear day we can see more than 50 miles west into Vermont. It is from the west that most of our New England weather comes.

Grant Brook defines the southern boundary of the property. When I was young I caught many trout in its swift waters. I am certain Native Americans had even better luck than I fishing in the granite-lined creek that carried water off the hills, then from Lyme Center to Lyme and eventually into the Connecticut River.

Below the house on Grant Brook is a waterfall known as Tannery Falls. A century or more ago a tannery located on the brook was powered by water rushing over the rocky falls. I remember the pool at the bottom of the falls being a favorite local swimming hole. I imagine that the rocks beside the falling water would have been a good place to wash and dry clothes.

Located in the woods above the house is a beaver pond, which could have provided water not only for people, but also for wildlife. Because animals would have congregated there, it was a place where early settlers could have hunted and trapped.

My belief that Native Americans settled the property is confirmed by the fact that, when we were young, my brother and I found many Indian arrowheads in the dirt behind the farmhouse. Another confirmation is the large number of snakes that are found near the house. Snakes, cold-blooded creatures, like to gather near warm rocks. Native Americans often used warm rocks to heat their dwellings. The snakes may have come initially for the warm rocks, but many have stayed for centuries. Large snake populations can be found on the site of the Dartmouth Medical Center which is known to have been a major Native American site and at many other Native American sites in the area.

This summer the carpenters found snakes curled up on the second floor of the farmhouse. I often find snakes in the basement, under the barn, and sunning themselves on the stone walls.

08/09/04

August

August is not my favorite month; actually, it is probably my least favorite. In August there is too much to do. The garden produces more than I can pick, clean, eat, give away, or preserve. The grass grows fast; the weeds grow faster. If I want to enjoy the berries, I have to pick them before the birds do. And if having too much to do in a day is not overwhelming enough, each day there is less daylight. In August the horse flies and mosquitoes thrive and bite. In August I cannot take off enough clothes to be comfortable on a hot day.

What I find most depressing about the 8th month is the guilt I hold, guilt for promises made to others that I haven't enough summer days to keep: "Before the summer is over, we will . . ." And guilt for promises I made to myself that will have to wait for another year: "This summer I am going to. . ."

Because I live in the northern part of the United States, every month has different weather, hours of light and darkness, foliage, and crops. The holidays dictated by churches and the government, Thanksgiving, summer school break, and Labor Day weekend add to the reasons every month is different. The differences give me many reasons for enjoying the other months more than August.

In September and October the days get cooler. The mosquitoes die. I get to wear my warm, colorful fleece. The hills turn beautiful shades of orange and red and yellow and green. In November and December I enjoy the fun, friends, and festivities of the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, and look forward to the first of the clean, white winter snows. In January and February each day gets longer, and, over the months, gradually warmer. The stars are bright and beautiful in the cold night skies. In March and April the trees start to come alive, and the maple sap runs. The early spring plants, the birds, and the woodland animals start to stir in anticipation of the even warmer months to come. I think the months of May and June are my favorites. The days are long and warm, and the varicolored cheerful flowers are in the best bloom. During these months we get the best hay, a variety of delicious berries, and early

vegetables. July is the heart of summer, with county fairs and band concerts, eagerly anticipated fresh vegetable crops, and new calves in the pasture.

Then August returns with its reminder that the long, lazy days of summer will not last, that so much of what I wanted to do this summer will have to wait another year.

08/18/04

Vegetables

This month I enjoyed the first ear of corn from this season's garden. It did not look like the corn pictured in a children's visual dictionary. The small, pale ear may not have been picture-perfect, but it was sweet, tender, and delicious. In the days since then, almost every night I have enjoyed fresh corn and tomatoes. Some nights I add fresh beans, chard, beets, and/or squash. Last night I had fresh corn, bright, red tomatoes stuffed with giant shrimp, and some really good Fumé-Chardonnay. The meal was delicious. This time of year vegetables from my garden are flavorful and colorful. The radishes and carrots are crunchy, the lettuce crisp, the beets firm.

I think the reason many Americans do not like vegetables is that they haven't tasted very many, and most of those they have sampled aren't very tasty. Potatoes, by a wide margin, are the most popular vegetable in this country. Americans eat almost 150 pounds of potatoes per capita each year, and most of those are fried. I think the flavor of fried potatoes is grease. A pile of french fries is pale when compared to a plate of red and yellow tomatoes, dark green spinach, yellow corn, bright red and white beets and green peas. I wonder if many of those who eat more than a third of a pound of french fries and potato chips each day would recognize the potatoes in that traditional early summer New England dish, creamed fresh peas and new potatoes.

Dozens of different vegetables can be grown on a small subsistence farm like the one on which I grew up. These vegetables have a variety of different textures, flavors, and colors, and can be prepared in many different ways. When I was living on the farm we ate a variety of different vegetables because of economics and convenience. If you didn't have a convenient green grocer or sufficient cash. In the early spring we ate the vegetables that were available.-parsnips and asparagus; in the summer there were dozens of vegetables to enjoy. As fall approached we ate winter squash, root vegetables, Jerusalem artichokes, turnips, chard and apples. In the winter we had the vegetables that keep well in the root cellar-beets, carrots, turnips, those that kept well in the pantry-Brussel sprouts, cauliflower and cabbage, and those

that we had canned over the summer. Now, probably because of what I had to eat when I was growing up, I enjoy many different vegetables.

Several evenings last week, on my way back from the farmhouse to my home in Lebanon, I stopped to see a friend, Joan, at the Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. I have known Joan since we were little kids; she grew up on the farm next to ours. As kids we spent time together milking, haying, picking vegetables, collecting windfall apples for cider, and helping our parents with the farm chores. Joan's parents liked peas. Each year they planted an enormous patch of peas, most of which they canned so they could enjoy them in the winter months. To shuck the peas, Joan's mother fed the podded peas through the wringer of their washing machine. The peas were squeezed out and shot into a bowl; the squashed pods fell into a bucket.

During one of my visits with Joan last week, the conversation turned to spinach. She decided that spinach would help her hemoglobin count. Soon we were discussing options for preparing spinach--fresh in salads, steamed, sautéed, canned and frozen. We both liked spinach and could not decide which method of preparation we preferred.

My friend Jeff grew up in New York City during WWII. As part of the war effort, he sold vegetable seeds to the residents in his apartment building. The tenants would grow the vegetables on window sills and kitchen counters. Jeff said his customers took pride in what they grew and liked all of their different apartment-house-grown vegetables.

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Because we are now fighting a war, I think all of us should share in the war effort. If everyone grew a few vegetables, maybe we could ship more food to hungry people. If everyone grew some vegetables, more would appreciate them, and as a nation we might be healthier. If, collectively, we were healthier, we would be saving money on health care. Though I think it unlikely that either of our hard-campaigning political parties will include a platform plank supporting a bill requiring every able-bodied person to grow vegetables, I do think it would be a good idea if the presidential candidates were to support such a bill.

08/31/04

The Crew

The people I've worked with while renovating the old farmhouse are some of the best people I have ever known. Some have asked how I found them. Fortunately, in this area there are still available multi-talented people with good work ethics. The fact that the job site is appealing, and the work interesting helps me attract some of the best.

There is no better way to learn to do than to have to. For centuries people working on hardscrabble farms did not have the luxury of doing what they wanted when they wanted. They fixed fences, butchered a pig, planted corn, picked apples, patched the roof, and never lost track of the chores that had to be done every day: milking, feeding the animals, carrying water, and keeping the fires going. I believe Daniel Webster was referring to these people when, shortly after the 200-year-old farmhouse I am renovating was built, he said about New Hampshire's most enduring icon, the Old Man of the Mountain:

Shoemakers hang out a gigantic shoe; jewelers, a monster watch; even the dentist hangs out a gold tooth; but in the Franconia Mountains God Almighty has hung out a sign to show that in New England He makes men.

Last summer the Old Man fell from the mountain. I don't know if the kind of men Daniel Webster was referring to are about to disappear; but, for now, here in rugged, rural northern New England we still have self-reliant people who answer to themselves and their Maker; who find satisfaction in their accomplishments; who respect the birch trees, the deer, the weather, their tools, their dogs, and each other.

My property is a small, peaceful patch of northern New Hampshire. The house is at the end of a dirt road. Those working here don't have to deal with unwanted traffic. We don't have to look at neon signs or golden arches. We don't hear boom boxes blaring rap music. The people working here are drawn by the job, the site, and each other.

My lead plumber and roofer worked for me nearly twenty years ago when I was renovating rental properties in Lebanon. Several of the carpenters and the painter worked on my Lebanon home. Many were recommended. If someone is recommended, or has come to help another worker, I often assign them a short, limited project. If they like the work, I like them, and I think they can contribute to the renovations, I find more projects for them to do.

To renovate the farmhouse I have needed dozens of people who collectively can claim hundreds of years of experience. As the project moves toward completion, I will need additional people with different skills. Finding craftspeople who can do a really good job is like a high stakes treasure hunt. Thus far I have found treasure. If I had delayed the renovations a few years I don't know if I would have been as fortunate.

09/18/04

The Carpenters

If this project were a movie, Willem would be the headliner. Because of his books, articles, Public Radio commentaries, and television appearances, almost everyone in the area knows him, and his reputation extends far beyond New England.

On this job, Willem is the lead carpenter. In his interesting and eventful life he has been a preacher and a teacher. He thinks that being a carpenter is one of the highest callings and often reminds us that Jesus was a carpenter.

I don't remember when I first met Willem; it may have been the first time he was a guest on my radio program. He's the carpenter who renovated my Lebanon home. Because of his experience, knowledge, well developed observation skills, and interest in old, and new, building techniques, Willem is a carpenter of choice for a renovation project. And because he is a great story teller, he makes coffee and lunch breaks interesting.

Bob, who also worked on my Lebanon house, is Willem's main man on this project. He is a skilled cabinetmaker. I am glad it was he who replaced the windows in the living room of the farmhouse: the window casings are old unpainted pine; he had the skill to set in the new windows without damaging the old casings.

Bob often mentions his college classmates, who are corporate executives and partners in large law firms. He has the intellect and education to have gone into the corporate or professional world but chose a different path. I am grateful he is a cabinetmaker.

Bob spends much of his off-the-job time visiting the wetlands in his hometown and hiking in Vermont state parks with his wife and sons. At work he keeps a digital camera in his toolbox. When he pulls out the camera he often says, "I like to remember the jobs I've worked on." It was Bob who photographed the

snake curled up on the second floor; it was he who took pictures of Roger calling in the wild turkey as the sun went down at the end of a workday.

When I realized my lower barn was about to fall down, I asked Arend if he knew anyone who might be able to shore it up. (At the time Arend was keeping a couple of dozen cattle in my pasture.) He introduced me to Carlton. One of the most intelligent and hard-working people I know, Arend, often says, "I trust Carlton more than I trust myself." And now that I know Carlton, I understand Arend's trust in him.

Carlton did more than merely shore up the lower barn; he restored it. His restorations have received praise from local farmers, visitors, and the flatlanders searching for real estate in the area. This past year the barn was pictured on the inside cover of the Lyme Town Report.

When a recent winter's particularly heavy snowfall shifted my upper barn off its foundation, I asked Carlton to restore it. His work on the upper barn was noticed by one of the most respected barn authorities in the country, John Porter of the University of New Hampshire. John, who authored the book *Preserving Old Barns*, asked me if he could include the upper barn in a barn tour he was then organizing. He said the way Carlton had jacked up the building, placed the cribbing, and replaced the carrying timbers was an example of how a barn should be restored.

This summer, when I realized the small carriage barn was precariously resting on the trunks of a row of lilac bushes, I asked Carlton if he could restore yet a third barn. He now splits his time between restoring the carriage barn and working as a carpenter on the farmhouse renovations.

09/2 1/04

The Mason

I knew I needed an exceptional mason when my sister-in-law, Linda, and I made a commitment to include a cooking fireplace in the renovated kitchen. I thought finding the right mason would be hard, so I tried hard. For weeks I put a lot of effort into the task. Each time I came up with a candidate, something he did or said made me decide I hadn't yet found the right person.

As I searched further down my list of names of people who might know someone who knew someone who was a good mason, I came across the name of a friend who several years ago had had a fireplace built in her new home. I called Karen, who with no hesitation said, "I think my Uncle Bobby could build the fireplace, and I am sure he would like to build a fireplace you can cook in. Bobby is a really good cook." On that recommendation I called him. He and his wife came up to have a look at my gutted kitchen. When I saw the sketches he drew, I knew I had found the right craftsman.

After I hired Bob, I learned that his father was a mason, as was his grandfather and that I had hired Bob's brother Jimmy to work on my mother's flagstone terrace. Now I know many people who have fireplaces that were built by Bob or one of his relatives. After meeting him, I realized that I had seen him dozens of times when I stopped for coffee at The Deli in Lebanon.

In addition to being an exceptional mason, Bob is an accomplished artist. His wood carvings and drawings are so good that they've been purchased by the president of Dartmouth College to serve as gifts. From a piece of wood taken from a lilac bush located next to the house, he carved the handle of the stovepipe damper for my new bake oven.

Bob did such a good job on the chimney, and I and the others so enjoyed working with him, I asked him to work on other projects. Before he completed the kitchen fireplace, he started building the foundation for the small addition on the back of the house. After he finished the fireplace, I asked him to rebuild the main chimney. That completed, I asked him to set the bathroom tiles; in the next few weeks he will lay the kitchen tiles. Knowing the basement windows needed replacing, and that the new windows would have to

be set into the old stone foundation, I asked Bob to take on that project. The new windows have been delivered; soon he will be working with Ron to set them in the basement window wells.

Bob demonstrates the respect for others and the love of family that is so characteristic of the craftspeople renovating the farmhouse. He tells the guys that his wife Rose makes the best peanut butter cookies. (Rose does make really good peanut butter cookies-Bob has shared some with me.) He speaks with pride of his children and grandchildren. He is confident that, as soon as his granddaughter takes her hunter's safety course, a wild turkey will be on its way to the oven, because, as he says, "My granddaughter is a really good shot."

I am looking forward to the kitchen's completion so I and others can start cooking in the space. Then I hope to learn if Karen was right when she claimed that her Uncle Bobby was a really good cook.

09/2 1/04

The Indispensable Flexible Workers

Every job needs someone to fill in the cracks between major tasks.

Roger came on the job site as a tender for Bob the lead mason. As a tender, he set scaffolding for the chimneys, mixed mortar, and did a variety of other tasks so the masons could efficiently do what they do best.

One day after Bob and Roger had been working on the foundation for the small addition, Bob allowed that he didn't need Roger that afternoon and suggested that maybe Roger could do something for me.

Since then Roger has done not just something; he's done lots of things. He helped me pull up flooring in a cedar closet that will become a cedar bath. He has pulled and bagged old insulation. He's loaded my green pickup and made numerous dump runs with me. He has helped Carlton set timbers in the carriage barn that we're renovating. He's prepared areas of the basement for cement. While working with Roger, I have learned a bit about his numerous skills and the variety of equipment and tools he owns and operates. He has laid and finished floors, has welded, and owns welding equipment. He can run and repair just about every kind of heavy equipment, including backhoes, dozers, and skidders.

Roger is one of two Vietnam veterans working on the project. I will never understand or appreciate the war experiences Roger has had, but I and others on the job site value the caring, grateful person Roger is. On a beautiful day he will sometimes say, "If you have seen what I have, you'll appreciate a day like today."

This has been a difficult summer for him; his sister is gravely ill and his mother has been greatly distressed. Throughout the summer he has maintained a sense of responsibility and kept his priorities in

order. If he does not appear at work as scheduled, we know it is because he is helping his mother, meeting with doctors, arranging hospice care for his sister, or dealing with some other family crisis.

Roger is not the only one on the job who fills in the cracks between major tasks. Nate, our youngest worker, also has proven to be a willing helper. When someone makes the blanket statement that kids are bad and lazy, I know they have never met Nate and surmise they probably haven't met many kids. When I needed a particularly unpleasant job done-cleaning up the dump-I asked Arend if he knew any kids who might be willing to do the work. He recommended Nate. Nate, who this fall will be entering his senior year in high school, has proven to be responsible, hard working, and respectful. In warm weather he is a winning Motor Cross racer; in the winter he races snow mobiles.

Nate did the unpleasant dump job willingly and efficiently. As in other instances when I've discovered a good worker, I have found more tasks for him. One of the first extra tasks I had him do was to remove old insulation from the outside walls. When we needed insulation removed from under the eaves, he crawled into space only inches wider and higher than his long, skinny body. After he had removed the old insulation, he helped Carlton set the new supporting timbers for the carriage barn and nail on the new cedar shingles.

When Nate returned to school Carlton reflected, "I'll miss my little helper." We all miss him. When he left, he promised to let me know if he were to have any free days, and I promised to find something for him to do if he had any available time. I hope he'll have some free time; we would all like having him back on the job.

9/23/04

Same House?

Larry is one the carpenters putting on new siding. While working on the front of the house he suggested, and I agreed that the soffit boards and crown molding on the south side of the farmhouse should be replaced.

In hopes of finding some crown molding similar to the original, I got out my spiral-bound Brosco Book of Designs, a catalogue of available doors, molding, hardware, and other millwork products. As I looked at the pages of different moldings, I found myself thinking of Howard Mansfield's book, *The Same Ax, Twice*. The title of the book comes from the story about an old farmer who boasts that "he has used the same ax his whole life -- he's only had to replace the handle three times and the head twice." From this book I learned that the Ise Shrine in Japan has been completely rebuilt almost every 20 years since 690 A.D., and that nearly 90% of Old Ironsides, the U.S.S. Constitution, has been replaced.

The old farmhouse is not an historic icon, so renovation, which I think of as repairing and remodeling to impart new vigor, is the appropriate term for the work I am doing. Although new vigor is paramount, when it is possible, and not outrageously difficult or expensive, I try to restore original details.

One of the special features of the old house is the front entrance. Two centuries of rain, snow, sun, and ice have taken a toll on the door casing. Bob, the cabinetmaker offered to reproduce the pattern of the original casing. A collector of antique tools, Bob used his Stanley No. 45 Combination Plane with one of its original irons to plow a pattern that looks like that of the original, now rotting, casings. Earlier this week Bob showed me the new casing and with pride his old combination plane with its rosewood handle and box of irons. As he replaced the plane carefully in his toolbox, he added, "I bought this years ago; I couldn't afford to buy it now. People spend a lot of money for antique tools and never use them. They just hang them on the wall."

When I complete the renovation, I wonder how much of the original farmhouse will remain. The only original exterior component will be the old pegged front door. Sometime over the next year I plan to strip away two centuries of paint, refinish the door, and hang it within Bob's new casing.

About half the sills have been replaced, and about half the floor joists have been either replaced or sistered. Since most of the other components of the skeleton are in good condition, when my renovations are complete, I think the house will have more than 80% of its original framing and foundation. The interior I think will have about 20% of the original floors, walls and ceilings. I am keeping the original pine paneling, window casings, and doors in the living room, the largest room in the house. I am also keeping the old wide-board flooring on the second floor, which is now, as it was when I was young, splatter-painted. The remainder of the house will include many of the old doors and casings.

I am adding new materials and components, insulation, electrical fixtures, plumbing components, a new heating system, new appliances, and an OnQ system for distributing the signal from a satellite dish, signals for multiple phone lines, and Internet access. Many of these were not available a quarter century ago, and none were even anticipated when the house was built.

When the renovations are done, I don't want the house to be treated like some collectors treats antique tools—merely as an object of admiration. The house should be lived in and used. Part of that use I hope will involve the opportunity to share with friends and family many good times and good meals in the new kitchen.

09/29/04

Insulation

Since the farmhouse was built, nearly 200 years ago, insulation has evolved probably more than any other building material. When we took off the siding and opened the walls, we found corn cobs, old clothing, wadded paper, vermiculite, wood shavings, and a variety of processed products, including cotton and wool batting, loose cellulose, rock wool, and of course the modern favorite, fiberglass. Newspapers and, more recently, foil-backed materials were used to seal out drafts. None of the old types of insulation filled the cavities completely, and all provided nests for rodents, snakes, cluster flies-and even cozy spaces for wasps and hornets.

After researching various options and talking with friends whose judgment I respect, I made the decision to inject closed-cell urethane foam. The house is now completely insulated. The improved thermal stability is easily perceptible: on warm days the house stays cool; on cold days the house stays warm.

Having removed literally hundreds of rodent carcasses and pounds of droppings along with the old insulation, I am particularly pleased that the new material is not varmint friendly. Ben Kilham, Lyme resident and author of *Among the Bears*, had closed-cell insulation put in his new home several years ago. Recently his wife said they were thinking of having the same insulation added to their cabin- because they were tired of sharing their food, bedding, and papers with rodents.

All the insulation work was done by Foam-Tech, a division of Business Envelope Solutions, Inc. They are the largest concern I have worked with on this project. My work with them has helped me appreciate the special relationships I have with the other craftsmen and contractors working on the renovations.

Foam-Tech's first task was to insulate the master bedroom. We scheduled a date and they sent multiple copies of a long legal document and a list of job site requirements. On the day Foam-Tech had scheduled the work to begin they sent a truck and crew. When the crew chief arrived he requested a signed copy of the legal document. The only signature he got was on the check I gave him. With the

truck and crew on-site and a check in hand, he decided to go ahead with the work. When the job was completed, he offered a detailed review of what he had done. I took a quick look, and said, "It looks good to me."

Most of my contractors are small operations who employ attorneys only as a last resort and initially do only limited work for a new customers so their exposure to non-payment or an over demanding project is limited. Foam-Tech, however, works all over the East Coast with large companies and government organizations. It is probably because of the experience they have had and the legal staff they employ that they request their customers sign a wordy legal document.

Many think the threat to sue is a motivational tool; I think it is paralyzing. Some think that delaying payments, or getting a bill reduced because a small crack was not filled is entertaining. It is a game-a costly one someone has to pay for. I want to pay people for doing what they do best, not for writing bills, more bills, and overdue bills. I don't want to spend hours with long check lists after each piece of every job. Tours are for docents in museums. I try not to waste my time and effort, and the time and effort of others, reading, writing, accounting, checking, blaming, and complaining. I know this way of doing business doesn't work for many, especially in large organizations. I am grateful it works for us here on this job.

Since that first day, Foam-Tech has been back a half-dozen times. They have done excellent work. Over the course of their various visits we developed an exceptionally good working relationship, their crew helping us, our crew helping them.

The house is now completely insulated, and Foam-Tech still lacks my signature on their long legal document, but they have been paid in full for their work, and I have told them, and others, that they did a fine job.

10/04/04

Special Animals

St. Francis of Assisi had it right: animals make our lives better. On the radio program I hosted for more than a dozen years I had animals as guests and did programs about the impact animals have on the lives of people.

One of my guests was Wilbur, a Golden retriever who is a therapist at the Veterans Administration Hospital in White River Junction, Vermont. During scheduled appointments, stroke patients are instructed to pat Wilbur. He knows how to move incrementally further from the patient. Members of the VA staff told me Wilbur was more effective at increasing patients' reach, flexibility, and dexterity than human therapists.

During another show I learned about a cat at the extended care facility at New London Hospital who, without fail, took up residence on a patient's bed a few hours before the patient died. The staff had so much faith in the cat's ability to predict a patient's imminent death, they would wait to call the family until the cat moved onto the patient's bed. When I asked if patients found the cat distressing, the director of the facility told me that, on the contrary, patients found the cat comforting and that often their last motions were to pet the cat.

On other programs I learned of patients who, after a traumatic injury, resumed speaking for the first time to a cat or dog. I learned of hyperactive children who would do their homework only in the presence of a pet: for some students it was a hamster; others were able to concentrate on school work in the presence of a turtle.

One of the pleasures of the renovation project is that most days I get to share my day with two special dogs.

Wooly Bear is Carlton's black Labrador companion. I have no idea why she is called Wooly Bear. I would not describe her short, shiny black coat as wooly. She is a small Lab, not a big bear. Because Wooly is very curious, I like going for walks with her. The walks are more interesting because we're sharing the time and the trip. Wooly runs ahead, motivating me to walk faster. If something moves, has an unusual smell, or looks a bit unusual, Wooly stops. Her sensitivity to her environment makes me more aware of the sights, sounds, and creatures around me.

The other canine who enhances my days at the renovation project is Grizzly, Ron's wolf-dog companion. With pride Ron tells everyone that Grizzly has a really good nose. She does seem to have a good nose because she lets all of us know when deer, bear, moose and/or turkeys are in the fields. She chases, and sometimes catches, chipmunks and mice. Since I consider these swift little creatures to be pests, I appreciate her hunting prowess. Grizzly has become old and a bit arthritic. Over the summer Ron made a ramp which he carries in his truck so Grizzly no longer needs to jump into the cab of the truck.

Both Wooly and Grizzly are suspicious of strangers and are only tentatively friendly. Because neither is a dog that licks every hand, having Wooly and Grizzly greet me with their tails wagging makes me feel special.

10/10/04

The Plumbers

If I had to pick one feature that represents the quality of workmanship in the renovations, it would be the hot water control panel. When my brother comes to check on progress, he always goes to the basement to look at the 7- by 14-foot black panel which is mounted on the north wall. On it are more than a hundred components that control the flow of hot water to the sinks, dishwasher, tubs and showers, baseboard heating elements, radiant heat, and heated towel bars. The panel is a craftsman's rendering of controls for a state-of-the-art system.

The individual responsible for the plumbing is Dennis. When I first met him, nearly twenty years ago, he was a very good plumber; now he is an exceptional master plumber. Dennis is intelligent, knowledgeable, hardworking, skilled, and creative. He's as comfortable connecting pipe to an old gravity-fed well as he is selecting the components for a state-of-the-art hot water system.

Last fall, on a day I had scheduled a backhoe to dig a trench for new pipe that would connect the old reservoir to two water hydrants, we had a cold, wind-driven rain. Dennis worked for hours in an open ditch: his clothes were soaked; his shoes slogged when he walked. Most would have headed home for a hot shower after a short time. Dennis stayed until the job was done.

He rightly takes pride in his work. Every pipe has just the right pitch; every joint is neat. It is unfortunate that much of his work lies behind the walls, but visitors to the basement will have the opportunity to see the care and skill with which Dennis and his two assistants, Walter and Brett, have applied themselves.

Walt, who is a plumber, has done most of the mounting, plumbing, and wiring on the control panel. His workmanship is of exceptional quality. I often see him polishing the copper pipes and dusting the green circulating pump casings before he leaves for the day—he takes pride in the work he does and

always wants it to look its best. I think of Walt when I hear a young person say, "I don't want to be a plumber; I don't want one of those dumb jobs working with my hands. I want to go into computers." Walt, who programs the computer for the boiler and the chips for the controls, probably knows more about computers than some college graduates with degrees in computer science. He spends a part of each workday reading and reviewing manuals that many college graduates could not understand. Brett is a plumbing apprentice. He grew up on a farm where he acquired valuable skills and experience. He loves tractors, particularly old ones. On more than one occasion he has used my tractor to dig, backfill, or move something. When the artesian well casing needed welding, Brett did the job. Without his skills the project might have been, at best, slowed and, at worst, stopped. He likes plumbing, in part because of the varied work involved, and in part because he considers it a good trade that will give him the means to support his young family. Brett knows plumbing is not a job that can be outsourced overseas.

In our area, there is a shortage of skilled craftsmen. Schools tend to encourage students to seek higher levels of education, and higher levels of education best prepare students for desk jobs, professional and executive jobs, not the occupation of a craftsman. Becoming a skilled craftsman takes years of apprenticeship and practice. Because of new materials and equipment, it is intellectually challenging and constantly changing. In part, because of an addiction to instant gratification, many young people lack the patience to apprentice for years in order to acquire the skill that will eventually make them masters of their trade. And some just do not have the intelligence, or the mathematics and reading skills to learn about new material, equipment and techniques. I think the most deplorable reason there is a shortage of skilled craftsmen, is that the work done by people who labor with their hands and their heads is often not appreciated. I would like to remind those who do not respect the good, honest work of craftsmen, that, as Willem says, Jesus was a carpenter. That the great cathedrals of the world would not have been built if it were not for the skill of masons. If there were no electricians to wire homes, there would be no lights and we could not surf the internet on personal computers. When a hurricane whips across a swatch of land, everyone wants an electrician, a carpenter, and a plumber, yet it seems everyone wants to be, or wants their son and daughter to be, a doctor or a lawyer. I recently met a grandmother who apologized that one of her grandsons was a

fireman. Her husband had been a professor, the grandson's parents were medical professionals, and his brother was a professional. His grandmother's words were, "We tried, but he just wanted to be a fireman." I am glad he didn't listen to the advice of his elders.

Because in the Upper Valley there is a shortage of craftsmen, and particularly plumbers, I know I am extremely fortunate to have three of the best plumbers working on the renovations.

10/1 1/04

Clothes

Len became a regular customer at my retail store shortly after he moved from Hawaii to assume the presidency of a local high-technology company. Since initially he wore clothing that seemed a bit foreign to the area, and later every time he stopped at the store he was wearing something new, our conversation frequently turned to clothing.

In the summer, shortly after he had arrived, Len said, "I don't know why your New England houses have so many closets."

In the fall, after having purchased some fleece jackets, a few flannel shirts, and a wind parka, Len offered, "I know why you have so many closets; you need a place for all the clothes."

By spring, after he had purchased a ski parka, a winter coat, some wool shirts, a few sweaters and some winter suits, he opined, "The houses up here don't have enough closets."

In New Hampshire we get our first frosts in September. That is when we get out our fall jackets. Last week I started digging in the back of my closets for my warm shirts and comfortable sweaters. Before Thanksgiving I will revisit the back of my closets looking for long underwear, heavy socks, and gloves. About the time I get tired of wearing the same tan pants and yellow shirt to the dump every Sunday, it is time to rediscover clothes I bought last year, the year before, or even years before.

When I was young, clothes were made of cotton, wool, or blends of the two. We didn't have different clothes for different seasons. When it was cold we simply wore more clothes. We had wool shirts in three or four sizes, the largest being the last one to be donned on a cold day. We had bigger pairs of pants to wear over our union suits, and larger ones to wear over them. In the winter the outer layers were wool. The wool clothing was heavy; when it got wet it grew even heavier.

Most clothes fastened with buttons. Zippers were rare and not very reliable: often they would get stuck, or the teeth would not mesh properly. In an effort to make the zippers work a bit better, when we got a new bar of Ivory soap, before wetting it, we ran it up and down the teeth of all of our zippers. (If we used a bar of soap we had already washed with, the zipper would become gooey.) Buttons were more reliable than zippers, but they were constantly getting lost or broken. Every few weeks my mother would dump a tin box containing hundreds of buttons on the kitchen table. My brother and I would sort through them until we found replacements for those we had lost in the woods or broken when we moved some firewood. When our clothes were too worn to wear, the buttons were carefully removed and added to my mother's button box before the clothes began their new life as rags.

Today warm clothes are more comfortable, colorful, and lighter. Fleece washes without shrinking and dries quickly when it gets wet. It doesn't have much of an afterlife as rags, but some fleece exists as a soda bottle's afterlife: Patagonia® claims that 86 million soda bottles have been used to make their fleece clothing.

My mother, who wore and loved the best of fabrics—silks, linens, hand-woven woolens, and exotic furs—liked our contemporary colorful fabrics that were warm and lightweight. I bought a new red jacket this fall. The first time I put it on, I thought, if my mother were alive, I would give her the jacket. She would like the color and the soft feel of the fabric, and it would keep her warm. Since it doesn't weigh much, it wouldn't make her neck and shoulders ache.

I welcome the extra closets found in northern New England homes. I look forward each fall to looking in the back of my closet and rediscovering the warm, comfortable clothes I have forgotten during the summer months.

10/17/04

The Siding Team

Larry and his assistant, Jack, joined the project late this summer. The days were getting shorter, the mornings cooler, and the house was, for the most part, naked. The vinyl siding and underlying clapboards had been removed during the warm summer days. Larry and Jack make up my siding team.

Larry grew up in the area. Some of his wife's family have lived in Lyme for generations. He is an experienced, skilled, precise carpenter. Some say he worries too much about getting things just right. His obsession with perfection may not be good for his blood pressure; but it is good for my project.

He, like the other craftsmen, brings his own tools and equipment to the job. I agree with Hans the painter when, in his Austrian accent, he says, "Larry, his staging it's the best." Larry's staging is of the highest quality, and he sets it very carefully; it is so level you could sort your marbles on the planks. He spends more time preparing the exterior for siding than he spends putting on the siding. His extra efforts show. The siding is true, straight, and shimmed enough to be flat. His work makes the old house look young for its years.

So that he can use Larry's staging, Hans likes to paint the siding as soon as the team has driven in the last nails. When I ask Hans how the job is going, he often says, "Larry, he's the best-I have not used one can of caulk."

Jack, a retired New Hampshire state employee, completes the team. While working for the state, he laid out the interstate highway system. As a child he lived just a short distance from my Lebanon home. Now in his senior years, he says he likes "working with the guys." The guys like working with him: he has an upbeat attitude and a good sense of humor. He keeps us smiling.

Jack does dozens of odd jobs for Larry. He has primed all of the corner boards and the other trim boards. He helps set the staging. He unloads deliveries. When they are putting on the siding, Larry

measures; Jack cuts. After Larry, keeping an eye on his long level, has placed the siding just right, Jack holds it in place while Larry drives in the nails. They make a good, efficient team.

Larry is as precise and skilled about hunting as he is about his carpentry. Since hunting season began, he has spent hours watching deer. When he identified a doe without a fawn, he watched her for days until he found just the right moment to drop her quickly.

On Friday Larry shared the fresh venison with us. He built a fire in the old stone fireplace at the edge of the field. At noontime Larry, Jack, Hans, Carlton, Ron, and I gathered around the fire. Under cloudy skies we piled thin slices of rare venison on good wheat bread and added freshly cut onions and green peppers. As we ate, little was said, but a few observations were made. Larry said, "You don't want to cook good venison too much." Carlton added, "I think food always tastes better when you cook and eat it outdoors." Jack declared, "Tastes so good it makes you want to take up hunting." I added, as I have so many times this year, "It doesn't get any better."

10/24/04

Politics

If I didn't acknowledge that this is a place in which the upcoming elections are on the minds and lips of many, you might think I was writing from a Siberian prison, or maybe a desert island in the South Pacific.

This is the year 2004, which, as I learned in grade school, is divisible by the number four and therefore a year in which the President of the United States is elected. Because New Hampshire is a state pundits have labeled a battleground state, many are interested in how any and every sampling of New Hampshire residents will vote. Some have asked how the guys on the project will vote. I don't know how most will vote. I know how some will vote because of a bumper sticker displayed or a comment made. I like the response of Astronaut Leroy Chiao, who, in an interview from the International Space Station currently floating above the earth, said he will vote but will not share with others whom he is voting for. He said, and I agree, that in this country the right to a secret vote is inseparable from the right to vote.

I believe daily life on some levels is a spectator sport. At this time in this place there is much to see, hear, and reflect on. On my drive from my home in Lebanon to the farm in Lyme, each day I note there are fewer colorful leaves on the trees and more colorful signs on the lawns. On my 20-mile trip, Kerry signs outnumber those for Bush signs about 3 to 1. The completely unreliable prediction that could be drawn from this observation would be that Kerry will get 75% of the vote; Bush, 25%.

I have enjoyed the evolving signage set out by dueling neighbors. One day a small Kerry sign will appear; then a neighbor will put up a big Bush sign. This will be followed by the first neighbor adding signs for senate and house candidates. Soon a short strip of the road will be lined with signs for dozens of candidates. On our local ballot we have three offices for which only three individuals are running because the same candidate has been endorsed by both parties. Ray Burton doesn't have many signs out: I think he is relying on his overwhelming popularity and the fact that if you vote a

straight Democratic ticket, you vote for Raymond Burton for Executive Council, and if you vote a straight Republican ticket, you vote for Raymond Burton for Executive Council. I find it a bit strange that one of the three candidates, Doug Dutile, who is running for sheriff on both the Republican and Democratic tickets and appears to have no opposition, has more signs than either of the presidential candidates.

I find much irony surrounding ideology. The Democratic Party is supposed to be the party of the poor, yet the wealthiest towns in the area are overwhelmingly Democratic. It would be hard to make an argument that Kerry, Kennedy, and Jay Rockefeller are poor. The Republicans are supposed to stand for traditional values, but Reagan was our first divorced president. I think Rush Limbaugh, who is strongly associated with the Republican Party is on his third marriage, and most have read about his drug problems. Many would not consider the gay relatives of prominent Republicans, Dick Cheney and Newt Gingrich to be traditional. One of the ironies I find particularly distasteful is that those who profess to believe in individual rights and in privacy want to know how I, and everyone I know, will vote.

I don't know which candidate for President will win next Tuesday. I don't even know if anyone will know who has won by next Wednesday. I know that regardless of who wins, there will be losers who will say the election was not fair. I also know that four years from now, when another election season comes around, we will be reminded of promises made that were not kept.

I believe the most important votes we will cast next Tuesday will be for state and local offices. The state and local office holders are not only the farm team for higher offices: they are the politicians who determine what policies will ultimately prevail.

10/29/04

Electricians

Shortly after my mother died, I needed to have some electrical work done in the barn. The electricians I knew were good; however, none were exceptional, and the best of those I knew were not available. I needed to find an electrician. I asked friends for recommendations. While I was trying to make the best choice from their suggestions, I encountered unexpected help.

To put phones and DSL service in the guest house I was using as an office, I needed to dig a trench and lay conduits. As is required by state law, I called Dig Safe System, Inc., the communication network that assists excavators, contractors, and property owners in identifying areas that are free of underground utilities. The representative sent by Dig Safe was a long-term electric-company employee. While he went about his work, he reminisced about conversations he had had years earlier with my mother. He said that on cold, blustery days when he came to the end of our dirt road to read the meter, my mother would often invite him into the kitchen to warm up and enjoy homemade oatmeal cookies.

When I asked him to recommend an electrician, he said his company policy didn't allow him to. Still hoping to get some help making a selection, I started reciting my list of recommended electricians. In response to most he said, "He is good; we do a lot of work with him." When I came to Scott's name, he looked up from his Dig Safe work sheet and said, "He is the best."

Scott is a master electrician who runs his own small company from a town about 25 miles north of Lyme, in the foothills of the White Mountains. He has three employees—Paul, an electrician, and two apprentices. Most of the work on this job has been done by Paul and the apprentice assigned to him, Jason.

If we were to vote on who among the workers has the most energetic, positive attitude, Paul would get the vote. And, as is so often the case, a smile and the ability to find words to lighten the gravity of any situation are often found in those who carry heavy burdens. Paul carries such a burden. His

wife is ill and has been hospitalized for the past several weeks. He is a member of the Army Reserves and scheduled to be deployed November 15th, five days before his twins' fifth birthday.

In our small northern New England communities, townspeople, although they may not have a lot to share or much to say, do what they can to help others. Every evening since Paul's wife has been hospitalized, the ladies of his small church have prepared dinner for the family. He jokes about the mystery meal he will get when he stops to pick up the kids after work, and about the quantities of leftovers he will leave the next day at the home where his kids receive daycare.

As the 15th draws near, we are wishing Paul and his family the best. I am looking forward to having him back to work on a few residual electrical problems in about 18 months-at the end of his overseas assignment. In the meantime, I have faith that his kids will be well cared for by his two sisters and the ladies of the church.

Scott will keep us informed about Paul's assignments. I will send him an e-mail from time to time, and I will read with more attention than I have the names of those who have become casualties in the ongoing military actions.

This month war in other lands came a little closer to this New Hampshire hillside.

11/08/04

Thanksgiving: Plans Change

Those who know me, even casually, know that the focus of my efforts and energy this past year has been to get the farmhouse ready for Thanksgiving dinner with my brother and his family.

In spite of unpredictable problems, the kitchen is almost finished. Today I could roast a turkey, open a bottle or two of Farnum Hill hard cider, with help from friends and family prepare all the side dishes for a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, and bake apple, pumpkin, and mincemeat pies in the new ovens. Cleaning up would be a bit challenging, but we have more than a week to get the sinks and dishwasher connected.

I don't have any beds with clean sheets ready to turn down, but there are lots of places where we can lay a sleeping bag on some sawdust with the option of positioning your feet or head beneath a table saw or if my guests were anxious about sleeping under equipment I could move the table saw to the other side of the room. My plan was to have the carpenters vacuum up the sawdust and then drag out some of the mattresses. I think sleeping on a mattress on the floor can be very comfortable.

When I called my brother and his wife recently, Linda answered. Her first few words were, "I'm glad you called-I was going to call you." This was followed with, "We have decided to spend Thanksgiving in Boston with Ben and his wife Corrie. I know you planned Thanksgiving dinner, but Ben's mother-in-law wants to have Thanksgiving in Boston and" The conversation included an invitation for me to join them in Boston and Linda's offer to make reservations for me at the B&B where she and my brother will be staying.

After Linda ended our conversation with, "See you in Boston," I thought of a piece written by my Uncle John, an editor working for a Detroit newspaper, concerning greyhounds chasing a mechanical rabbit. The dogs never could catch the rabbit, which at the end of the race just disappeared. For almost a year I had been running toward a special meal on a particular date. I don't know if the dogs

ever realized they would not catch the rabbit, but I, in one brief conversation realized that the "rabbit" I had been focusing on was no longer ahead of me on the path. My thoughts and emotions cycled. I felt keen disappointment. Yet when I thought of all the work preparing Thanksgiving dinner, at some level I was relieved. I mentally kicked myself for investing too much time and energy in a goal I mistakenly believed others were committed to. When I consider the enjoyment and satisfaction I have had around the renovations, I am glad I didn't know my goal was going to vanish. Maybe without focusing on the goal I would not have worked on the renovation project with such enthusiasm-but if I hadn't done it with commitment and enthusiasm, I don't think it would have been as much fun.

As my thoughts moved beyond my own feelings, I realized that the most difficult problem I now face is how to tell the people I have been pushing to ready the farmhouse for Thanksgiving dinner about the sudden change in plans.

The first person I called was Ida. She has been fully invested in the preparations. Ida's first response "What are you going to tell the guys?"-was followed by a reminder that some had delayed hunting trips or given up other jobs to meet a goal I had set and was now removing.

In past years some of the crew took a break from work for the entire hunting season. In an effort to get my job done on schedule this year they limited their hunting to just a few days, or an occasional afternoon. Ron spent a day bear hunting and a weekend tracking deer. Over a three-week period Larry spent many days hunting. Bob the mason hunted in New Hampshire last week and plans to do the same in Maine next week. Carlton managed to find some time during the final week of the season. This week Dennis went north with his snowmobile club. Unfortunately, they spent less time hunting than usual, with the result that Larry was the only one to get a deer-and he only got one at that.

I feel a bit of guilt because many did not spend as much time as they would have liked to have spend hunting, , but I am most uncomfortable about the other jobs many gave up or delayed to get my house ready for Thanksgiving and about their time away from fun and family activities so they could work longer days, as well as some weekends and evenings.

This morning, as an antidote to my disappointment, I wrote a check to the Lyme Town road crew for their garage fuel fund. Money I might have spent on food for Thanksgiving dinner I hope will help keep the road crew warm this winter.

I don't know how, or when, I will tell the guys. After I write this, I'll call Ida and ask her for suggestions.

11/15/04

Design

Design is the cornerstone of the renovations. I started the process of designing by thinking of the function, or end use, I wanted to achieve. I wanted the kitchen to accommodate a lot of people, several cooking at the same time. I wanted a cooking fireplace, a professional range, at least two sinks—one big enough for large pans—and lots of counter space. I wanted my bedroom area to be a space I didn't have to leave, so, in addition to a bed, I required a sitting area for reading, a place for a desk at which I could write, and space for a computer.

Once I have an idea of what I want to do with a space and of some of the items I want to put in it, for me the hardest part of the design process begins: deciding on the particulars I want to add and putting them in the right places. My experience is not extensive enough, nor my imagination sufficiently creative, for me to envision all the possibilities. When I am trying to design something, some of my friends find me annoying: I go on a quest for options to consider. I ask just about everyone, "What do you think I should do? What do you think I should get?"

It is one thing to get suggestions from friends. Because I usually tell them their suggestions are among many I am collecting—about such things as the color of walls, type of kitchen range, or the kind of replacement windows I will ultimately use—I think they don't invest a great deal in their responses. The situation is different with professionals. When they suggest something, they are invested in their answer. If they are knowledgeable and honest, they believe in their recommendations. When working with some designers, I feel that if I reject their suggestions, I am dismissing them. I'm not comfortable when I feel I am discounting someone.

The most important person in helping with redesigning the space within the walls of the farmhouse has been Ida. Until recently I did not know why working with her worked so well for me. I knew she was intelligent, knowledgeable, hard-working, and creative, but I wasn't sure why I felt so comfortable working with her.

Last month I attended a local business forum. The keynote speaker, Prof. Richard Shreve, is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Harvard Business School, and Yale Divinity School. He gave a talk on ethics. After discussing established principles of ethics such as those set forth in Kantian ethics, Prof. Shreve discussed a relatively new set of criteria-those which comprise feminist ethics. When he stated that feminist ethicists have a moral duty to listen to others' differing points of view and, in considering such perspectives, develop a theory and practice that will serve the most important interests of others, I felt he could have been describing Ida and her business practices. Ida has opinions. She offers suggestions. Yet in working with her, it is clear that her investment is not simply in implementing her own ideas but in bringing satisfaction to her customers. She is more committed to making her customer happy with a design than in using a design she likes. I don't feel impolite or unkind when I say "I don't like it" to Ida.

It is not just her ethics that make me glad I am working with Ida. Design is about the big picture and the multitude of details that must be addressed to make the results successful. Ida is very good about the little details. She never visits the job site without a tape measure, which she uses to measure and remeasure every feature of each room. She uses thick black notebooks to chronologically record every design we have considered and every appliance we have thought about purchasing. I think this project is now on its third four-inch-thick-notebook. I have often said, and continue to believe, that one of the best decisions I made about the renovations was to elicit Ida's help.

11/17/04

Losing Friends

My friends serve as a sort of trampoline in my life. Their strength keeps me up. Their enthusiasm, imagination, curiosity, flexibility, and experiences help me try to do more, learn more, and want to make a contribution to the quality of their lives.

November was not a good month for the fibers of my trampoline. The first Saturday in the month, a day I had planned to share a meal with Margaret, I instead attended her funeral. Margaret, like her father before her, died suddenly of a massive heart attack. She and I liked to share good food, good wine, and long conversations. We laughed about the antics of our cats. We exchanged tips for dealing with our respective chronic diseases; hers was much worse than mine, but mine became easier to live with because of Margaret. She and I spent a lot of time on our computers. From her I learned computer tips and tricks and about a few web sites I might never have otherwise discovered. What I learned from Margaret made it easier for me to find on the Internet some items I have used in the renovations, such as the dummy door knobs for the master bedroom closets. I will miss her—our exchange of e-mail, our shared bottles of wine, those wonderful, long, therapeutic conversations—and the opportunity to show her how well the knobs on the closet door match the old ones.

Trina Schart Hyman, illustrator of more than a hundred books, died last month after a long battle with breast cancer. When I visited Trina's old farmhouse in Lyme so that she could sign books for my customers, we usually ended my visit in her kitchen, where, while we sipped Earl Grey tea, we discussed a variety of subjects in which we shared a common interest. We liked animals. Trina had lots of animals. We thought aspirin was underappreciated. I thought it was a good idea that Trina gave lots of aspirin to her old donkey for his arthritis. We preferred organic foods. I was planning on growing organic vegetables, and she offered me a manure mix from her various animals for my garden. We talked about how chicken manure could burn a plant, while cow manure could be put directly on the garden. I told her that when the circus came to town my mother liked to get elephant manure for her flower garden. When I bought my dump trailer, I was thinking about Trina because I planned to use it to move

manure from her barnyard to my garden. I doubt I will ever taste a cup of Earl Grey tea without thinking about her. I will miss Trina: she understood, and helped me understand a bit about what it's like for a single woman to live on an old New Hampshire farm.

Noel Perrin, a Professor of English at Dartmouth College and an author of books that celebrated rural life and electric cars, died in November. We shared an interest in words, rural New England, small farms, and electric cars. He believed one person could make a difference. He made a difference. Hybrid cars are more popular today because Noel wrote and talked so much about his own electric cars. There is more appreciation of, and respect for, the products of small northern New England farms because of Noel's writings. We shared the love of a Lebanon restaurant. Over the past months, when, as so often happened, we picked the same night to dine out, I had watched the ravages of time, age, and disease take a toll on Noel's vitality. I miss him but am glad he did not have to move from his farm and suffer further deterioration and debilitation.

Anne died last month from cancer. For years she was the morning lady at The Colonial Deli in Lebanon, where I stopped every day a bit after 5 a.m. for my first cup of coffee. Our mothers were about the same age. They lived in Lyme. They were both in declining health. Some mornings we talked about Anne's mother's late night wanderings. Some mornings we talked about my mother's late night phone calls. We hashed over their confusion and deterioration. She helped me see the funny side of my mother's behavior and to become more confident when making decisions about her care. I would have liked for her to have had more years to enjoy skiing, her flowers, and good conversations-but such was not to be. I'm grateful that Anne was a part of my life when I needed her experience and wisdom.

12/19/04

The Painter

If one of those matchmaking services ever asks me if I have a preference for national origin, I'll say Austrian. I only know two Austrian men. Actually I don't know Arnold, but I do know that he and my painter, Hans, have the most beautiful eyes, and their accents are so gorgeous, I could listen to them read hog prices for hours.

Hans is one of the oldest and most agile craftsmen working on the renovations. He gets up and down so smoothly it is almost as if his moves are choreographed—down to the mopboard, up to the window casing, up the stepladder to the coving, up the extension ladders to the dormers, and down to get chalk or paint.

I met Hans about a dozen years ago when I was renovating my Lebanon home. He painted the walls. Because he was overbooked, as are so many of the best craftsmen in the area, he asked his wife, Sandy, to paint my windows.

Hans is not only a good painter; he is very knowledgeable about paint. To achieve the finish and durability I wanted on the exterior of my outside doors, Hans selected a Dutch paint and had it shipped to him. He did such a good job staining the new wood in the replacement windows in the living room, it is hard to tell which pieces are not original 200-year-old pine.

One of the qualities I most appreciate in Hans is his flexibility with respect to the tasks he handles. If the carpenters are making a lot of sawdust, Hans sands some of the old wood he will be repainting so that if he has free time on Saturdays and Sundays, when the carpenters are off, he will have an inventory of surfaces to paint which he does not want damaged by flying sawdust. When it's warm and dry enough to paint outside, he leaves the inside jobs and moves outside to paint the new clapboards. Additionally, Hans earns high praise from our lead carpenter, Willem, for his carpentry. While

painting, if Hans encounters a carpentry problem, he cuts, sands, and/or nails to make the appropriate corrections before painting the area.

This summer it was easy to know when Hans was getting ready to leave the job for the day: he would walk by the building in which I have my office to pick clover for his pet rabbits. One day I asked Hans what his rabbits' names were. He hesitated a while and then said, "Buddy." When I asked if they were both called Buddy he said, "Yah, Buddy." The following Sunday I stopped at his home, a very attractive Swiss-chalet-style home he built, to leave off a check and some fresh clover. Hans showed me the large two story condominium he built for his rabbits and introduced me to his two Buddies—a big, beautiful, apricot-colored rabbit and her cute little black and white companion.

Hans is an accomplished hang glider. He has hang glided from most of the prominent sites in the United States and Europe. He is also a well known and accomplished skier. For years he has taught skiing and worked on the ski patrol and ski lifts at the Dartmouth Skiway. I hope we don't get snow early this year. I have lots of work I would like Hans to do, and I know that when the snows come I will lose him to the slopes for the season.

11/20/04

Thank You

During the week before Christmas more than a dozen people worked on my renovation project. We all had different schedules and lots of commitments so a Christmas party seemed unworkable. Because I wanted to to give each of those who were spending the days near Christmas working on the renovations some special acknowledgment I selected for them a small gift and wrote each a note thanking them for their special contributions.

As I wrote the notes I became aware of how unique and important the contributions that each had made was. When I had all of the notes and the little gifts laid out on the table I realized my words did not speak to the spirit of respect and cooperation each of the workers showed one another; it was their individual skills, experience, and commitment to excellence, in combination with their willingness and ability to share their special skills and knowledge with each other and to work together that had made the project so satisfying and successful. No coach could wish for a better renovation team.

A bit of what I said in my notes helps to define the contributions those working on the project in December made to the renovations.

To Arend and Paula who maintained the open fields, cut the hay and pastured their cow on the property I wrote-

Arend and Paula- Because of your efforts the fields look better, the cows seem content, and the cow bells sound as if the world were at peace. Without your recommendation I might have never found Carlton the carpenter, whom the others call the best 8'-by 8' man because he is so good at setting the big timbers used in the frame of the house and barn, as good an electrician as Scott, or Jeff, an exceptionally skilled plasterer.

To Bob, Carlton, Jack, Larry & Will who formed the carpentry team I wrote -

Bob- The old front door and its side lights look better than they have in more than a century - you set the new windows so skillfully in the living room and were able to preserve the trim, only an astute observer would know that the windows have been replaced.

Carlton - My barns should last another century or two because of your patience and skill and the house does not set on rotting sills

Jack- The house is less naked due to the hours you spent measuring, cutting and holding siding, and pounding hundreds of nails.

Larry - Hans is right when he says "Larry, he is the best." Because of your quality carpentry the siding is straight, true and flat and the coving in the kitchen appears to be seamless as it bends and jogs around the tops of the cabinets.

Will- although you suffered the discomfort of hundreds of wood splinters from old barn boards, you put the old boards paneling on straight and tight. Your work is the first anyone entering sees, and it speaks for the quality and character of the renovations.

To Ida the designer I wrote-

Ida- You are truly the keystones of the project. Your attention to detail has helped to keep the project from falling behind schedule and has reduced the number of times we have had to tear something out and redo it because it was not done quite right the first time.

To Jason and Scott part of the electrical team I wrote

Jason - we have lights inside and out, power in the barns, working electric fences and a generator ready to power the house because you were able to keep track of the project even though you often worked only a few hours at a time.

Scott - In spite of the fact that deployments greatly stressed your over-booked business, you kept my project on schedule, and the others did not have to wait for electrical work to be done.

To Ron the grounds guy I wrote-

Ron- The hundreds of feet of trench you dug for water lines, electric conduit, grounding cable, and propane lines help to maintain the all-important services. The garden was beautiful and bountiful this year, and I have reason to believe it will be more so next year.

To Bob & Roger who formed the mason team I wrote

Bob - The fireplace you designed and built is the show piece of the renovations, and the granite patches you put in when you replaced the old basement windows look as though they were part of the original foundation.

Roger - The kitchen fireplace was constructed more quickly because you built the scaffolding and made certain Bobby had the right mortar mix and the right bricks as they were needed.

To Hans the painter I wrote-

Hans - Your suggestions about colors and finishes, about carpentry details, and your aversion to sawdust is in large part responsible for the quality and tastefulness of the finished surfaces inside and out.

To Brett, Dennis & Walt who formed the plumbing team I wrote -

Brett- your willingness to climb into the old ground wells to connect new piping and your skill with the tractor guaranteed the plumbing was not held up.

Dennis - The plumbing components you selected and your workmanship have added significantly to the function and quality of the renovations. Your workmanship is art.

Walt- The house is warm and the furnace control panel is a work of superior planning and craftsmanship because of your skills and industry.

12/24/2004

Winter Travel

Most people live in warm or temperate climates. When my nephew, Ben, did a low-budget trip around our planet earth, he wore sandals, a pair of shorts, and a tee shirt. He carried just a few items in a backpack when he walked the miles between common carriers. The old, often dilapidated vehicles he rode in didn't have special preparation or extra equipment to deal with weather extremes and uncertainties.

On winter days in northern New England we need to wear a lot of clothes and our vehicles need special preparation and extra equipment. Winter travel here is not for the unprepared. In my car I keep a snow brush, a snow rake, a couple of different windshield scrapers, a flashlight, some sand, windshield washer fluid, and extra gloves. As Tom and Ray Magliozzi, the MIT graduates who host *Car Talk* say, "Any small problems you had with your car in good weather will be bigger problems in bad weather."

Long before the first snows came, I got my vehicles ready. I replaced my car battery (my mechanic and I didn't think the old battery had enough cranking power). I had the oil changed and made sure the new oil was of low viscosity. The antifreeze was checked to make certain it was good to 40° below zero (last winter the temperature almost reached that point). I replaced my summer driving tires with studded snow tires. The thin, sleek windshield wiper blades were replaced with snow blades-thick, rubber-clad blades that do not easily clog with snow or stick to the windshield when it's icy.

The preparations and required equipment may seem like a lot to someone who lives in Bermuda or sunny Florida, but preparations are easier, and travel by car is now a lot more reliable in New England than it was when I was young. Batteries are better. We often had to replace our battery partway through the winter, and on cold nights we would bring it into the house so it would be warm in the morning. A cold engine was hard to turn over, so we tried to keep the engine block as warm as possible. We kept the car in the garage and put an old fur blanket over the hood (my mother assured me that the dark,

ratty-looking fur had once kept an old buffalo warm). If the warm battery didn't provide enough cranking power or if the buffalo rug didn't keep the engine warm enough to get the car started, we would turn our attention to the ignition system. We tried to keep a new distributor cap, spark plug wires, and clean, gapped spark plugs on hand. If we could not get the car to start after we had replaced the plugs and wires, then we put a bit of kerosene in the cylinders. If this didn't work we would wait for a warmer day to try again.

I think I was in high school when electric block heaters became available. After we got a block heater, we had better luck starting the car on cold winter mornings. These devices are still used; I have a block heater on my tractor to keep the engine and fuel lines warm.

Fuel systems were not sealed as they are now, and we didn't have "check engine" lights to tell us if the fuel cap was not on tight. If water got in the gas tank, the gas lines could freeze. In that event, sometimes alcohol would dissolve the icy blockage. If alcohol didn't work, we would disconnect the fuel line and bring it inside to thaw.

After we got the car started, we often faced problems with traction. The road crews did not have the graders, scrapers, plows, and salt spreaders we have today, so the road surfaces were rutted and slippery. Because the tire threads didn't provide good traction, we used chains on icy and snow-covered roads. One of the most miserable winter jobs was putting on the chains. When I put on chains my fingers always ached and felt as if they were permanently frozen. But the worst part of the job was dealing with the gunk inside the fender. When I fastened together the ends of the chains, especially the hook and latch on the inside of the tire, I had to stick my head under the fender. When I moved the hook and loop together, my arms would rub against the fender, knocking mud, ice and dirty snow down my arms, under my collar and onto my face.

Once we got the car started and the chains on, just seeing was sometimes a bit of a challenge. Windshield wipers did not work very well, and we didn't have windshield washer fluid.

Driving in winter is still a challenge, especially on days like last Friday when we had freezing rain, but travel by car is a lot less problematic today than it was when I was growing up on the farm in Lyme.

1/02/2005

The Roofer

This year I put new roofs on the garage, the guest house, and the farmhouse addition. Ollie did my roofing.

Shortly after my husband and I moved to New Hampshire from the metropolitan New York area, we purchased a large, old house just a few blocks from the Lebanon Opera House. Our house had been built near the turn of the last century as a two-family home for executives in one of the local mills. It had beautiful woodwork, large windows, and high ceilings but had unfortunately fallen into disrepair. One of the most obvious and critical problems was the roof. We joked about how we could have star-gazing parties in the attic because the roof's holes were so large. After researching options, we decided on an enameled standing-seam roof and hired a local roofer. The new roof covered the holes, but it did not look as good as we would have liked: the long metal panels had wrinkles, and although the holes through which we had watched the stars were covered, eventually leaks developed around the new skylights we put in.

Later, when I realized I needed a new roof on one of my rental properties, I decided it was time to find a new roofer. I found Ollie the way I have found other good craftsmen: I asked anyone I thought might have any knowledge about roofers for a recommendation. Then I drove around looking at the roofs. There was a period of time when, if asked directions, I might have said, "Turn right just after the green standing-seam. Go two blocks to the slate roof. Make a left after the mill finish."

Ollie has pared his roofing business down to an efficient system. He comes out to the job site to plan and measure. One day soon after his crew of six to eight arrives in two trucks: one carries ladders and all the special pieces that have been prepared in the shop; the other carries a roll of roofing material and pulls a device that contours the sides of the roofing panels and cuts them to length. The crew attacks the roof like worker bees. Within minutes ladders are up, panels are being contoured and

cut to length, and the roof is going on. I, and even the workmen on the job, are always surprised by how quickly Ollie's crew gets the job done. I like to think one of the reasons the panels don't have wrinkles is that the panels are on the roof before they have time to wrinkle. I know if you work pie crust too long it gets tough, and I think if you handle standing-seam roofing too much it can acquire wrinkles.

When Ollie's crew was on the job, he would arrive on the job site sometime near mid-morning. At the site of Ollie's truck the crew would leave their work stations. The first day this happened I asked one of the crew who was hastily climbing off the roof, what he was doing. He gave me a strange look and said, "It's coffee-break time." After everyone has had coffee and a snack, as if on cue they return to their places on the roof and behind the truck. Panels are then again contoured, cut, pulled up, and laid on the roof.

One day when Ollie arrived for coffee break the back of his pickup was filled with apples. After giving me and the crew each an apple, Ollie asked me if I liked hard cider. I said "yes." A few weeks later he arrived early one morning with two bottles of hard cider and the suggestion that I not take a long road trip after sampling it. I knew Ollie was a good roofer, that he ran an efficient business, now I knew something about one of his other skills.

1/12/05

Lightning

This past year we have had unusually bad weather in the United States, and the tsunami in the Indian Ocean was the worst natural disaster to occur in my lifetime. We can neither change the weather nor eliminate natural disasters, but technology has given us some ways of reducing the resulting death and destruction.

On a hot, muggy spring afternoon more than twenty years ago, I was upstairs in our New Jersey home watching television while ironing. As a band of thunderstorms approached, the skies darkened and the winds picked up. Suddenly I saw a bright flash, heard a loud report, and, seconds later found myself on the floor, the iron still in my hand. I had been knocked down by a bolt of lightning that had struck my neighbors' house and set their home on fire. My neighbor's wife, who had been washing dishes in the kitchen sink, was struck by the lightning charge that had traveled down the kitchen water pipes., she was severely injured and the house sustained significant five damage.

When I was a kid, we had a telephone that was one of eight phones on the party line which served our part of town. Party lines were convenient: if we were visiting a neighbor and heard three long rings followed by a single short ring, we knew someone was calling us and we could answer our call on the neighbor's phone; at home, if a neighbor were called, we could pick up our phone, listen in on their call, and learn the latest gossip!

Since the telephones were not grounded, several times each summer the lines would be struck by lightning. The lightning charge, in its search for a ground, often traveled down our phone line and into our house, sometimes causing puffs of smoke and loud noises to be emitted from the old black telephone. My mother found the lightning frightening. My brother and I were excited by the, smoke, loud noise and occasional sparks that flew when lightning grounded through our telephone line.

The house and the surrounding buildings are located on an open hillside, which, I learned as a child, is a prime location for lightning strikes. The miles of network, telephone and electric cables, the half-dozen computers, the multi-line phone system, and the several miles of copper pipe are just what a good bolt of lightning is looking for. Because I did not want the house and its varied electronic equipment to be damaged in the event of a severe thunderstorm, lightning protection was one of my priorities when I made a commitment to renovate the farmhouse.

Almost a decade ago I did a radio program on lightning protection. Because of my New Jersey experience I wanted my listeners to have information about how they could protect their homes and barns in the event the buildings were struck by lightning. Will, who owns a business installing lightning rods, was my guest. Over the course of the hour the listeners and I learned that the risk of a lightning strike increases with elevation, as well as with the height and type of structure. We also learned that lightning rods can be installed in trees, and that this is often done when the trees are valuable, near underground utilities, or proximate to a metal fence line. I, and my listeners, we're impressed with Will's knowledge and how clearly he explained how lightning protection is installed and how it works.

This summer when I realized it was time to make arrangements for the installation of lightning protection I decided to contact Will. The message I got when I called his office was discouraging—he was completely booked. If I left my name, in a few weeks someone would call to schedule an appointment for the coming year. A few days later Will called: he had remembered our radio show. The next week he started connecting the lightning rods on my lower barn. This summer he put lightning rods on the house, garage, guest house, and carriage barn. Then, using hundreds of feet of shiny braided copper cable, he connected all the buildings to each other, and to giant grounding rods. The insects living in nearby ground now have beautiful metal artwork in their neighborhood.

Over the summer I had wonderful conversations with Will about metal sculptures. He likes to go to art shows where metal sculptures are on display. His eyes would light up, and his hands move when he talked about the different metals used in a particular sculpture, how it was assembled, how it moved in the wind, and how light reflected from its surfaces. He likes to cut, bend, and weld metal in his own

shop. Will, who likes to work with different metals, talks about someday putting away the ladders and making lightning rods for other installers.

He will be back to put lightning rods on the upper barn after Ollie gets the new roof on the barn, which will happen after Carlton finishes the barn's west face, which in turn will take place after the weather gets warmer. This winter Will is working on the old weathervane that was on the barn roof. Over the winter he is going to transform it into a lightning rod. Next summer the weathervane will not only tell me how the wind blows; it will help protect my barn if the wind is accompanied by lightning.

1/17/05

Endings

As Joni Mitchell's song "Both Sides Now" says "Something's lost and something's gained in living every day," -and some days things end. I am not good at endings. It is not just the big endings, divorce and death, but also the little ones: when I finish a really good mystery, I am disappointed there will be no more words to read in the book and am concerned that the next mystery I pick up will not be nearly as good.

Last Friday Carlton stopped by the guest house to say, "Guess I'm finished up. There's not much left to do. I'd just get in Larry's way." Carlton's few words caused me to flood with more emotion than I have felt in months. The job was actually winding down. Almost every day for the last several months I have said to myself, or to others, "It will be great to get the guys out of here so I can get on with my life." Now that it is actually happening, part of me doesn't want it to ever end; over the past year the renovations have become my life. I have become good at finding dummy door knobs on the Internet, ordering lock sets, and painting pencil tile. In the next few months my life is going to change a lot.

There are still bits and pieces of the renovations to do. The handrails, newel posts, and balusters for the stairs which will run from the kitchen area to the second floor are lying on the kitchen floor. The door casings in the kitchen have to be painted. A few cherry handles for the cabinets cracked when they were being installed, and the replacements have not yet arrived. The light fixtures have not been hung, and some I have not even picked out. We don't have a lock set on the formal front door, but it has been ordered. On January 31st the Marvin Window repairman comes to fix the second floor windows on the east gable end, (they don't open as they should) and a dining room window that doesn't seem to close. On February 3rd Jimmy, the floor man, comes to patch the living room and dining room floors; in the following week Scott returns to polish and oil the floors. The dumb waiter, which will carry wood from the basement to the kitchen, is still in boxes. The cold weather closed in before we could get all the new clapboards on, so in the spring there will be a couple of weeks when part of the crew will

return to put on clapboards and finish painting the exterior. The soapstone sinks in the basement have to be moved. When the weather is warmer, I am going to replace the outside door into the basement.

After the renovations are completed, it will probably take me a year to sort through the furniture and rugs, the dishes and knickknacks, the paintings and photographs, and the tools and utensils in order to decide which I will use and where I will use them.

The renovations are not completed-and I have lots to do after they are-but as the project winds down I wonder what will be the focus of my time and energy in the coming months. Maybe because the day was cold and gray, maybe because the renovation project was more fun and exhilarating than I could have ever anticipated, after Carlton left Friday, I felt depressed: I feared my life would soon be a lot less exciting, and what I would be doing a lot less satisfying.

Over the weekend I tried to put thoughts of my conversation with Carlton behind me. Monday morning when I saw Larry, he said, "Today will be my last day; I have some other jobs I have to work on. Tomorrow I'll bring my trailer over and pick up my tools." Any hope I had of distancing myself from the thoughts which visited me last Friday were dashed.

1/17/05

Mistakes

Mistakes:-everyone makes them-no one wants to make them. There are little mistakes. This morning I filled the tea kettle, put it on the burner and wondered why the water was taking so long to boil-I had forgotten to turn on the burner. There are big mistakes. When we lived in New Jersey a neighbor who left a pot of soup bones cooking on the stove when he went to a fire safety meeting at his church, returned home to find his house engulfed in flames. The pot had boiled dry and melted; the bones had caught on fire: the fire spread. There are funny mistakes that become the building blocks of idle chatter; my mother-in-law stumbled into the bathroom half asleep, squeezed what she thought was toothpaste onto her brush, and woke up quickly when the Ben-Gay started warming her gums.

With dozens of people working hundreds of hours doing thousands of things we have had a lot of mistakes made on the renovations project. When Hans opened the paint that had been mixed for dining room trim he found that what should have been a color created by 16 drops of green and 1 drop of yellow had been mixed as 1 drop of green and 16 of yellow. After the window over the kitchen sink had initially been installed, it had to be moved a few inches west so it would center properly over the kitchen cabinets. The main electrical feed to the central electrical panel had to be rerouted because it was in the path of a drain pipe. Over the summer the electric lines to my office were cut twice. After the second time we ran new feed through a heavy conduit which we buried in a new trench. A few weeks ago when I showed Will and Larry the dresser I had planned to put between the closets in the master bedroom, they both said it wouldn't fit. When I replied that Ida and I had designed the space for the dresser, Will remembered he had set the rough-and not the finished-opening to the dimensions specified in the drawing. Now I'm going to have to find another dresser for the space. Then there is that ugly stain on the bedroom floor: before Scott sanded and oiled the floors, something was spilled-I don't know who did it, or when, or what was spilled-but when I enter the bedroom from the hall, it is there to remind me that mistakes happen and things are not usually perfect.

Most weeks, and most times, the mistakes are frustrating annoyances—another board, this time the right length, has to be cut, a few tiles have to be replaced, or the left-handed lock set has to be exchanged for a right-handed one. This past week we dealt with two mistakes that were not little frustrating annoyances. For weeks crew members had been complaining that the circuit breakers in the master bedroom tripped too easily. The electricians said the workers were overloading the circuits; the workers said they were not. Wednesday Jason came to finish the electrical work in the master bedroom and bath. When his whippy drill tripped the breaker, he realized that what I had been trying to tell him for weeks was true. There was a problem. He spent most of Wednesday trying to find it. By Thursday morning he had discovered that a wire had been spiked by a nail, and he worked the entire morning trying to locate the spike. When I returned from a morning appointment, Jason said he had found the wire. To correct the problem, he was going to disconnect the spiked wire and run a new one. To do this he said he would have to cut a channel in the wall. When next he came to my office it was to tell me that while opening up the channel the claw of his hammer had caught and torn a bundle of video and Cat 6 cables. Wednesday morning, I had thought the master bedroom was finished and ready for a final professional cleaning on Friday. Thursday afternoon, the room was a construction disaster. Baseboard had been ripped off the walls, the outlets had been pulled from the walls, plaster had been torn away around the electric boxes. Thursday Jason finished running his patch around the spiked wire. Now the bedroom has to be put back together and the On-Q cables rerun. Monday Will and Hans will start putting the room back together. Friday Gary comes to run new video and Cat 6 cables for the On-Q system. Because the outside walls have been foamed, running the new cables is not going to be an easy or neat job.

Mistakes can be costly, frustrating and time-consuming. It took seconds to spike the electric wire; it took Jason most of two days to find and repair the problem. In the process he made the mistake of ripping a bundle of cables. It will probably take Gary an entire day, and he will use hundreds of feet of wire to repair the cables Jason tore. It will take Will and Hans most of Monday to put the trim back on the walls in the bedroom, to patch the walls and to touch up the paint.

I know there will be more mistakes - but I hope the rest will consist of the little kind that can be quickly corrected.

1 /23/05

Tests

Here in Northern New England a day of heavy snow may be followed by several days of bright sun, a January thaw can be sandwiched between days when the temperature doesn't get above zero, and a September frost can be followed by several days when the temperature reaches 90°F or greater. The temperatures can get above 100°F in the summer and go to -40°F in the winter. We can have weeks without rain, and inches of rain in a day. The weather tests the farmhouse.

This summer I knew we had good insulation when the temperature inside changed little from morning, when the outside temperature was near 50°F, to late afternoon when it had risen into the eighties.

When we had a violent wind-driven thunderstorm, water blew under the French doors. New weather stripping had been put on, but after it was tested by another wind-driven rain, I knew it had to be adjusted.

Last week when the temperature fell to almost -30°F, the single panes of glass on the French doors, the front door, and the sidelights next to it frosted over with thick layers of ice. As the sun warmed the glass, the ice melted and water ran down the glass panes onto the floor. To prevent soaking the floors and rotting the doors I knew we would need storm doors and storm windows for the side lights.

Yesterday afternoon, when the temperatures rose above freezing, the cabinet maker installed storm sidelights he had made in his shop. This morning the temperature was below zero, but no ice had formed on the sidelights; they had passed the weather test. In the next few weeks we will see the storm doors tested.

Lots of tests of the basement's resistance to flooding have failed. Early in the summer, for reasons the plumbers think were unrelated to the renovations, a pipe from the artesian well ruptured. The well pump forced water against the foundation until there was sufficient pressure to breach the foundation.

Water flowing through the breached foundation flooded the basement. During subsequent rain storms, water followed the channels formed when the pipe had broken and rushed into the basement.

In an effort to prevent flooding, I had the inside of the basement walls covered with a foam that can be used for swimming pool linings. During the first rainstorm after the walls were foamed, the basement flooded when water flowed down the outside wall and into the basement where the wall intersected with the floor.

To avoid flooding we needed to divert water away from the foundation. In an effort to do this I had Ron dig a trench the length of the foundation and lay perforated pipe. The pipe was then connected to a dry well we dug in the side yard. Ron covered the pipe with fabric and then put stone and loam on top of the fabric. A few days later, rain made a ditch between the perforated pipe and the foundation and washed loam into the basement!

We tried again, this time digging a wider trench extending from the foundation to beyond the perforated pipe, and exposing both the foundation and the pipe. With the foundation exposed we were able to pack sand against it and lay plywood against the sand. Ron partially filled the trench with stone, then put down a layer of fabric to prevent the sand and loam washing into the stone and eventually clogging the pores in the perforated pipe. On top of the fabric we put a layer of septic sand. Our new system passed a few small tests; the basement stayed dry after moderate rains. It will not have a really good test until spring, when runoff from the roof will commingle with melting snow running toward the foundation from the snowpack up the hill.

I think we may get some water in the basement with the spring runoff, so I'm planning further improvements to the system. In the spring I want to plant a row of lilacs, and possibly roses, a few feet from, and parallel to, the foundation to help define a double-ditch system. The ditch between the foundation and the plants would direct water coming off the roof away from the foundation, while the ditch on the opposite side of the plants would direct water running down the hill away from the foundation. Over the coming summer we will get some small tests of the double-ditch system, but

unfortunately we will not have a really good test until the following spring, when the area behind the house will be assaulted by water from both the roof and the snowpack.

There will be other weather tests. When it gets warmer and the mosquitoes and flies begin their search for victims and my fresh fruit, we will see if the little bugs can make their way around the edge of the pocket screen door. When Bob finishes the pan for the hot coals, we will get to test the new bake oven next to the fireplace and see how bread rises and bakes in it.

There will be many more tests-and I hope we get a lot of passing grades-I know we will get some failures and that from an analysis of the failures will come better solutions..

2/2/05

Floors

When I made plans to renovate the farmhouse that had been my family home for more than fifty years, among my most important priorities were to expose the hand-hewn structural beams in the ceiling of the master bedroom, to recondition the 200-year-old pine paneling in the living room, and to save the old hardwood floors in the living and dining rooms.

When my parents decided to put in central heating they installed a wood-fired hot-air furnace in the basement, and cut holes in the floors which the heat could pass through. The holes were covered with cast iron gratings and connected by duct work to the furnace. When I installed a new hot-water heating system, the grates in the floors were no longer needed. What to do about the holes they covered was a pesky problem that rattled around in the back of my mind much of this summer.

Jimmy first worked on the project early this summer when he put down the new maple flooring in the master bedroom. From my first conversations with him, it was apparent that wood was his passion. When he returned in the late summer to put down the floor in the room over the kitchen, his response to the short and simple question "How was your week?" offered a wealth of information about different kinds of wood. He would reply with enthusiasm, "I put down some Brazilian teak; the wood has lots of different colors." Then, with a minimum of encouragement, he went out to his truck, brought back pieces of teak, and pointed out the grain, the structure, and the different colors. He then volunteered that teak shrinks less with changes in humidity than does oak. Before the job was finished, Jimmy had told me about a 200-year-old oak floor he once pulled up, affirmed that he loves Indonesian cherry, and that he doesn't know why some of his customers are so hesitant to select some of the beautiful and varied woods he likes to put down. He said it is unfortunate that many customers put down the flooring at the end of a job when they are running out of money, thus wanting the least expensive product put down as quickly as possible. He added that he installs a lot of maple floors but that eventually many of his customers become unhappy with the maple because it can shrink a lot.

After talking with Jimmy I was glad I had purchased unfinished flooring. He said many preferred to putting down finished flooring because it is a less expensive, but they are often displeased because pre-finished floors do not appear to be as tight; in the finishing process the edges of the floor boards are rounded so when the pre-finished boards are butted close together the rounded edges make it look like there is a gap between the boards.. He offered up much more information about wood and floors he has worked on than I can possibly remember, some of it simply anecdotal and interesting, such as the tale of one customer whose favorite ice cream was maple walnut: he wanted a floor consisting of maple and walnut wood.

When Jimmy asked if I would like a pattern inlaid in the floor on the landing that separates the room over the kitchen from the stairs, I knew immediately how the holes in the living and dining rooms could be patched. I asked him to save scraps of different woods from his various jobs and come back when he had time to place patterns in the holes in the old floors.

Last week, Jimmy and his assistant spent two days cutting and fitting squares, strips, and triangles of wood into the five holes in the living room and dining room floors. All of the patterns are different: different woods, different shapes, different designs. Jimmy designed three of the patterns; Aaron designed the other two. One of Jimmy's patterns includes pieces of yellow pine, Brazilian teak, red oak, Indonesian cherry, hickory, and maple. The response of everyone who has seen the patches has been pretty much the same: "Wow! That's neat! Some have said, "They're like pictures in the floor."

Monday, Scott the floor finisher comes to sand and oil the floors. Jimmy and Scott have been in contact, so the latter is prepared to finish the patches in such a manner as to bring out the best of color and luster.

The renovated house has some very special features: the fireplace in the kitchen, the old barnboards in the entrance, and the hand-hewn beams in the master bedroom ceiling. Likewise the hot water control panel in the basement, and, after last week, the patterns Jimmy created to patch the holes in the hardwood floors.

2/6/2005

Putting the Pen Down

Each of the previous pieces was e-mailed to a long list of people who had expressed an interest in the renovations. Each e-mail was introduced by a few words. Before I present my final reflection on the renovations I will share the last words I shared with those on my e-mail list.

For the first time in more than a year the farmhouse and I have had a break from the drum of hammers and buzz of saws. This week Scott sanded the old wood floors in the living and dining rooms and put down the first coats of oil. Because we could not walk on the freshly oiled floors—and I did not want grit or sawdust to be permanently bonded to them—I dismissed the crew for a few days. When they return, they will be working on some of the remaining small details and wrapping up the project.

With this piece I end my renovation reflections. I hope to collect the pieces I have sent you, possibly add a few pictures and sometime this year have it all put together in a small book.

I would like to extend to each of you an invitation to visit the subject of my e-mails. Although you will probably not have an opportunity to meet any of the crew, you will be able to see what they contributed. When you drive up, you will see the siding that Larry lay so very straight and Hans painted so carefully. If, before entering, you look to the surrounding building you will see the barns Carlton restored, the roofs Ollie's crew laid wrinkle free, and the lightening rods that Will installed. When you enter through the back door you will see the kitchen Ida designed, the old boards and beams Carlton removed from my barns, and the fireplace Bob built. In the living and dining rooms you will see the patches Jimmy put in the old floors that Scott sanded and oiled. In the living room you will see the 200-year old pine paneling Hans cleaned up and oiled. In the front hall you can see the sidelights Bob made with that Old no. 45. When you look at the ceiling you will see the plaster that Jeff and his crew put on. If you venture to the basement, you can study the

hot-water control panel Dennis and Walt designed and assembled. From every window you will find a different view, and if it is summer you may be able to see Arend's cows in the pasture or a few deer in the side field.

It has been fun working on this project - now the fun is going to be showing you what we have accomplished.

Moving In, Moving On

A year ago, when I started sending e-mails about my renovation of the farmhouse, we were tearing out the ceiling and walls in the kitchen and 1st floor bedroom and disposing of old appliances. This week we started the last of the major pieces of the renovation. Scott is now sanding the old wood floors and the brand new patches; later this week and next week he will be oiling the floors. Next weekend, when the last coat of oil has dried, I will be able to start putting the furniture in place. The renovations are coming to an end, and now the moving in begins.

A few weeks ago Pat started cleaning up the accumulated pounds of dust, dirt, and sawdust. She has cleaned the kitchen floors, the ovens, the bathrooms, and the room upstairs where I plan to have my office. Barb has visited to look at the space and some of the family furniture I want to return to the house. Barb is a principal member of the anesthesia practice associated with the local hospital, She says that when she is on call she would rather spend the time looking at fabric samples and thinking about some of my decorating challenges than to get involved in a movie or television program, she might have to leave.

There is still lots to do: select and install lights in the halls and bathrooms, order doors for the showers, put storm doors on the front door and the French door. Then there are the dozens of items on the long punch list to work through, including adjusting a pull-out cabinet under the kitchen

counter so that it slides in and out more easily, replacing cracked cabinet pulls, and straightening crooked electrical outlet covers. We will not be able to put the last of the clapboards on the house until spring, and only then will the exterior painting be finished. The landscaping will have to wait until late spring or early summer. Until then, visitors will be greeted by large, ugly piles of dirt in the side yard. Although the tasks yet to be done are numerous, they are relatively small and do not limit the ability of the house to function as a home.

By the end of March I hope to have moved my office into the renovated house. In the spring I plan to move in. Now, as the time to move in approaches, it becomes clear that the time has come to move on.

2/12/05