

TIMBER HOMES

2008 Annual Buyer's Directory

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Your Dream Home Guide

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Sage Advice with Sandy Bennett

Veteran timber framer offers his wisdom to would-be homeowners.

For readers just getting started in the timber frame process, or even those educated consumers wanting to know more, there may be no better source to hear from than Sandy Bennett.

It's been nearly 30 years since Sandy became a timber framer, and in that time he's not only witnessed the growth of the industry, he's played a firsthand role in it. A charter member of the Timber Framers Guild, Sandy sits on the guild's board of directors, heavily involved in charting the path for the organization to train other timber framers and to educate the public.

His company, Blue Ridge Timberwrights in Christiansburg, Virginia, is a charter member of the Timber Frame Business Council, for which Sandy also serves on the board of directors. Sandy started timber framing in 1979 when, after studying engineering in college, a fellow student named Frank Baker approached him about going into business together. The pair formed Riverbend Timber Framing in Michigan. After 12 extremely successful years of building Riverbend into a recognized respected name in the expanding timber frame industry, Sandy decided to sell his portion of the company and take a break. But that brief break ended 13 years ago when Blue Ridge Timberwrights became available. In Sandy's words: "It was time to get back to work."

These days, in addition to his industry leadership efforts, his work consists of a staff of around 20 completing up to two dozen projects per year, depending on the size and scope of the job at hand. Sandy spoke with us about the considerations for a timber frame project, from wood species to design elements to working within your budget.

Timber Homes Illustrated: What is the first piece of advice you'd offer consumers beginning a search for a timber producer?

Sandy Bennett: I would advise that they do their homework and try to find a timber framer who they're comfortable with. They're about to make a huge investment, so it's important to spend some time and find out about the previous work a timber framer has done, talk with references, see how long the company has been in business, and even visit a job site or completed home. Companies and individuals can be so different that it's difficult to simply comparison-shop, but most important is getting good value and being able to trust them.

THI: What are some of the basic differences from producer to producer-philosophy, number of projects completed annually, the process itself?

SB: I would say all of the above. Some companies are more production-oriented, able to rely on machines more and complete as many jobs a year as possible. Some are small and committed to the "craft," often just three- or four-person operations and more reliant on hand tools. That's not to say either way is better. It's just a different approach. It also depends what consumers are looking for. Some may come into this with a design, and some may be looking for a design. We have our own design staff. Among timber framers, there is a wide gamut of services offered. Some are kind of "virtual" timber framers. With the proliferation of CNC (computer numerical control) machines, some companies actually re-bid their frame fabrication and erection to other companies. Knowing what your framer is actually doing versus what they're subcontracting out is helpful.

THI: How are CNC machines being used in the industry?

SB: CNC has been expanding. It first came into this market about 10 or 12 years ago and is growing rapidly. We've utilized it ourselves for assistance on a few jobs. In the hands of an expert, it works very well and is very effective. But like any machine, it's not for a novice.

THI: Take us through a typical project for you, from your initial interaction with the customer through the design process and the completion of the timber frame project.

SB: We'll give out literature and information based on a phone call, or magazine or web response, etc. If consumers are interested in moving further or learning more, we'll recommend a face-to-face meeting, either here or we can visit their site if they have one. That way, we can help them assess what they're trying to undertake. Then we may take them to one of our sites or arrange a visit to a completed home. Ideally, they'll come in before a house is planned. Usually, in residential work, we do get to talk to the people before design is too far along. The ideal situation is that we meet, enter into a design agreement together, plan the home and then move into a production agreement. So, during the course of design, they can make certain decisions on the home and the timber frame with our input along the way. One thing I want to stress that's essential from the beginning: It's doing a disservice to try to design a project without asking for an overall budget and keeping it in mind. Trust and honesty are essential at this step and can help avoid disappointment later.



THI: You mentioned having a design staff-is that common among timber framers?

SB: Most of the middle to large shops have a design staff, but we are also able to work with outside designers, too. There are freelancers out there who are very good. There are advantages to using an inside staff because they have familiarity with the timber framing process of their particular shop.

THI: How frequently do you work with an outside design staff brought in by the homeowner?

SB: In residential work, it's unusual to have any outside input on the timber frame itself. It's certainly more common that someone is designing the house but not the timber frame. I'd say that occurs on about one out of every five projects. The majority of residential work is designed in-house these days.

THI: What should readers keep in mind as they design a timber home?

SB: Unlike a log house, these houses don't need to look any different on the outside. The story is on the inside. Some designs don't lend themselves to a timber frame. A soaring hip-roofed mansion isn't necessarily ideal here. Simple design may work best for a timber frame.

THI: How do consumers choose a wood species, timber style and stain color?

SB: I'd say through seeing samples, determining what they like, and then, for the different wood species, just learning about the pros and cons. Some are stronger from an engineering point of view, like Douglas fir. With some companies, your choice of species becomes pretty simple, because they might work in only one or two woods. We don't really push a particular wood. Knowing how a wood will be used affects the species we go with. Some woods are better outdoors, like a white oak, cypress, or cedar. It's not unusual to use one species inside and another one outside the house for a porch or gazebo. I'd also add that recycled timber has been good for us over the years. It tends to be dry, and there's some good material and beauty hiding in those old beams. When it comes to stains, it's rare to have the wood stained from our perspective. Usually we're trying to give them wood they find attractive in the natural color with just oil on it.

THI: What relevant services do timber frame companies generally offer that readers should be aware of? Structural insulated panels? Turn-key contracting?

SB: On most projects, there's a local general contractor, and usually we have contracted directly with the owner. That's fairly typical unless you find a company that offers turn-key services, probably within a local area. In general, some companies offer timber frame site-services and panel-raising, and some don't. Consumers should always ask, "Will you come to my site and erect the frame?" Some companies will pass that along to another contractor. We're fairly straightforward in what we do. We offer full design services, and we fabricate and erect the frame, and we never ask the client to absorb the risk and uncertainty of not having site equipment such as the crane and forklift included in the package price. Also, we are typically responsible for the installation of the structural insulated panels. Then we'll turn it over to the general contractor, although we're always available throughout the whole process. That's why I say this is about relationships. What's most important in selecting a timber framer is to find someone you feel you have a good relationship with. I give out my home phone number and my cell phone number to any client that wants them and tell people I am



available to them 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We're going to do this together. When we are finished, we want to be able to have potential clients visit the home and talk to the owners about what a great experience it was. That's the way we are and the way we're hoping to be on each project. I find that such personal relationships are not unusual throughout our industry.

THI: What is the difference in price among timber frame options?

SB: The more complexity, the more it will cost. Different species can affect the cost but not really as much as you might think. I guess the exception would be, these days with oil and gas being the cost that it is, if you live on the East Coast and select a West Coast wood, shipping alone is a factor that can't be ignored. In general, I like to tell consumers that there really are three major elements in the overall cost: size, complexity and budget. You can only affect two of the three. That is, if you're going complex on the design or the frame and you have a small budget, the house will need to be small. If you want the size of the house to be large with a smaller budget, then things can't be too complex. And if you want a large, complex house, you need to be prepared for the financial reality that will be associated.

THI: What resources would you recommend for consumers to learn more?

SB: Most timber framers have their own web site, and that can serve as a first introduction to learn more about the company and about timber framing. Home shows are a great way to meet the individual companies. Of course, there are plenty of good books too, and the Timber Framers Guild has a good site (www.tfguild.org), with a library and resource guide, which is published by the Timber Frame Business Council (www.timberframe.org), which is another good source. I'd also strongly recommend Summer Beam Books, run by Charlotte Cooper; she has a wealth of timber frame books she offers, as well as numerous books on mainstream and alternative construction (www.summerbeambooks.com).

THI: Anything we haven't covered?

SB: It's so important for people to have a good handle on the cost of the entire project from the beginning. I have found myself chagrined at times that people haven't adequately estimated or priced the complete cost of their project and figured out what they can afford early on. For some folks, cost is no object, but most of us need to set a budget that we can then work within to complete the project. The tendency always seems to be to expand the budget a bit as the project proceeds, but at least it's done with open eyes.

Contact Sandy Bennett at Blue Ridge Timberwrights by calling (540) 382-1102. The company's web site (www.brtw.com) contains a gallery of recent projects and more information on timber framing.