

Three Nick related memories, i.e., early 1970s, from Dan Herr

May 13, 2002

1. I think my first year as Nick's apprentice was the summer of 1971. As I recall, our first house, in Putnam, CT, was an 1810 salt box. One of my jobs was to remove the more recent interior walls, so that Nick could install period wood siding, stairs, and central chimney. Removing the walls, I often experienced a shower of 200-year-old rat droppings and other debris. We worked and camped on-site for four days each week. At the end of the day, we would head down to a nearby creek to wash off and then to the local market for that evening's meal. Nick was an expert at tenderizing and preparing any kind of steak and I learned much about preparing meals, especially meats and curries, from him. For the next three days, Nick prepared the materials to install the following week.

Our drinking and working water came from a well near the house until the owner's two sons poured detergent down the well. After that, 'Madam,' the apologetic Mom, delivered cases of water and other beverages. I would use that water to rinse the bricks and mix the mud Nick used to construct the central chimney. On one occasion, while I carried a bucket of mortar to the roof, I heard Chomper barking. She positioned herself next to Nick at the peak of the roof and barked at Madam's younger son, who stood on the roof top on the other side of the opening for the central chimney. At that moment, I saw a golden arch of liquid extend from the child's mid-section to Nick's head. Nick proceeded to pick up the boy by his ankles and insert him into the top of the of

the chimney. He said that he had a mind to lower him all the way and leave him there for a while.

Nick researched local 18th century construction methods during our time at each site. On another occasion, as Nick built a staircase around the chimney, he explained that the height and width of each step differed to confound would be robbers from ascending the staircase. As we descended to the first floor, we encountered Madam's Newfoundland dog, who panted cheerfully with a very blue tongue. He had just enjoyed licking the fresh egg paint off the Rumford fireplace that Nick painted that morning.

During one of Nick's incredible steak dinners, we heard Chomper bark at something with great interest, before she ran out of the woods, into Nick's arms for protection. Too late, for a skunk sprayed her.

While there are many other memories from that job, this final one is a legacy to the house. During our work at the site, we gathered found items, such as a chain, a padlock, a woman's panties, a skeleton of a dog-like animal, a hat, and something that resembled a walking stick. Just before enclosing the central chimney with wood paneling, Nick carefully positioned the chain around the skeleton and cemented it to the mortar on the exterior of the main first-floor fireplace. He then artistically assembled this found material withing and around the skeleton. All composed, it looked like something or someone unusual chained to the chimney years ago. After fifty years, it may still remain behind that paneling.

2. Nick shared his culinary gifts with many people. I recall him telling me about a special curry dish he prepared for guests who lingered beyond their welcome, after Joanna and he had returned from a trip out west. While traveling, Nick left the home and bonsai garden in the hands of a close friend and partner. The partner had then invited some friends, who, in turn, had invited other friends to stay at the Lenz homestead. When Nick and Joanna returned home, a few of the guests left. However, several guests decided that this was a wonderful place to 'hang out' and to enjoy Nick's cooking. After about a week of unsuccessful subtle hints, Nick announced that he was preparing a celebratory curry feast. That evening, with the house guests seated around the table, Nick and Joanna brought in a bowl of rice and a large pot of curry, which smelled wonderful. They proceeded to serve each guest bountiful portions of rice and curry, which the guests ravenously devoured. Then, Nick and Joanna poured glasses of wine around the table. As Nick and Joanna sat down at either end of the table, the guests had already begun to serve up seconds. Nick and Joanna sipped their wine and thoroughly enjoyed the scene before them. A few minutes later, one of the guests paused long enough to notice that Nick and Joanna had yet to serve themselves. He complimented Nick on this delicious curry and noted that it was different from other curries he had eaten. He asked Nick what type of curry he made. Nick slowly rose and went to the kitchen. By the time he returned with several cans of Alpo, some of the guests had launched into thirds. Nick quietly mentioned that this was the type of fare he would offer for future meals. By the next morning, all the 'house guests' had left. ... Issue resolved.

3. This third memory hails back to the first time that Nick introduced me to Jim Aaron, two of the best restorers of 18th and 17th century structures, respectively in New England. During that meeting, Jim shared that he recently consulted with Plymouth Plantation Corporation on the construction of the new Plymouth Plantation village, as the original Plymouth village was lost to history. As he climbed around the rafters of the new buildings, he approved of the joinery as early 17th century. The quality of the old wood also impressed him. However, he noticed that the wood contained remnants of early joinery that likely was used in the 1620s. He found this preexisting joinery in many of the new structures. He asked one of the supervisors where they procured the lumber for the village. What he learned from the supervisor gave him pause, as the supervisor told him that they gathered the wood from some old 'shacks' in a nearby marshy area. Jim asked the supervisor to take him there. Upon arrival, he found that only two or three of these structures remained. Inside the structures, he found evidence of early 17th century joinery. He was convinced that this was the site of the original Plymouth village and that these remaining shacks were all that remained of the original structures. When he shared this information with the managers, the Corporation no longer required his services.