

stonecdote

(anecdote: a short personal account of an interesting or humorous incident. stonecdote: an anecdote about stone.)

It is my wish to encourage the sharing of stories much as we would do in each other's company. Here's a light-hearted reminiscence of my own. Imagine if you will that we are down at the pub, in this case the Second Street Brewery in Santa Fe. I recommend Rod's Best Bitter, though you may prefer the hoppy, high gravity, medal-winning IPA.

So—remember the photo in the last STONEXUS of the stone columns and the merry masons who built them? Well, that was taken on a pleasant spring day in 1980, just after the final cleanup had taken place. The actual work was done in quite different conditions, during one of the wettest winters on record, in a place noted for wet winters, Marin County, California.

They grace the entrance to what had been the old Kent Estate in Kentfield, an up-scale community nestled in a moist armpit of Mt. Tamalpais, a geographical entity locally referred to as the "Sleeping Woman" because of its silhouette against the sky. Recently purchased by a German baron, the estate was in the process of being baronialized. Stately stone entry columns were *de rigueur* and I was asked to bid on them. After looking at the plans, I deliberated for a full minute and then drew the numeral six in the air. "Six?" "Right." "Thousand?" "Right." That was considered—and rejected; they would prefer doing time and materials. Okay by me.

It was an interesting design, each column was to be square in cross-section, inside and back faces to be plumb, front and outside faces, sloping. Basalt fieldstone augmented with sandstone. Lanterns. The MO: ample foundations (this is earthquake country), each containing a flattened spheroid of rebar gathered in a cluster, like the stem of an onion, around the electrical conduit (for the lanterns) extending up the center of the column-to-be. The stone would be laid up properly, the mortar recessed, the core filled with scrap rock and concrete. NO cement blocks. The crew was a trio, myself, Michel a French mason and George, our apprentice.

So we commenced work, established the foundations and began to build. The columns slowly grew as we soldiered through the unfavorable weather and battled the bastardly obdurate tool-steel-eating basalt boulders. Occasionally the good Baron would visit the estate to observe the proceedings, bestowing a genial wave to us from the rear of his chauffeured car as he passed by. In sardonic observance of ancient custom, we would bare our heads. The rain continued; the cold was constant; the work went on. Conditions were so miserable we had to laugh. The hot, hearty meals with red wine at the Italian restaurant we favored for lunch helped, as did the opera and jazz music we played at high volume while we worked. Michel and George began talking with Italian accents whereas I adapted an Irish brogue believing it more appropriate to the atmospheric conditions. In these ways we kept our spirits up.

The six thousand dollar mark came, and went, but the columns had yet to attain their full height. Every day dozens of other tradesmen, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, painters etc. passed though our worksite going to and from their own jobs inside and under cover. Quite possibly they were the source of a growing suspicion that the good Baron was being milked by the loony stonemasons.

The situation was complicated because the general contractor had been seriously injured in an automobile accident and was hospitalized. The architect was out of the country. The Baron now seemed worried as he gazed on the columns in passing—but what was he to do? A baron can't speak to a workingman, especially about such matters. But somebody had to; that somebody turned out to be the realtor who had negotiated the property transfer. He volunteered to rectify the situation, to take matters in hand and bring the unruly stonemasons into line.

So, one typically not-so-fine day a Mercedes sedan drove up, stopped and out stepped a person resembling the actor Victor Mature. Dark and handsome was he, self-assured, impeccably dressed and richly ornamented with gold. His manner was suave but commanding as with firm tones he informed us that, having exceeded the original benchmark figure of six thousand dollars, we had been paid more than we actually deserved and that we should finish the remaining work expeditiously—and without further remuneration.

You know how after something happens, sometimes just after, more often long after, it occurs to you what you should've said, what you should've done? But occasionally, just occasionally, we actually do say what we should've said and do what we should've done; well, this was such a time.

"Perhaps" I said, picking up a hefty stone, 50 or 60 pounds of dense geological material, "you don't understand what we're dealing with here." I thrust the rock toward him and, when he put out his arms in self-defense, released the heavy, wet, muddy object onto them. Realtor, meet Reality. The fact of the act and the weight of the stone astonished him and he was obliged to embrace it to protect his expensively shod feet. After watching him dance around with this for a moment or two I relieved him of it. Aghast is the best way to describe the way he regarded his hands, his suit and shirt, the stone and me. The manner of his leave-taking was abrupt. He never returned.

Working at our accustomed pace we finished the columns and as a gesture of good will, made a fair adjustment to the bill.

[BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

T.L.

[STONE FOUNDATION HOME PAGE](#)