

HOMIE & REAL ESTATE

Building Barns and Friendships

Story & Photos by Dave Milano

I learned all I needed to know about builder Simon Wickey on a Saturday morning tour of Bath/Hammondsport, New York, making surprise visits to owners of several of the many barns, garages, and houses that Simon has built in the area. “Simon Wickey! Good to see you again! How have you been?” was the response we got at each front door. Handshakes and happy smiles every time.

Albert and Kathy Yowell were typical. They greeted Simon warmly and enthusiastically and, after assuring that he and his family are doing quite well, thank you, took time to proudly show me the horse barn Simon had built for them.

“It’s a beautiful building,” notes Kathy. And indeed it is—a simple, traditional board-and-batten barn with a gambrel roof, containing the typical and eminently useful mix of stalls, storage rooms, and hayloft. Solid, functional, and getting more beautiful with each passing year, their barn replicates the archetypical northeastern farm building, full of function, tastefully and faultlessly holding its place in the familiar upstate New York landscape of rolling fields and forests. Simon laid out the building the old-fashioned way, from plans stored safely in his memory—traditional dimensions, roof angles, and details wrought from years of hard-earned experience—and the result stands like a reliable old friend.

We look over the building, share commentaries, then prepare to say our good-byes, but Simon isn’t allowed to leave just yet, not until Kathy retrieves two jars of newly made raspberry jam and an armload of fresh willow cuttings for Simon to take home. And there it is. In a business fraught with anxieties and difficulties—ugly price surprises, quality concerns, costly delays—Simon has left in his wake a long string of happy

customers, sometimes new friends, eager to recommend him for more work. “That’s the way it goes,” says Simon; “you build a nice one, more jobs come.”

Born into the Amish, Simon learned the building trade the old-fashioned way, by working with hand tools alongside family members and other mentors, each passing on their own particular skills and knowledge. Along the way he also learned the invaluable habit of industriousness. “Wood and tools are in my blood,” says Simon, but I can see that’s not half of it. A strong back and the will to use it make all the difference. “There’s a barn over there we built several years ago,” Simon remarks, pointing out the car window toward a green hillside. “The owner wanted to get a crane to set the beams, but three of us lifted them into place. Had to use old wooden ladders that stand firm when you climb them.” He remembers the job with a smile. “It was real work, but the crane would have cost that fella almost what we built the whole thing for.”

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Above right: Builder and old-fashioned craftsman Simon Wickey with the tools of his trade. Above: Larch-sided garage built by Wickey on Keuka Lake’s Marilena Point.

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Simon is no longer in the Amish; the horse and buggy are gone, and he drives a pickup truck full of power tools. But the ethic of hard work still dominates. Simon applies his craft with energy, diligence, and honesty.

Former vintage auto racer Wilbur Dowdle attests to Simon's skills and ethics. He's the happy owner of a fine looking, three-bay garage set neatly into the hillside just behind his home. Dowdle had the foundation built, then called in Simon to build the garage. The building combines beauty and utility, with weather-resistant larch siding (Simon calls it "eastern redwood") and a structural system adequate to support one of Wilbur's classic cars on the second floor. Simon made that possible by designing and fabricating custom trusses. "I wouldn't change a thing about it," says Dowdle, "except maybe to have more of it." He was particularly happy that Simon was able to keep the project on budget. "If Simon tells you it's going to cost \$12.14, you can bet it won't cost \$12.15."

Nearby retired physicist Dan Hays noticed Dowdle's building while taking a morning walk. He was impressed, and knocked on the door of Dowdle's house to find out who built it. Soon, Simon was erecting an even larger version on Hays' property at Keuka Lake's Marilena Point. Hays worked side by side with Simon for most of the project's duration. "You know," says Hays, "many builders cringe at the thought of the owner constantly looking over their shoulder. But Simon welcomed our interchanges. We both enjoyed figuring out together how to solve problems."

Hays is an admitted perfectionist, and with a science background was determined to make sure every part of his building was straight, true, and structurally adequate, as well as attractive. At one point Hays became concerned about the strength of the second floor. Simon recalls the moment. "He asked me how many people could safely be upstairs. I told him, 'As many as you can fit up there.'" Hays the physicist made sure. He measured floor deflection with a tape measure after a heavy load of wallboard was delivered. "It didn't move a bit," Hays says. "That satisfied me." Hays also marveled at Simon's finely tuned efficiencies. "I noticed that when cutting off a board with his circular saw, he'd take his finger off the trigger at precisely the right moment so the saw would come to a stop just as the cut was finished. That's a tiny thing, but it demonstrated Simon's effort to make the most of every resource. I was impressed by that."

Simon and his two sons continue to bring quality and functionality to buildings near their home base—their farm in Columbia Crossroads, Pennsylvania. Whether it's a barn, house, or commercial building, new construction or renovation, every project gets a good dose of old-fashioned skill and honest hard work. And if history repeats itself, as it usually does, Simon will probably leave a new friend inside the next building, and the next, and the next.

Dave Milano is a regular columnist for Mountain Home. You can contact him at someplacelikehome@mountainhomemag.com. See his blog at www.mundanedaily.com.



Albert and Kathy Yowell and their Wickey-built barn designed from the storehouse of plans in Wickey's head.

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