

TIMBER FRAMING

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On the front cover, scarf joints for new Ttemple to Shiva await assembly in Pokhara, Nepal. Photo by Jeffrey Empfield.

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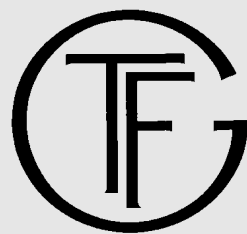
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TIMBER FRAMING, Journal of the Timber Framers Guild, appears in March, June, September and December. The journal is written by its readers and pays for interesting articles by experienced and novice writers alike.

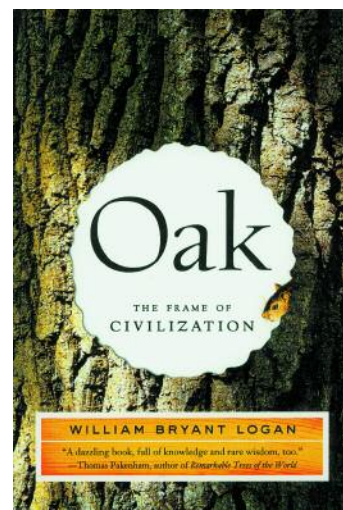


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Oak: The Frame of Civilization, by William Bryant Logan. New York, W. W. Norton, 2005, 5½ x 8¼, 336 pp., illustrated. Library binding, \$24.95; paper, \$15.95.

SPRING has finally made it to most of North America, and with it I have the perfect suggestion to accompany your warmer evenings. With a degree in forestry and 13 years experience working oak from forest to finished product, I could only imagine that *Oak: The Frame of Civilization*, sent to me by a friend, was another in a series of books that just scratches the surface of the tree that I have come to depend on for a living. How nice it was to be surprised and wrong! What I found was a richly crafted, engaging book, written by a peer. Logan, who has also produced *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth*, is an award-winning nature writer and a professional arborist in New York City.



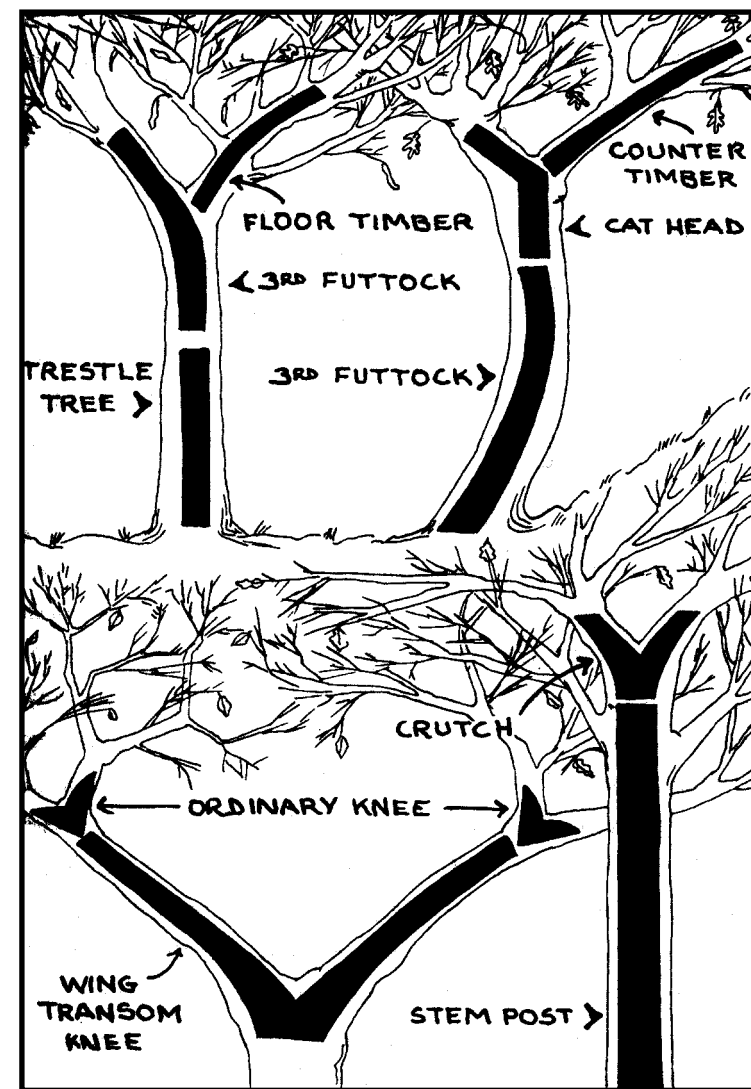
For the woodsman or carpenter, Oak brings a greater depth to our work, and places us as successors to a very long line of users. The book also shows how important is the stewardship of our inheritance. For millennia mankind has depended on the oak, not only for building, and the author makes a clear case for a persisting human relationship to the tree. "The distribution of oak trees," he observes, "is coterminous with the locations of the settled civilizations of Asia, Europe and North America."

Logan surveys the global distribution of oak, a northern hemisphere tree that dips below the equator in Indonesia, discussing how the trees have evolved over time and influenced the naming of people and places, and then takes up a little-known benefit of oak, specifically the acorn as an important foodstuff. For those of us who grew up around dense oak forests, it's not surprising that acorns are a ready food source, though we may never have made acorn meal nor understood what a critical staple acorns were in early human diets. Logan uses the term balanoculture to describe the human consumption of acorns, citing numerous mentions in Classical literature and specific historic examples from Mesopotamia and North Africa—and California. For instance, Indian Grinding Rock State Park in the Sierra foothills has almost 1200 mortar holes in bedrock representing 5000 years of balanoculture. As for our own time, Logan reports finding acorn starch flower and acorn jelly for sale in a Korean grocery store in Manhattan.

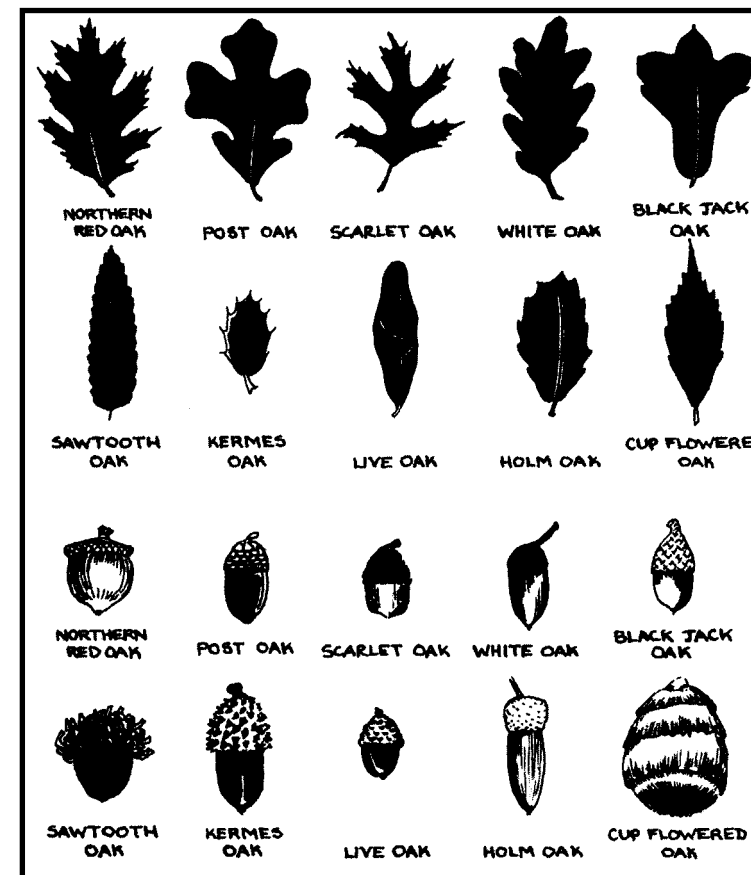
It's fascinating to learn how far back the roots of our trade really go. "A craftsmen's intellect is valuable because it's tested," Logan

Erratum

The photographer of the Weston House interior shown in TF 91, page 9, was misidentified. Anthony Tieuli took the picture. The editor regrets the error.



Drawings by Nora Logan, from *Oak, The Frame of Civilization*. European sailing ship oak parts. Futtock, of course, is foot oak. Below, leaves and acorns of a few of the 250 species of standing oak.



remarks: techniques and workmanship actually matter. Sometimes they are matters of life or death. He discusses the massive network of plank roads in Megalithic Europe, cunningly evolved, and highlights other structures from the period such as early stave buildings and a large livestock containment facility in England. Mankind has been using woodwork joinery and relying heavily on structural oak for over 3000 years. Among numerous early oak constructions cited in the book, most interesting to me as a builder was an archeological find in the Netherlands dating from ca. 1475 BCE. Although I'm not going to tell you what was found, I will say that it's what we all build today.

In redrawn sketches and drawings reproduced from familiar sources such as Hewett and Harris, as well as original drawings by Nora Logan, we see how people have used oak, often exploring in detail trades that sprang specifically from oak—shipbuilding and house carpentry in particular, but also tanning, charcoal-making and cooperage. Sometimes Logan reaches the question why we have revered oak as a building material for so long: "Permanence, dignity, grace, strength. These are the qualities that men and women sought in oak."

Logan offers a broad discussion of European sailing ships, from the Vikings to the golden age of shipbuilding, ending with the building of the ironclad ships of the US Civil War. Not a shipwright myself but an admirer of the trade, I found engrossing his story of Viking ships, whose flexibility made them simultaneously fast and seaworthy enough for journeys to North America. Viking craft were not built plank on frame but rather as shells of lapped and riveted cleft-oak strakes erected on keels and stems, with their stiffening ribs fitted last to the inside of the hull. Logan discusses in some detail the British and American fleets of the War of 1812, as well as the massive shipyards in both countries throughout the 19th century, citing the superior construction of the USS Constitution, "Old Ironsides," framed with live oak and planked with white oak, and the standoff battle between the CSS Virginia and the USS Monitor during the Civil War.

Resource management of original oak forests in the United States has been neglected. In Illinois, the last remaining megalithic forests of our region, bur oak savannahs such as once existed in ancient Europe are slowly and systematically being destroyed. While we continue to harvest the result of seedling growth of 70–165 years ago, the inner circles of forestry spell doom and gloom for oak forests in North America. Chemicals, lack of fire, nuclear energy, pasturing forest land, soil ph changes from acid rain, invasive species preventing soil temperatures for germination of acorns—the list is long, and it does not look good for the oak tree.

Throughout the book, Logan emphasizes the long importance of oak in the temperate, deciduous and chapparral forest biomes, and the very short time frame underlying modern thinking. We live in a version of the world made with fossil fuels. Comparing "the world made with wood and the world made with coal and oil," he observes, "one lasted 12 to 15 millennia; the other has lasted about 250 years so far," and quotes C.S. Lewis: "When you are on the wrong road, the shortest way to go forward is to go back to where you made the wrong turn and make the right one." Good advice for an age of increasing information and technology. Logan's advice to us regarding oak trees, the environment and living sustainably is that to live in the present we need to put one foot in the past and one in the future.

Upon finishing this book, I felt the need to go right out and plant an oak tree. I would have done so except that the ground was still frozen. I will wait a few weeks, but you can bet this year I'll be scrounging the woods for acorns to germinate from some of the best-looking trees I can find.

—RICK COLLINS
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