

# Introduction

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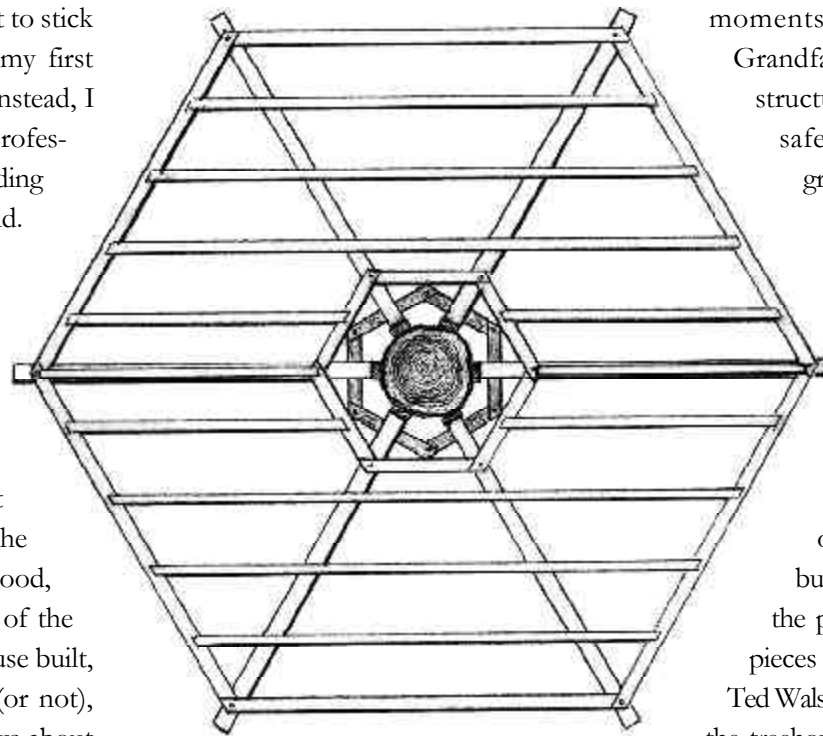
In the spring of 2005, I received a mysterious package containing a handmade copy of a book and a letter from the author, Peter Lewis, asking me to look it over and give him my thoughts. The book was *Treehouse Chronicles*, the story of the building of an enormous timberframe treehouse.

What first piqued my interest was that Peter and his business partner, Ted Walsh, determined to make their treehouse a timberframe structure. I'm a timberframer by trade and by passion, and our company designs and builds timberframe buildings throughout North America. However, we have yet to stick one up in a tree, so my first reaction was a twinge of jealousy, and my first impulse was to figure out how these amateur hacks had screwed it up. Instead, I quickly discovered that their reverie was actually built with precision, professionalism and attention to detail. In one evening, I went from a faultfinding mission to marveling at their ingenuity and enjoying a good story, well told.

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One of the things I have always loved about making timberframe buildings is that every project is a multiple-level adventure. Even though it appears that these adventures are focused on the complexities of design, the difficulties inherent in site work, the idiosyncrasies of working with wood, and the inherent challenges in executing high-level craftsmanship, most of the real adventure has to do with people. While our client may just want a house built, the process itself involves many professionals who work in harmony (or not), depending on attitude and orchestration. These projects are almost always about the process of teamwork more than they are about crafting timbers. Timberframe structures are essentially pieces of furniture too big for one guy to make alone; therefore, timberframing is a team sport—there is no room for individual heroics. When you embrace this idea (and find the right people), the many other building challenges and adventures become manageable and fun.

Peter's treehouse became a reality because he didn't try to do it alone. His dream inspired big ideas and efforts in others, which he celebrates with enthusiasm and humility. For instance, it was fascinating to watch three Lewis generations contribute to the project in different ways (Peter's father and son were major players), revealing characteristics of each other in attitude and action. They are all problem-solvers, but the elder Lewis has more tools and experience, Peter has more dogged determination, and his son Jeremiah has lucid moments of high inspiration.



Grandfather provides the key structural concept from the safety of his shop, while grandson gets stuff up in the air with aerial acrobatics. Like others who helped with the project, we learn about these characters day by day, idea by idea, board by board. We see some of the players only briefly, but several are there from the pregnant idea to the last pieces of trim. The main guy is Ted Walsh. *Treehouse Chronicles*, and the treehouse itself, are tributes to his artistry, imagination, and many skills.

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The drama in this story comes from the fact that Peter's huge, audacious vision is at the same time unrealistic (given his limited resources) and frivolous (life can surely proceed without a treehouse). It leaves Peter wrestling with twin de-

mons: How can I build a truly wonderful treehouse? Why build this foolish thing? This struggle reminds me of a comment made by our senior engineer, Ben Brungraber. He plays the role of structural engineer on many of our projects throughout the country, working closely with builders to solve problems and accomplish important structural goals. On a covered bridge repair project some years ago, he played a dual role and discovered that his requirements as an engineer were quite at odds with his inclinations and skills as a builder. This led him to say, “It is often really hard for engineers and builders to get along, even if they are the same person.”

Peter is similarly conflicted. Peter, the dreamer and designer, provides specifications and expectations that drive Peter, the builder, crazy. Even the greatest and most wonderful kind of work (such as timberframing) is either 90% routine or stupidly difficult to achieve—a dreary prospect for those who simply have to get stuff done. But that doesn’t mean work like this isn’t worth doing. I’m convinced that anyone who builds anything is fortunate, for they get to experience the sheer joy of seeing physical form take shape as a direct outcome of physical effort. The most fortunate people of all are those who can pull magic from that which seems too hard, or too mundane, by bringing their full awareness to all the moments of their lives. Peter Lewis is such a person. He resolves his conflicts with a keen awareness and is able to find beauty and awe in all that he encounters. Stupid mistakes are lessons in humanity. Boring tasks are times of contemplation. Bad weather allows for reflection on our humble place in this world. In this book,

we see that each day can be yet another opportunity to see ourselves, and others, and the world around us, just a little more clearly.

Timberframers eventually become accustomed to being variously chastised and validated by their efforts. Working with wood is like working with a mirror. It doesn’t lie. It gives feedback immediately about character, skills, and attitude. Every cut board or beam does that for each person, and the building provides the mirror for the team. Somewhere in Maine, way up in a pine tree, there is a monument to the dream of a man and the work of his team. I know that it isn’t perfect—no building ever is—but I also know it is a rare and special place that was crafted with care and is already filled with precious memories.

I am amazed and humbled. This is a delightful and beautiful book that made me laugh out loud, shed a tear, and turn page after page, mesmerized by its magic. On the face of it, this is just a story about the realization of the iconic dream of every kid to put a house in a tree. Yet I found myself carried up into the branches of this tree, and I read the book long into the night. *Treehouse Chronicles* is so much more than a story about building. The author, along with family and friends, took basic construction materials, mixed them with humor and awareness, and crafted a dream in the sky. I am left wondering if our 600-plus timberframe homes aren’t rather prosaically stuck to the ground.

—Tedd Benson, author, *Timberframe: The Art and Craft of the Post-And-Beam Home*, founder and Company Steward of Bensonwood Homes

