

Barn raisings brought the community together

A barn raising in Tioga County meant more than just getting the frame of a barn built. It was a community event, with neighbors of all ages invited to join the work — as well as the festivities and food that followed physical effort.

The number of frame barns constructed in the eastern United States after the frontier opened up after the Revolutionary War was in the thousands. Nearly every barn built prior to the Civil War was a timber-frame type, and many were built in the 20th century.

A barn raising required team effort. An enormous amount of work and preparation preceded calling the neighbors to help build a barn. The preparation of materials was often done by the farmer from his own wood lot. Work of this type was traditionally done in the winter. Not only did a farmer have more time during the cold months, but frozen ground greatly helped in the process of getting the logs from the woods to the site.

In addition to harvesting the trees, nearly every barn frame prior to the Civil War was hand-hewn or would have a high percentage of hand-hewn timbers.

The old growth forest which carpeted the Southern Tier offered the logger and timber-framer the finest material imaginable. With a forest canopy in the 150-foot range, there were



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numerous trees of moderate dimension with long, narrow tapers and dense growth rings.

Trees of this quality reduce the amount of work needed to turn a log into a beam and the broad-ax work on many early barns is exceptional. Often, the surface of the beams is so smooth that at first glance, it might seem that the beam came from a mill.

Few farmers had the skill to fashion the barn frame themselves. This was usually done by a craftsman called a carpenter or a joiner, who was assisted by an apprentice or two.

Before the frame was assembled, a foundation had to be built. In the early years, barns were often positioned on strategically placed boulders called plint

stones. A laid stone foundation might come later, but until the late 19th century, almost all foundations were laid on plints.

Before a barn-raising crew could be assembled, the sills and floor joists needed to be in place. There was a preference for white oak or chestnut for this part of the frame because there was greater exposure to the elements along the base of the barn. If a floor couldn't be built in time for the raising, some kind of temporary one would suffice.

Calling together a group of people for a raising was probably not that difficult.

Traditionally, farmers and their families came together for a common cause. These work "bees" also filled a social need at a time when leisurely hours spent visiting were not a normal part of daily life.

On the day of the barn-raising, families would descend on the chosen site. Women came to prepare meals for the crew. Young children came for a chance to frolic with friends and watch the show. Older children would help with the barn raising.

The raising would often be led by the framer himself. Although many hands made light work, each crew leader hoped that there would be enough experienced and capable volunteers to avoid pitfalls and accidents.

The process of raising the first bent (one of the main components to the frame) was always a bit nerve-wracking. It required the coordination of people handling the timbers while others stood back, ready to jab their pike poles for the vertical launch.

With two bents in place and the timbers pegged together, the crew could proceed with more confidence. The number of bents for a barn varied, depending on the size of the barn. With all the bents in place, scaffolding was laid across the top to provide a platform for raising the plates.

If the frame was complete at this point, the rafters could be set in place and the task finished. More complex barn designs took longer. Most frames would be up by the end of a single day, however. Diverting people away from their own work for two days in a row would be difficult.

If the frame came together without mishap or mistakes and there wasn't a late-afternoon thunderstorm, its completion would be cause for celebration, feasting, exuberance, frivolity, exhibitionism and indulgence. One custom carried into the present day involved the nailing of a green bough to the frame — usually done by the master carpenter. The roots of this custom can be traced back many cen-

turies and, among other attributes, signifies homage to the forest which produced the frame.

When it came time to eat, the women would be ready to serve the food. An evening's barn dance lasting late into the evening would cap the day's activities.

In America, the completed barn frame became a vehicle for acts of acrobatic daring while the crew at ground level engaged in athletic contests and drinking bouts. Someone would climb to the top rafter and christen the frame with a bottle of rum.

Although the balloon frame came into use in the 1830s and became the norm for most homes built after the Civil War, the timber framing tradition survived much longer for barn construction. In Northern Tioga County, there are accounts of timber-frame-constructed barns being built into the 1940s.

Nizalowski is seeking information about timber framing in Tioga County. Write him c/o Newark Valley Historical Society, P. O. Box 222, Newark Valley, N.Y. 13811 or e-mail him at: edniz@prodigy.net. There are other articles pertaining to barns on the historical society's Web site, along with many other stories of Tioga County's past. The address is <http://www.tier.net/nvhhistory>.