





## Gad Chase, Laddermaker

Gerald (Gad) Chase is the last vestige of three generations of ladder makers who practiced their craft in the once bustling town of Knapp Station, N.Y. Gad and his wife, Martha, still live at the site where this dying art was, in days gone past, a thriving business.

In the early summer of 1978, I talked with Gad in the shop behind his house where he demonstrated to me how ladders were made. This past fall I enjoyed his display of tools and ladders at the Festival For North Country Folklife. During the winter months I again visited Gad and his wife at their home, where we talked about ladder making days and ways. Some of these conversations were recorded, and the following is a record of our talks and get-togethers...a kind of sharing of the knowledge and pride of a craft family.

Gerald Chase: They (Grandpa and Dad) used to make 'em in the old store up here. There used to be an old shed down back. They lived there. That was before my time of course... before 1900. It [the store] was Chandler and Chase at that time. Grandpa and Dad made ladders there...and Uncle Ed, he had the Post Office in there too.



Grandpa [Anthony B. Chase, fife player] started the ladder making tradition.

They first started out on a farm up beyond here. The ol' homestead. It's about a mile and a half south of here [Knapp Station]...But he [Grandpa] wasn't much of a farmer, I guess... He was a tradesman. He and Dad made ladders in the store for many years. Then they sold that place [Gad points across the Knapp Station Road to three houses down] and moved over here.

Richard Hartigan: What about the tools they used, how did they come by them?

G.C.: Well, there were two shave horses [used for holding ladder rungs as they were draw shaved]. Grandpa made one and Dad made one. They done it themselves. I remember a blacksmith shop. He shod horses and did repair work, but they had their tools long before that. Probably started out buying bits from some regular tool hardware outfit.

The blacksmith did make some tools. There's one made out of an old file. You can see file marks on it. You can see where the ridges of the file had been. They made that into a draw shave.

We also used hammer, bits and brace [for drilling], two handsaws, three shaves, splittin' chisels, edger, and the shave horse.

R.H.: How did you go about making ladders?

G.C.: The first step is to go to the woods and get a good straight pole and get it home. We used cedar, used tamarak some. We'd hire some farmer, he'd use his team to snake 'em out to where they could get to 'em with a sled and bring home a load. We used to get them from old Chad Cyrus up here over on Grasshopper Hill. He had a good cut of cedars over there one time. He'd get five cents a pole. They were anywhere from 10, 18, to 20 feet.

When you got 'em home you put 'em on the work horses and peeled 'em with the draw-shave.

You could probably peel one in a half hour. Well, you'd flatten the round edge a bit, then put the belly down so's she won't roll when you're sawing it. Then rip 'er down through with a handsaw. It takes quite a while to go on down through. That's a lot of sawing. Well, it takes a couple of hours for a 20 foot pole,



maybe a little longer. It takes quite a while to rip 'em. We tried rippin' them on the sawmill [local sawmill in town], but it wouldn't cut straight along the grain. Had to be done by hand...Well, you'd split 'em open 'n lay 'em flat up, take your square and go across and mark 'em. Mark it off for the holes 'bout 12 inches apart. You bore 'em with a bit and brace, and you'd lay out the rounds, put 'em in the holes and put the other side piece on top. The rounds were made ahead...of ash or maple so's to season and dry.

Then we pound it down, lay it down flat a-gain, 'n wedge it. Split the edge of the rounds all away around – then you start to drive the wedge. I used to hold an iron [train rail] a-against the ladder to keep it from knocking all out of shape while Dad hammered the wedges in. When you got 'em wedged, you sawed them off, 'n they'd send me to sharpen more wedges and Dad would slick 'em off [with the drawshave]. I used to make wedges 'n sharpen them. When he first started off, Dad always wedged 'em, but when my sister and I got away from home, he had nobody to help him wedge 'n he had to nail 'em [nail the rungs].

Dad would make the rounds. Sometimes I'd do some sawing and peel the poles. The fine work he done himself. He wouldn't have trusted nobody else. We used to do two or three hundred feet for a winters work.

R.H.: How were the ladders sold?

G.C.: Well, there's always a use for a ladder around a barn you know...Climb up to fix the glass in the windows and fix hinge on the upper doors, fix the roof spouts...you always had a use for a ladder...farmers, they'd use 'em to go up on a haystack...top off a stack, put rails down each side to hold the hay there. We'd make 'em for whatever a man wanted, from 10 to 23 feet.

Be 'long toward spring, the better weather, he'd load up the horse and wagon and take off – put on two or three hundred feet. He'd be gone all week 'cordin' to the way they sold. He used to go up through Norwood, go that way, go over to Madrid, over to Morley, Lisbon...He's been as far as Oswegatchie and beyond Canton 'n DeKalb Junction. He'd go until he sold out and then he'd turn around and come home. One time he had enough of 'em, they shipped a [railroad] carload of 'em down toward Malone, that away. Father was gone a week or ten days to sell them.

Old Dad, he was a peddler. He'd sell you a ladder whether you wanted one or not. I heard him talk to some...I used to go with him once



*Gad, draw shaving a rung on the shave horse. His foot moves back and forth, tightening and loosening the rung as he shaves.*

in a while, and they'd buy a ladder just to get rid of him...Wouldn't take no for an answer. Later years, when I got hold of a Model T [1928], I used to go with him. We weren't selling too many then...just load four or five in the Model T...it was kind of petering out then.

*While talking with Gad, I was impressed by how well the ladders looked after so many years of use. I am arranging with Gad to barter the use of his ladders for my house building project this summer. Gad is proud of the workmanship and solidness of his family's ladders.*

G.C.: They used to hold up pretty good – I got some out here myself – two or three of 'em. They're probably all over the county...Depending on how they took care of 'em. If they kept them under cover they'd last a long time. There's one standing out in the church yet [North Stockholm United Methodist]. That's been there since they put the bell in – 1923 or '24. It's there yet. They needed the bell up there, so we made them a ladder. It's fastened up there. When they lowered the ceiling it kind of sealed over where the ladder went up through. You can't get it down. It's too long [20 feet or better] to come through the lower ceiling hole, you see. Still there; can't get away.