

RAM(P)SES II

A horrific accident in a steel mill left Charlie Pritts with one eye and the need for a new livelihood. As a boy he had earned pocket money “making “ stone at the local quarry-squaring rocks into usable building stone. He had liked that so he decided to become a stone mason.

Charlie, or “Pap” as he was known to all, was my stepmother’s father. He had visited one summer and faced my father’s fireplace with stone. I helped him on my college summer vacation but wasn’t particularly attracted to the work. In part that was because it consisted of gluing up a thin veneer with strips of sandstone (I was studying art and didn’t like Mondrian); in part because I considered my other job, as a lifeguard, much more interesting.

But when I returned from a 12 year sojourn in Europe a born-again stone mason I was especially interested, as we were now fellow craftsmen, to see and talk to Pap again. He was then 84 years old but still laying stones on top of stones in southwestern Pennsylvania. He was troubled with arthritis and unless he kept working with his hands they would seize up on him, he said. So during the winter he “made“ stone behind his house with which he would build in warmer weather.

In the course of our conversation I asked him how, when he had recovered from his accident, he had gotten started in his newly chosen line of work. Did he take work with a experienced stone mason? Consult books? “Nope, I just bought a bunch of rock and built me a house so folks in town would see what I could do. Built it all by myself. Took a whole summer and some of the fall.”

I was familiar with the house that he and his family had lived in for years. Two stories with an attic and a basement. A stone fireplace and chimney. And well built, especially for a novice. Quite an undertaking, even for a small crew, and Pap, without experience, had done it alone? In four or five or even six months? My own experience with stone building made me incredulous.

“C'mon, Pap, just you? No laborers even? No one to haul stone and mortar up to you?”

“Just little ol' me” (Pap wasn’t a big man).

“O.K., Pap, if you say so, I believe you. But tell me, how DID you get materials up to where they were needed?”

“Real simple, I just ramped around it. Built as I ramped. Ramped as I built.”

“Why, Pap, that’s how they think the Egyptians built the pyramids!”

Pap’s one eye twinkled. “Well, them E-gyptians wasn’t so dumb then, was they?”

No, Pap, in some ways they were as smart as you.

Tomas Lipps

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