

Builder using traditional methods at Kutztown Folk Festival

By Tyrel Linkhorn
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Kutztown, PA - Plenty of artisans peddle handmade wooden crafts at the Kutztown Folk Festival.



Reading Eagle: Lauren A. Little

Garrett C. Witherington, 7, foreground, makes pegs with his brother, Ethan A., 9, Sunday at the Kutztown Folk Festival. They are helping their father, Jack, a Gilbertsville woodworker who is constructing a building using traditional Pennsylvania German methods.

If you go **Kutztown Folk Festival**

When: Daily through Sunday, July 6,
9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Where: Kutztown Fairgrounds, North Whiteoak Street, Kutztown.

Admission: Free age 12 and under;
\$12 for 13 and up, except \$11 for
senior citizens, \$20 for all-week pass.

Parking: Free.

Phone: 1-888-674-6136.

Web: www.kutztownfestival.com

But there's only one whose woodworking is in the form of 15-foot-long, 150-pound beams.

Meet Jack Witherington of Gilbertsville.

He's the guy overseeing construction of a small traditional style timber-frame building at the festival, which began this weekend.

With the smell of wood smoke in the air and the clank-woosh sound of antique engines puttering away in the background, there's no better setting than the festival to build a barn in the traditional way.

Witherington said the 200-year-old construction method - no chain saws, no power drills and no metal fasteners - was used for many barns in Berks and surrounding counties.

Though the method fell out of style around World War II, Witherington said it's seeing a resurgence.

"I think there's a lot of fascination with people who make stuff in America," he said Sunday.

Witherington said festival organizers invited him to come and demonstrate how the Pennsylvania Germans traditionally constructed their trademark barns.

Wearing a straw hat and blue jeans hoisted by suspenders, Witherington straddled one of the beams and worked a 114-year-old beam drill while his sons Ethan A., 9, and Garrett C., 7, took a break from the work.

"It's hard for them to drill through the knots," he said as he spun the two handles counterclockwise.

Earlier, the boys were carefully cutting the wooden pegs that will join the beams.

As visitors stopped by the tent, Witherington talked about the tools and the methods of traditional barn making.

For Witherington, traditional timber framing isn't just a hobby; it's a full-fledged business.

After years in manufacturing, Witherington was beginning to feel the strain of the faltering industry and decided to change directions and do something he'd always wanted to try - carpentry.

"I told my wife: 'Here's our chance. The kids are young, let's try it,'" he said.

The effort was worth it.

He now runs Methods and Materials in Gilbertsville, which specializes in traditional timber frame construction.

And yes, the building at the festival is for sale.

Witherington said visitors have shown interest.

Included in a large group standing around his tent was an architect whom he talked shop with, showing joint from an old barn that his company had turned into a home.

Witherington, a self-proclaimed opponent of urban sprawl, said he's seen too many historical buildings razed for shopping centers, which are just torn down to build something else.

Hardy and pleasing to the eye, traditional buildings, he said, have staying power.

It's his hope some of what he builds will remain for years to come.

"Hopefully when I'm dead and gone someone will say, 'This one's worth saving,'" he said.

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