



# Simplicity Achieved

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TO BE A GOOD WRITER, AT LEAST AS I have tried to be one, you don't need to be very bright. You don't need to know a lot. You do need to be able to concentrate, however, in a particular, rather curious way that projects your own mind, your own experience, onto a subject matter so as to make it yield something new. It's sedentary work, it's solitary, and when you've been at it awhile, it can make you a little crazy, just because the work is so cloistered, so profoundly interior. If you're a writer, you live in your head. Writers, more than many other workers, therefore, need to get out of the house.

So it was that, a number of years ago, I found myself temporarily in the timber-frame building line. Having need of a small woodshed, lacking funds and being the owner of a pile of old salvaged beams, I decided to try my hand at putting up my own shed, using the materials and methods that have served so well to furnish Vermont with plain, graceful and enduring buildings.

As a timber frame, my shed would be simplicity itself: three sills, four posts, eight diagonal corner braces, four plates, put together by mortise-and-tenon joints pinned with wooden dowels. Moreover, should I need guidance in this project, I'd have only to step across the driveway and examine the construction of our house, which had been built in exactly the same style 200 years earlier. The house would be, to an amateur with zero experience of building, not only a guide but also an

inspiration; for I recalled the famous exhortation: what one has done, another may do.

The simplicity of the timber frame also recommended itself by reason of economy. I wasn't in a position to equip myself with a set of modern builder's tools. But, I reckoned, I wouldn't need them, or anyway not all of them. I had a chain saw, a handsaw, an auger, a level, a square and a sharp chisel. The craftsmen whose buildings I was imitating had little more than the same hardware, and they succeeded. What one has done, another may do.

From the outset of the project, I found the contrast between building and my customary work to be both striking and refreshing. Working outdoors, under the hot sun, with real materials having real size and weight and requiring to be shaped and moved, not without real bodily effort, could hardly be more different from the lamplit world of words, their fluid meanings, their infinity of associations, their subtle harmonies. It was that contrast which I hoped to explore, and from which I hoped to learn. And I did. I learned a lot.

In particular I learned a healthy respect for the old-timers who raised the timber frames that set the pattern I was following. The simplicity of those structures is a bit deceptive: it's simplicity achieved, not inherent, and it shows that the contrast between writing and building, otherwise so obvious, is not absolute. A small, plain post-and-beam woodshed is like a poem by

Emily Dickinson or Robert Frost: it looks simple, it *is* simple. But try writing one yourself.

Much of the difficulty, I discovered, came from the need, while working horizontally and on the ground, to cut and match angles that would fit together vertically, 10 feet in the air. This was especially tricky in making and joining the corner braces, where right angles and half-right angles must lock up tight simultaneously. The process is like looking into a mirror to play checkers on the ceiling.

No doubt our forebears in timber building could have had my shed up in a day or two, but I took far longer. Partly that was owing to the complexity of the task; mostly it was because I didn't work every day, and when I did, I usually worked alone. Putting up the shed took me most of a summer. Nevertheless, the job got done, the structure stood, and although the old builders would have laughed at it (and some not so old did in fact laugh at it) the shed served us well.

In the end, then, I had gotten out of the house, and we had a woodshed. The enterprise was a source of satisfaction to me for reasons beyond the usefulness of its product. For one thing, I had, briefly and only semicompetently, joined a proud tradition. The post-and-beam frame is as much a part of Vermont as its mountains, villages, forests and farms. I was happy to have added another exemplar, however humble. What one has done, another may do. 🌿