



Fine Homebuilding

The Magazine You Built

After 25 years, the country's best builders still are sharing what they know in *Fine Homebuilding's* pages

BY SCOTT GIBSON



“He wanted the articles to come from experts in the field, not from a bunch of freelance writers and deskbound editors.”

To Charles Miller, the small ad running in *Fine Woodworking's* May 1980 issue must have seemed prophetic. On page 34 was a call for a “homebuilding journalist” to join a magazine that did not yet exist in a publishing field that really didn't exist, either. But the San Francisco Area renovator, illustrator, photographer, and architecture student knew it had been written for him.

Elsewhere in the same issue, an announcement from *Fine Woodworking* founder and publisher Paul Roman filled in the details: “Just as a void existed for the serious woodworker when we started *Fine Woodworking* magazine five years ago,” Roman wrote, “so does a void exist for the serious homebuilder and renovator today. There is no magazine that covers the whole broad and vital field of homebuilding with quality, style and depth. So we at The Taunton Press are starting a magazine this fall that will do just that, and we're calling it *Fine Homebuilding*, because that's what it will be about.”

Five years earlier, Roman and his wife, Jan, had launched *Fine Woodworking* on a shoestring, and by 1980, it was clear their model for producing reader-written magazines could work. Their approach hinged on finding people like Miller, who not only was knowledgeable about the trade but also could become a capable journalist. Soon, he had been named western editor, and early in the new year, the first issue of *Fine Homebuilding* appeared on newsstands.

Issue No. 1, February/March 1981, was 68 pages, with eight pages of advertising and a murky cover photograph of someone at work inside an old house (photo right). On the back cover was a description of how an Inuit named Tookillkee Tiquktak built igloos (bottom photo, p. 61). A subscription cost \$14.

That was 25 years, 177 issues, and a lot of history ago, but Miller was right about at least one thing. The ad might as well have been written just for him; he's still on the masthead. More important, Paul Roman was right about something, too. Readers would welcome a magazine that seriously covered the craft of building houses.

Of course, the Romans and Miller weren't perfectly clairvoyant. They might have miscalculated on one detail. But we'll get to that later.

Getting articles from builders rather than writers made a big difference

It was Paul Roman's frustration over the lack of information about home building years earlier that could be marked as the magazine's real beginning. The Romans had moved to Newtown, Conn., in 1973, and Paul Roman acted as general contractor for the construction of their new house. He took on some of the work himself, but when he sought magazines and books for help, he didn't find much. Magazines of the day, he says, didn't cover construction in any detail, and one of the few books he found useful had been published in the 1930s.

“The amazing thing to me was the lack of information out there as to how do you build a house,” he says. “There was really no information.” And with *Fine Woodworking* booming, he adds, “it was just logical to me, ‘Hey, let's do a homebuilding magazine.’”

Building houses was a new topic, but the magazine was to use the same guiding principles that had launched *Fine Woodworking*. One was to limit ads to products related to building, what the company calls endemic advertising.

Another was a financial structure putting most of the burden of paying for the magazine on subscribers, not on advertisers as most magazines do, which allowed the company to put reader interests first.

But paramount to the plan was making sure the information the magazine published was authoritative. Roman hired a Vermont renovator, teacher, and fledgling book author named Mike Litchfield as the first managing editor and put him to work rounding up articulate builders willing to write about what they knew.

“He wanted the articles to come from experts in the field, not from a bunch of freelance writers and desk-

EDITOR WANTED

Homebuilding journalist to join *Fine Homebuilding* magazine as assistant editor. Must have experience in homebuilding or renovation work, plus writing or editing experience. Drawing and photographic aptitude an asset. Send resume and letter stating salary requirements to: Paul Roman, Editor and Publisher, *Fine Homebuilding*, The Taunton Press, Box 355, Newtown, CT 06470.

The right shiny lure. To our great good fortune, the want ad above, which appeared in the May 1980 issue of *Fine Woodworking*, caught Charles Miller's attention. Miller was hired that year and has worked on every single issue of *Fine Homebuilding*.



“We were honoring something we felt strongly about, which was these skills of home building.”



How'd they shoot that photo? From a helicopter, of course. Charles Miller convinced his boss that he had to hire a helicopter, then had to persuade the pilot to violate FAA regulations and fly low enough to get the shot.

bound editors,” Litchfield recalls. “He was really emphatic about that. He wanted authenticity. We had envisioned from the beginning that *Fine Homebuilding* would really fall more on the side of nuts-and-bolts technical information, information you could do something with.”

Litchfield, like every *Fine Homebuilding* editor who followed him, went on the road. Using *Fine Woodworking* contacts as a starting point and urged on by Roman, he traversed the country in search of authors and articles. “Basically, he just handed me a credit card and told me to see what was out there and develop a national network of contributors,” Litchfield says. “I think the magazine really began, maybe as all magazines begin, with friends of friends.”

An article mix that blended design with practical how-to from pros

Back in Newtown, art director Roger Barnes, Roman, and a small group of editors were developing an article matrix, a kind of blueprint for the types of articles the magazine would publish. They foresaw a balance between new construction and renovation, regular repre-

sentation for a variety of building trades, and a good dose of architecture and design.

Many of the 13 feature articles in the first issue of the magazine look strikingly familiar today. There were meat-and-potato articles on basic building techniques, some project-specific narratives, and several articles about design. Departments included “Tips & Techniques,” “Q&A,” and “Great Moments”—all of which have survived essentially intact. Some of the headlines in that issue could, in fact, run in today’s *Fine Homebuilding* without raising an eyebrow.

But there was something else: an air of scruffy self-sufficiency that seemed unpolished and gritty. One article explained how the author used his tractor and an ingenious system of cables and pulleys to raise a timber-frame workshop by himself. Another covered site-built solar collectors, a forerunner of many such articles the magazine would publish in the early years.

“The original intention was for the magazine to be aimed at people like Paul and Roger who wanted to work on their own houses or even build their own houses from scratch,” says John Lively, who took over as editor of the magazine with its seventh issue and retired last fall as Taunton’s CEO. “So they tried to create articles more around owner-building.”

It was also a magazine of its time. Energy shortages loomed over the economy. Both the Vietnam War and the political upheavals of the 1970s were still raw memories. A lot of people now wanted to build their own houses or at least know how it was supposed to be done.

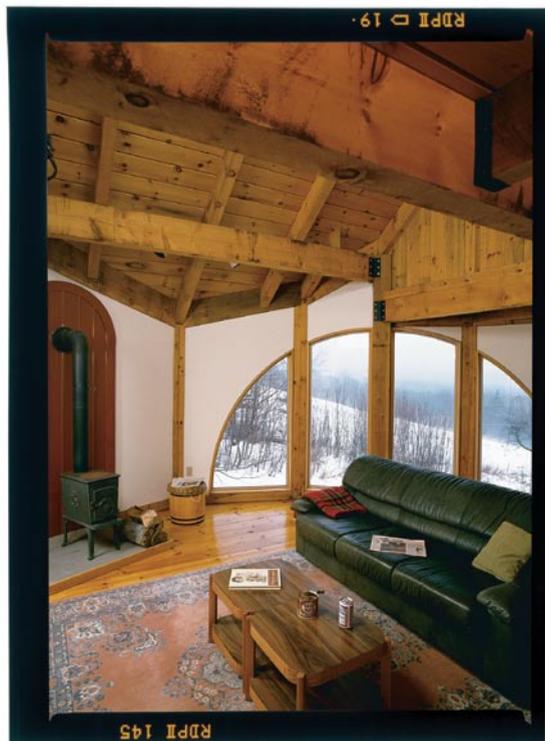
“I think the ’60s and ’70s spawned an appreciation for handmade stuff,” Miller says. “It was as though the Arts and Crafts era, William Morris and all, had returned in a way. And I think part of it was a turning away from corporate America, a very conscious, ‘I’m not going to be like my dad, I’m going to work with my hands—at least until they get arthritis.’”

A staff of builder-writers helps to keep it real

Yet the magazine was about the craft of building houses, not a manifesto for social change, and carpenters with a love for language made ideal editors as well as authors.

“We were literally making it up as we went along, but all in a very good way,” says Paul Spring, a builder who became a *Fine Homebuilding* editor in 1981. “I think the excitement for the readers, for the editors, and certainly for me was the feeling that we were honoring something we felt strongly about, which was these skills of home

Budweiser and beer nuts. Most shelter magazines send a photographer, a stylist, and a semi full of props to photograph a house. *Fine Homebuilding* sends one editor (often a former carpenter) who styles the photos as best he can.



“Most photos published in the magazine still are taken



Are those hard hats fake? They're real, but we cloned them in with Photoshop before first publishing these photos in 2001. We had hired a local photographer for an article on crane safety. When we saw that none of the crew was wearing head protection, we nearly had to pull the article. One observant reader wrote to scold us.



building. I didn't know of another magazine that did this. My work as a builder had been published in other magazines, but they didn't want to know who built it. They weren't interested in the techniques. They wanted to know the designer or architect."

Spring was far from the last builder to be hired as an editor. Two chief editors—Mark Feirer and now Kevin Ireton—were carpenters before they were magazine editors, and much of the current staff of editors once worked in the trades. Career journalists are still a rarity here.

The strategy is not without its risks, but when editors who once were builders sat down to work on articles about building, there was an unexpectedly rich reward.

"I think we all had to rewrite these builder-written articles to some extent," says Spring. "But there was almost a religious responsibility to maintain the tone and the authenticity of the manuscript. We called up every author with our changes, and we negotiated them. The best compliment we could get was, 'Boy, you didn't change my article much at all!' All the editors were aware that they could completely rewrite something, absolutely gut it, and that readers wouldn't know. But it wouldn't be the right thing to do, and in fact the article would not be as good." (Spring holds the record, having once spent more than five hours on the phone discussing changes with an author.)

The process is the same today. Editors look for potential authors among the ranks of carpenters, plumbers, elec-

tricians, and architects, then take their manuscripts and turn them into articles. And authors still get at least the chance to argue against changes in their manuscripts.

Who's this magazine for, anyway?

From the beginning, articles have covered a diverse range of building topics, everything from plumbing a toilet to designing an addition. The information was, and is, for people who do things, not for armchair quarterbacks. What wasn't as clear was whether articles were written for professionals or amateurs.

The magazine's original plan was to keep content centered among three constituencies: architects, builders, and homeowners. Authors came from the pro ranks. Early conscripts included Bob Syvanen, a traditional Cape Cod builder; Jud Peake and Don Dunkley, production builders from the West; and a little later, a roof-framing wizard named Scott McBride. They were all authoritative and dependable. (McBride got started writing for *Fine Homebuilding* because he had broken both ankles in a fall and needed something to occupy his mind. When he came in to talk about his articles, he arrived in a wheelchair.)

These and many other well-qualified authors were delivering straight-from-the-

What were we thinking? This cover from 1983 shows tile being installed around a lowly toilet flange. Some on the staff thought the image looked like an abstract-expressionist painting. In those days, we didn't worry much about newsstand sales.



by staff editors who have not had much formal training."

“The magazine became part of a broad community of builders, not just



Is that guy wearing a Rolex? We stopped worrying about the quality of digital photography when a reader wrote in to complain about this 2001 cover. He said no real contractor would wear a Rolex. He was right about the watch but wrong about the contractor.

field information that wasn't being published anywhere else. But keeping articles interesting enough for pros and still clear enough for nonpros could be challenging. Which group is more important is a debate that has never really ended.

Maybe it doesn't matter. For the 20 years Ireton has been at the magazine, the past 14 as its editor, the ratio of pro to nonpro readers has stayed roughly 50-50. To him, what matters most is not numbers but the way the magazine conveys information.

“If we decide to do an article on how to lay a hardwood floor, that's what we focus on,” he says. “How do you do this process? It didn't matter whether it was a pro or a nonpro who was going to read it. The question was how do you do this job well? How do you get a quality installation as quickly as possible? We really weren't thinking, ‘Was this for a pro or a nonpro?’ We were thinking about the process itself.”

Helping readers who think visually

Ask a carpenter how to build something, Ireton says, and chances are good he'll pick up a pencil and start to sketch. Building is a visual business, and both photography and

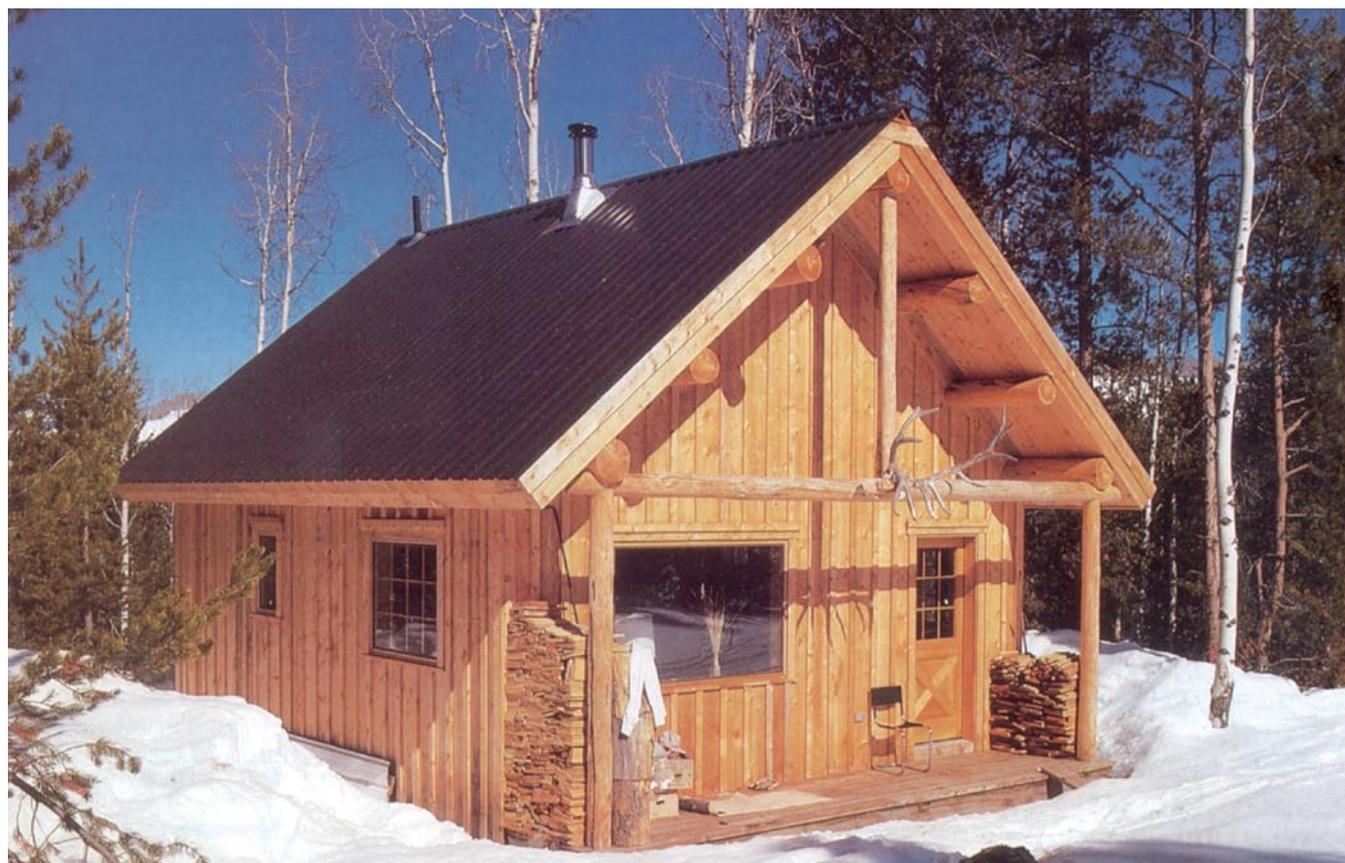
carefully detailed illustrations have been at the heart of *Fine Homebuilding's* content.

From the start, editors went on the road with their cameras. Most photos published in the magazine still are taken by staff editors who have not had much formal training but who know exactly what a good photograph must have: relevant information.

The work takes camera-toting editors to job sites all over the country and, on at least one memorable occasion, into a helicopter. On one photo shoot, Miller was in Carmel, Calif., to take pictures of a seaside house designed by Charles Green. He convinced his editor, John Lively, that the best photo would be shot from the air. It sounded like a great idea, but the \$500-an-hour pilot refused to take the aircraft below 1000 ft. At that height, the house was just a blob. Miller cajoled the pilot into flying lower, but he refused to hover. He made one pass, and Miller shot two rolls of film, 72 frames.

When he got the film back, Miller was horrified to see that each of the 36 frames on the first roll had been blurred by a combination of helicopter speed and film type. He went through the second roll. Every frame was blurred—until he came to number 37, an extra picture that shouldn't have been on the roll. It was in focus and became the cover of issue #24 (top photo, p. 58).

We have to ski to the cabin? In 1987, author Bill Phelps failed to mention that there were no roads to his Wyoming cabin before Tim Snyder flew out to photograph the place. In turn, Tim failed to mention that he had broken his leg in a pickup basketball game. Despite his broken leg, Tim skied to the cabin for the photos.



a disseminator of information.”

“I can remember the feeling on early photo shoots of being an impostor,” says Ireton. “You were given this equipment and sent out to take photographs. You’d arrive at somebody’s house, and they would say, ‘Well, the photographer is here.’ I’m thinking to myself, ‘Yeah, but yesterday I was nailing shingles on a roof in Maine. I don’t know about photography.’”

A major change for the magazine and its editors was the adoption of digital photography in 2000. Until then, it could be a nail-biting couple of days after an assignment to find out whether the film was any good (sometimes it wasn’t). With a digital camera, an editor knows instantly whether the shot is good. There is no film to worry about, and a camera can hold hundreds of cover-quality photos.

The advantages are many, but some editors weren’t so enthusiastic about the conversion. They worried that the new format wasn’t capable of showing as much detail as real film. Those fears more or less went away after issue #142 was published in October 2001. A reader wrote to complain that the cover photo showed an author wearing a Rolex wristwatch (top photo, facing page). Had to be a model in a posed photo, the reader opined, because no builder would wear a watch like that on a job site (actually, he was wrong about that). The letter told the magazine two things: Digital photography had plenty of detail, and readers were watching. Really, really carefully.

In the end, it’s still about process and a community that loves it

Building houses today is far different than it was 25 years ago, and so is the magazine, at least outwardly. When the magazine began, the average house in the United States was 1720 sq. ft. and cost \$83,000. By 2004, the average size was 2349 sq. ft. and the cost \$274,500. This issue of *Fine Homebuilding* runs 176 pages, 83 of them advertising. A one-year subscription costs \$38.

The magazine long ago stopped accepting feature articles about cordwood saunas, solar collectors, and igloos. There are more photos and fewer words, and published houses are inarguably more expensive than ever. Not all readers are happy about that. But the basic tenets that have guided the magazine for 25 years—reader-written articles, subscriber-financed content, endemic advertising—haven’t changed. In sticking to the plan, *Fine Homebuilding* makes good money and has a paid circulation of well over 300,000.

And something else happened, too. The magazine became part of a broad community of builders, not just a disseminator of information. That was one outcome of publishing this particular kind of magazine, the one



delightful consequence that neither Miller nor Paul and Jan Roman could have completely foreseen.

“We were going to an audience who loved doing the work, loved being builders, loved the camaraderie and community and society of a job site, and we were their national magazine,” Lively says. “We gave them a place in very much the same way that *Fine Woodworking* gave woodworkers a place. Whether pro or amateur, if you are intellectually engaged and emotionally fulfilled by the activity of building, this magazine’s for you. If all you’re after is the financial result of the house, it’s not the magazine for you.”

Today, *Fine Homebuilding*’s community is most evident on the magazine’s Web site reader forum called “Breake-time.” Regulars dole out information, trade wisecracks, and mercilessly jump on the magazine when they think the criticism is deserved (one post last year questioning whether *FHB* was dishing up the right content pulled in more than 150 replies). Breaktimers even use the site to set up “fests” around the country so that they can meet one another. (Aussie Mark Cadioli always gets the prize for having traveled the farthest at these parties.)

“We have a pact with our readers that is just sacred,” Miller says. “The fact that we get paid to do this is cool, but I feel like we’re contributing something.”

“One time we got a letter from a reader who said, ‘You know, I never had that old guy who lived down the street who could show me how to build stuff. *Fine Homebuilding* is my old guy.’ And that was touching. Yeah.” □

Scott Gibson was an editor at *Fine Homebuilding* for five years during the 1990s and is now a contributing editor.

Travel expenses: refinishing? Before digital photography, editors used Polaroids to preview images. When shooting this Wisconsin cabin, the editor peeled apart the Polaroid and inadvertently laid the waste half chemical-side down on an antique table. The bill for restoring the table led to one of the bigger expense reports we’ve seen.

What, no ad? In a departure from convention, the back cover of issue #1 featured the construction of an igloo. For most magazines, the back cover is their most lucrative ad space, but *Fine Homebuilding* still reserves that spot for editorial content.

