

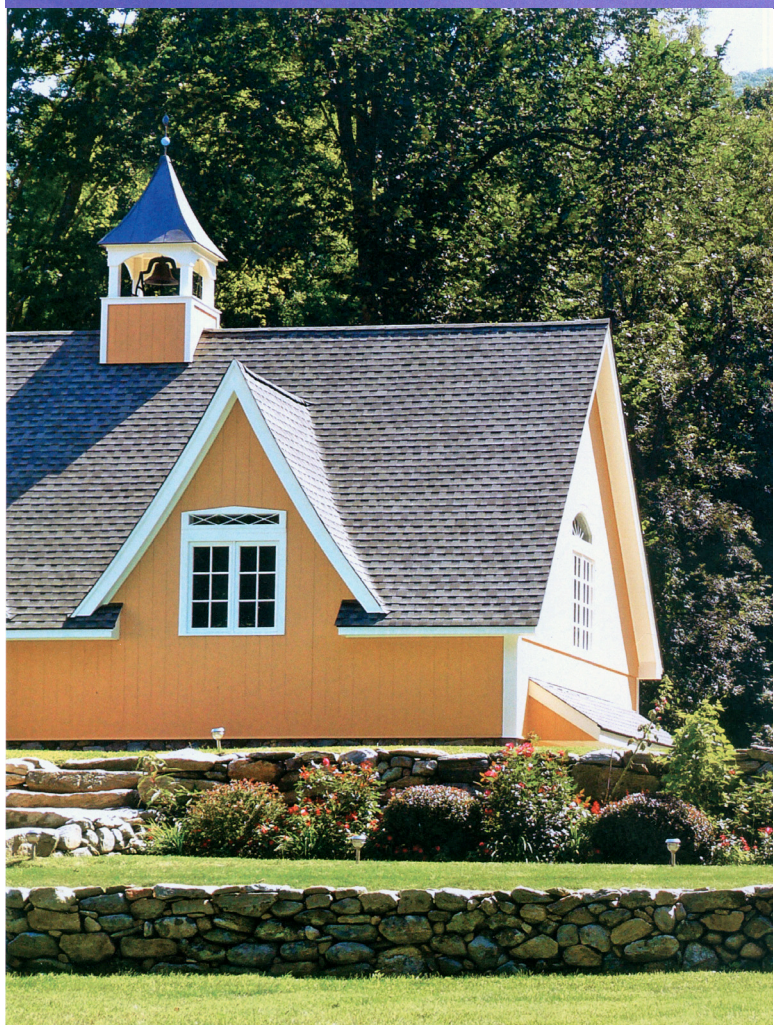
The premier publication for the people of Northwest Connecticut

Litchfield

MAGAZINE

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For this writing couple, craftsmanship comes home | BY DIANE MEIER

I CAME IN FROM SWIMMING PRACTICE with a passel of kids, intent on making milkshakes in my parents' super-duper industrial blender. We heard a noise from the floor below. Heavy metal, repeatedly hitting something hard, and a woman's voice, kind of—well, it wasn't groaning, it was more like "oomphing." I descended the stairs, tentatively—my posse close behind. There was my mother, dressed in a starched and ironed, paint-stained smock over immaculate designer sportswear, beating the frame of a classic French sofa with a heavy pitted chain and exhaling, like Venus

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Williams, with every deliberate stroke.

It must have appeared pretty violent, because my swimming buddies suddenly looked like TinTin—eyes like saucers and hair on end. But I was relieved. I'd seen Mom do this a hundred times on smaller objects—the leg of a chair that had to be matched to a museum piece, a picture frame for an old print, the top of a blanket chest for a client of Sister Parish.

"This is called 'distressing,'" I explained to my crowd, Mother barely acknowledging us as she reached for her cigarette with one jeweled hand and walloped the wooden frame with the other. *No kidding*, I can now imagine them thinking.

Craftsmanship comes in many wrappers, but my brothers and I were introduced to it early. We had a grandfather who was a famous deep-sea diver. He developed a lot of the early diving-bell equipment and his adventures became books and radio shows. But he was proudest of his embroidery. He could sew dressmaker details on the edges of pockets in perfect ornamental arrows, as the sailors of the nineteenth century did to keep their pockets from fraying or tearing. Both Chanel and Schiaparelli made use of that detail, and my mother and my father's sisters had him create this embellishment on their slacks and jacket pockets to chic affect.

Mother taught me to stretch and build a canvas before I was ten years old. I knew how to size the canvas with rabbit-skin glue, and to coat it with *esso*

the canvas disappeared. I knew how to mix colors from only the primaries and was rebuked if I ever used a color directly out of a tube. My mother could spot "tube" color from across a room.

When my father redesigned the mudroom to more efficiently hold our skis and gear, he hired a brilliant carpenter who had gone to Yale. Dad said his cabinets were priced as though they had gone to Yale, too. But he would show guests the lovely dovetailed joints, and how he and Larry had invented ways for cabinet doors to open that didn't take up the whole hallway. Craftsmanship, Dad would point out, is different from art. It's different from utility. It's a kind of honor you put into the work, and it has its own value.

Fast forward to Kent. It's 1998. I'm a girl alone. I've just taken this 1830s house, and I have an old family doctor's cabinet in the kitchen, filled with quirky china. On the facing wall I have a white melamine bookcase from Ikea, overflowing with cookbooks. I stand in the kitchen and look at the homely bookcase and think about painting it. (I think about painting everything. If you stand here too long without moving, I'll think about painting you.) But it's an ugly thing. It doesn't fit the space; it's not tall enough. It has no detail whatsoever, and it's made of melamine, for God's sake. So I draw a rough cartoon, a bookcase, with the same kind of crown-molding top the doctor's cabinet has. I add measurements for the ideal dimensions. I leave the drawing and a note for

house—a kind, bright, quiet man named Jeff Memoli.

At the time, I didn't know much about Jeff except that he came well recommended (through our hardware store) to deal with whatever problem befell an old house and a girl who knew nothing about home maintenance. This is the note I left him that Monday morning: *Can you build a bookcase that looks something like this (see drawing) to replace the horrible Ikea bookcase (see bookcase) here? If you cannot, can you recommend someone who can?* Then I load the car with my German short-haired pointer and my tote bags and head back to New York to my work, fully expecting to return to Kent on the weekend to discuss said bookcase with Mr. Memoli.

What I find that next Friday evening, when my dog and I tumble back into our Connecticut house, is not a note or discussion or estimate about the bookcase, but the bookcase itself. Finished. Made perfectly to match my cartoon drawing, sanded, primed, and ready for whatever color I choose. I paint the thing the same color as the wall, and, as in the doctor's cabinet, I stripe the molding in an almost-not-there glaze of robin's-egg blue. By the end of the weekend all of the cookbooks are on the shelves, and the Ikea bookcase is on its way to Jeff's daughter's dorm room in Boston.

Husband Frank entered the picture in 2001, and under his direction, Jeff has remade or built from scratch fireplace mantels, stairways, porch railings,

two huge barns that hold all of his and much of my professional life. And in managing this, Jeff has added more craftsmen: Roger Jackson, who created the barn stairs in mitered perfection, two cupolas with eased copper roofs, and two dormers with that same challenging sloped detail. Roger looks as though he's carved from teak, and watching him climb up the side of a roof with a cupola on his back is not something you're likely to see in New York City. Bobby Smith oversees painting to a level that would please my mother.

And Robert Chevalier has built walls that are more like art installations than fences to make good neighbors or restrain cattle. The rhythm and form of the stone is, like great art, nothing short of humbling. They hold the terrace for the pool, and define the levels of ground over these many acres, with huge boulder-studded displays, far closer to music than stone. Rock music, I suppose, if you can stand the pun, but the craft is evident. More Jimi Hendrix than Spinal Tap.

Nikolle Kuehnert tends our gardens with an intensity of detail, purpose, and craft you might believe was all but gone. Susan Shandell, in Millerton, creates lamps and lampshades for us with an eye for detail and creativity that makes us feel like curators. I might suggest that Megan Hanley, at Marbledale Farm here in Kent, is a craftsman of a farmer, with an artist's way with words. But everyone I talk to up here in the northwest corner of Connecticut appreciates both—the cucumber and the way Megan writes about it. I could go on—but apparently they have a whole magazine to put together here, and I must give way.

Frank and I have often said that the two greatest resources of Litchfield County are rocks and writers. So maybe it's no surprise that the things we treasure most are craftsmanship and material. And here, in the Age of Walmart, as both antidote and rebuke, we find this amazing level of craftsmanship right in our own backyard. Is it any wonder we love it here? ■