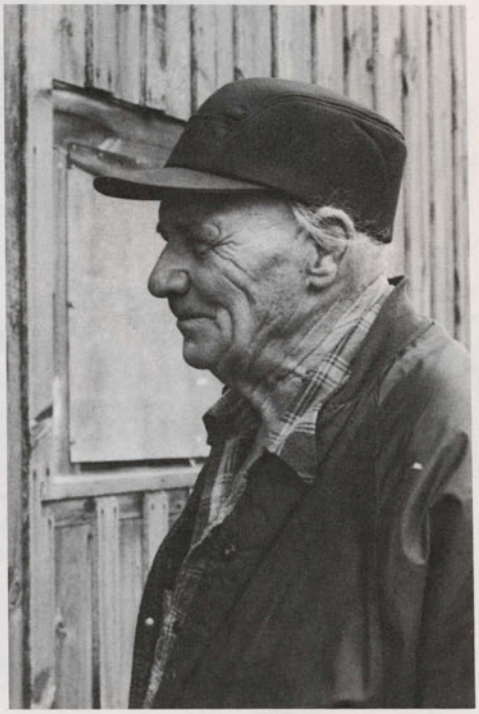
Barn Builder

INTERVIEW WITH STAN FLANNIGAN of Waterman Hill
BY ALAN CASLINE

How do you learn barn building? Stan Flannigan of Russell, N.Y. says he, 'just went at it'. 'I started in as clear back as I can remember. It was really, you might say, self-education. I learned alot from other people. I worked with good carpenters.' Stan learned the traditional way of barn construction not as a special thing but as part of being skilled in general carpentry. As materials and methods have changed over the years Stan has just gone along with the changes. 'The first barn I ever worked on,' Stan says, 'was over in Potsdam. We had to replace a rotten post under a manure shed and then we shingled the roof.' Timber framing is also referred to as pole and beam construction, but when I asked him if there was any special name for it Stan said, 'We just called it building a barn.'



'All my life I've worked for somebody else,' Stan says now in an attempt to explain the varied experiences, from logger to mechanic, he's had in addition to the work of running his own small dairy farm in the northern Adirondack foothills. 'Used to be an old fellow who lived down here that had alot of farms. He was a rich old guy. Denny O'Brien. He had about fifteen good sized farms on Waterman Hill that he had hired men working for him. I worked for him a long time, off and on --- it was mostly summers. I never worked much in the winter. I was up there probably about twenty years. My job was building and repairing, keeping machines going putting in horse forks, hay tracks... By doing that I got to be a Jack-of-all-trades. I was handy at just about anything.'

In the old days a barn started as standing timber. The trees used to make the poles and beams were usually cut right on the land-owner's property. Additional timber could be sent to a local sawmill to be made into boards for floors, roofing, and siding. The logs might be hemlock, spruce, beech or maple depending on what was available. 'We just used whatever we had and mixed them together in the construction.' Using a hewing hatchet and a turkey-wing broad axe Stan could hew a timber into a beam in about half a day. He remembers his sharp tools. 'They were an awful thing, boy! If you didn't use them just right you could chop your shins off!' He said that for someone not in the business it would take all day to hew a beam. 'You'd get used to it you know and maybe you can do it fast. Step on a log, notch it in --- each side you know. Put a chalk line on. You have to have an eye so you can get it square.'

To know how many poles and how many beams you needed you would first design the barn you wished to build on paper. You had to 'draw them out', Stan says, and he added with a touch of humor 'Last one I drawed out blowed over across the road there.'

The hewed timbers are turned into posts and beams. In each post a number of notches are cut --- one notch for each place a beam is to be attached. You use a hand saw and wood chisels for cutting these holes. The notch space is cut at a size just large enough to receive a projecting part from a beam. The notch is called a mortise and the projecting part a tenon. The tenon of

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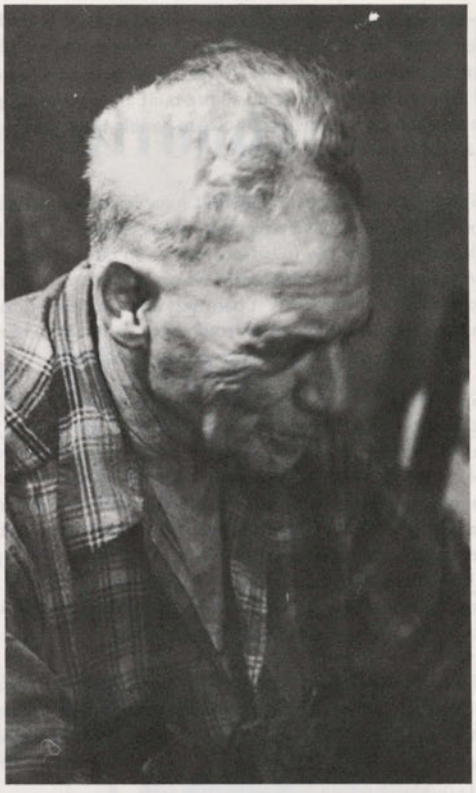
a beam is also cut out using a hand saw and wood chisels. A barn is built in sections or 'bents'. Barns are most often built in twelve foot 'bents'. This means that the distance between two upright posts connected by a beam is twelve feet. It is eight feet between the beam sitting on the foundation (see Stan's narrative on stone wall foundations) and the first floor ceiling or 'top' beam of each bent. How many bents you have along each sidewall of your barn depended on what size barn you wanted to build.



Stan explained how a post and beam were put together, this was actually called 'framing', and what a boring machine was and how it worked. The boring machine was used for drilling holes in both posts and beams. You steadied it between your legs and it had two handles. Holes were drilled and used for pegging the pieces. The holes in the two pieces going together were set off a little (1/8"). When the wooden pegs were hammered in this tightened the pieces, increasing it's structural strength.

The pegs were made out of a special kind of tree called 'Key ash'. You can't find this wood anymore according to Stan. 'It's a white ash but it's different. It has limbs that come right down to the ground.' They had a keying ring for making pegs. The keying ring was made of a metal tube that had an extremely flat edge on it's bottom for resting it on two blocks of wood or two stones. The two edge was sharpened and you pounded wood through it to make pegs. If Stan was building a barn nowadays he wouldn't use a keying ring to make wooden pegs. 'A cheap and easy way,' he says, 'is to take your wood to the sawmill and have your pegs sawed out.'

You needed men and horses for the next step which came after your bents were all constructed. Barn raising generally happened in the fall. Stan says word would get out around the neighborhood that 'We're going to have a barn raising.' People would gather, open up a barrel of cider and in a day the work would be done. Stan remembers working on two or three a season. Sometimes the cider would be spiked. 'Someone would dump in a couple of gallons of alcohol.' From the sound of it, a barn raising could be as much fun as work.

The heavy work of getting both long sides up goes quickly once you get started. All the bents of a side are attached and then throw a rope around them. The men and horses pull them up to a standing position. The rope is left on because you have to let them back in in order to fit the tenons from the short sides into the corner posts. Once the sides are up you 'plank the top floor' and add any posts and structure work you need for roof supports. A small barn has

You see the ground is naturally warm anyway. Course right out in the open here the sun will hit the stone, a big stone. It'll hit the stone --- the stone will all warm-up. The sun hits the stone that warms the stone up and that'll go right down. The heat will go right down and it will be warm under it. If you can get under it you can take the mud right out. That's the idea --- the frost has raised it now when it begins to warm up, why a little dirt trinkles under it and after awhile it pops right out of the ground. You've seen that. That's what it does with a wall that's even more than a foot wide. If it can freeze both sides of it, it'll pick it right up and the first thing you know you've got a big crack.

only has one level of bents on a side but some larger barns have two or three. The larger two or three floor barns are assembled laying flat, just like the one story type, and raised all at once. The roof rafters, like the bents, are all pre-built and lifted into place. Stan says four men using pike poles to handle the rafters could put a barn roof on.

Stan Flannigan seems to feel that some imperfection is natural according to the trial and error way he has of learning. He didn't work under anyone else in barn construction but one man, Lee Hewitt, served as an experienced advisor, someone to question and ask opinions of. When his first barn was up, Lee pointed to a mistake Stan had make in laying out his roof rafters and said to him, 'If you can't make a mistake you can't make anything.'

Stan has built barns at a number of sites around his neighborhood. On the road to Clare from Waterman Hill there are four or five barns he built, some of them he just roofed, but some he built the whole building. As he worked building barns he became better at it and the number of mistakes he made lessened as he became more experienced. Still, it's important that his attitude towards building has emerged unchanged from that of his first advisor. You go out and built and what you built is serviceable, the barn works as a barn but none of it is perfect. Like he told me, 'There are alot of mistakes you can make in building a barn.'

The old style of barn building went out because it's cheaper and easier to build frame structures and also because you no longer can find the same sized standing trees. As an example of this Stan showed me a thirty-two foot long oak cross beam in his farm's barn. 'You couldn't find such a tree anymore.'

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