



Quality Craftsmanship | Stowe, Vermont

the craftsman.

A NEWSLETTER OF SISLER BUILDERS SUMMER 2014

*Reflecting on 30
Years in the Business.*

BY STEVE SISLER



Sisler Builders Crew - 2013/14

MILESTONE ACHIEVED

Sisler Builders recently passed a milestone: 30 years in business. As I reflect on this achievement, I am proud and humbled, by what an idea has turned into. President and Vermonter Calvin Coolidge commented "...Persistence alone is Omnipotent," a phrase which has consistently motivated me, especially during the tough moments. The upcoming years motivate me even more.

The promise of our talented people, the ongoing technological progression charging into the construction field and the new palette of building materials all make this an exciting time to be a Builder. I look toward the future with the same sense of wonder, trepidation, and anticipation as I did when I embarked on this journey.

I've been thinking lately about the connectedness of things. Our company, now 30 employees strong, became what it is by honoring basic principles that apply in many endeavors. Whether it's coaching or competing, being a parent or building a home, the values of respect, preparation, challenge, and follow-through work every time. I'm struck, looking back, by how similar the obstacles and outcomes can be – at the hockey arena, the dinner table, or the building site.

Generally I'm not one for mottos or mantras, but if pressed I would say we endeavor to build efficiently, with a long view, utilizing materials and techniques which champion that view. We value respect for people, quality products, and the planet.

RESPECT FOR PEOPLE

I see a good example in the recent economic downturn. At Sisler Builders, we made it a priority to honor the commitments made to and by our employees. During the worst housing market in several decades, we adapted our work to keep our entire staff not just employed, but continuing to contribute to their families, their communities, to the recovery, and to a resilient business. One of our carpenters described the chang-

es in his commute from a nearby town – from bustling, to sparse, to lonely. At its worst, he felt that he was the only one from his community heading anywhere. Now, the roads are filling again, but I know the driver of one silver Sisler Builders pick-up appreciates the drive a little more and that means a lot to me.

Just like our employees, loyalty on the playing field comes from investing in the team when times are tough. Below zero morning practices at the old outdoor Jackson Ice Arena forged some great teams, built character and life skills that endure for all participants.



Sisler Builders circa. 1986

RESPECT FOR QUALITY PRODUCT

A local theater group recently performed "It's a Wonderful Life." There's a line where Pa Bailey explains to his son, who wants to do greater things, "You know, George, I feel that in a small way we are doing something important. Satisfying a fundamental urge. It's deep in the race for a man to want

A BUNCH OF HOT AIR?

The economics of newer heat pump technology.

BY RANDY PRATT

It just can't be. How is it possible to heat a home with cold air? Nick Sisler, co-founder and Engineer at Ekotrope (also Steve's son), is one of a growing number of experts in the energy, building, heating, and environmental fields who believe that air source heat pumps are the technology of the future – available today. As Nick states in a recent blog:

By allowing us to heat with clean renewal energy generated by photovoltaics, wind turbines, or a hydro plant, electric heating will be an important and necessary step in cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

Mike D'Muhala, Sisler Builders' Energy Division Manager, also "gets" heat pumps. Hearing him explain concepts like heat of vaporization, coefficient of performance, compression, joules, and absolute zero makes you wish you'd paid more attention in physics class. Even when the explanation is put in simple terms ("just an air conditioner running backwards", "the same technology as a refrigerator"), it still feels like there must be magic involved in heating a home by extracting heat from cold outside air, even when it may be below zero.

Whether it's physical or mystical, it's economical: newer heat pump technology can provide much lower cost heating, cooling, short payback of investment, and lower carbon emissions.

FIRST A PRIMER ON THE TECHNOLOGY

The Second Law of Thermodynamics shows that when two things of different temperatures approach each other, the hot thing cools and the cold thing heats up. This natural law has been used for cooling for decades, most notably in the form of refrigerators and air conditioners.

Essentially, an air source heat pump takes the heat out of ambient outside air (there is "heat" in outside air even when it's well below zero) by passing a chemical refrigerant through coils outside. As the liquid refrigerant heats, it becomes a vapor (just like boiling water). This now hot vapor is then forced through a compressor (using electricity) to further raise its temperature. It is then pumped through coils inside the home, where the heat is released. As the vapor then cools (releases its heat) it condenses back into liquid refrigerant, and the cycle repeats itself.

This process has far more to do with the relative temperatures of the two things than with the absolute temperature of either.

WHAT'S NEW & WHY NOW?

For some time, ground source (or geothermal) heat pumps have been transferring the nearly constant temperature of

the earth into dwellings to heat and/or cool them. Often, though, installation costs for these systems can be high. In warmer climates, air source heat pumps have also been used effectively. Now, thanks to technology improvements, better (and more environmentally benign) refrigerants, and – ironically – relatively low electricity prices, air source heat pumps are invading Vermont. This year, the Vermont Legislature passed a bill that will have the state's efficiency utility, Efficiency Vermont, consider reversing its traditional mission of reducing electricity consumption. As they state in a recent blog:

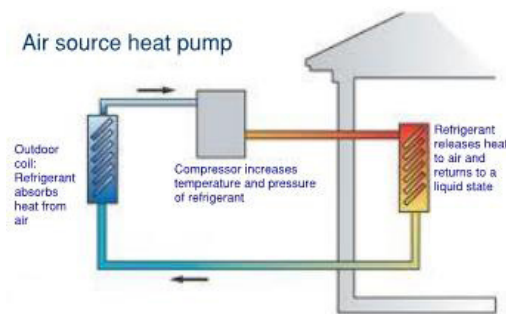
... in some instances, there is a strong economic and environmental case to be made for using more electricity, not less. Take the case of a modern air source heat pump. This efficient technology can help to heat a home at one-half to one-third the cost of heating systems that use propane or heating oil, while also providing significant greenhouse gas benefits.

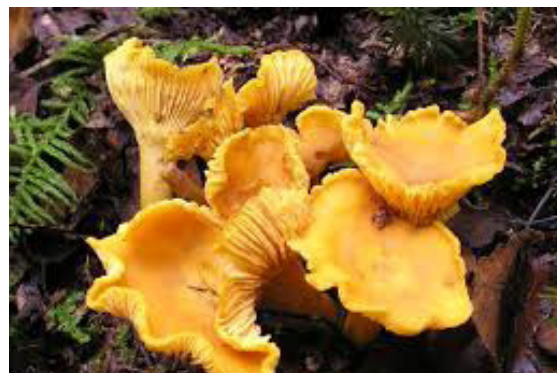
The benefits of air source heat pumps sometimes seem too good to be true. By one measure, called the Coefficient of Performance, air source heat pumps can provide 3 to 5 times more heat energy than they consume in electricity. Some heat pump evangelists are predicting that this efficiency will increase to 10 or more, and could revolutionize our energy future. Heat pumps also need not be just air-to-air. Air source systems are also able to heat domestic hot water, and may even integrate

with or supplement traditional forced hot water heating systems. There is at least one electric utility in Vermont (Green Mountain Power) that, along with Efficiency Vermont, recognizes the value of heat pumps and is offering incentives or special rates to save even more money.

There are drawbacks, of course. Current heat pumps may not provide a whole-home heating solution. A drafty house also lowers the benefits. Performance declines as the temperature drops, and another heat source is needed for cold Vermont winters. Also, if electricity prices should increase dramatically, the economics would become less appealing.

Sisler Builders is embracing air source heat pumps, as they may fit within a custom home, and especially within our Energy Division. Mike D'Muhala and Steve Gruner of the Energy Division are using their expertise and their magic in providing efficiency audits and retrofits, and are including heat pumps in the alchemy. **[sb]**





L to R: Merrill with Chaga; Morel; Chanterelle

FORAGING *Euell Gibbons wasn't such a nut after all.*

BY PETER MERRILL

Just when it seems like it won't come at all, spring arrives in a rush here in Vermont as steel-gray skies and damp days give way to an explosion of green. Hope springs eternal as we pour through seed catalogs, map out our gardens and tend our seedlings all the while dreaming of the bountiful harvest to come. Unfortunately, by mid-July this dream all too often becomes a nightmare as we realize that we are no match for the late, killing frosts, drowning rains and interminable weeds that annually conspire to derail our gardening plans.

That's what I love about foraging – no planning, no planting – just that moment of surprise and the instant gratification of finding something in the woods that you can actually eat. Just the other day I was weeding my blueberry bushes and came across a beautiful Morel mushroom. Morels come only in May and then they're gone which make them even more highly prized. I spent an hour crawling around my garden on hands and knees looking for more and found one other – enough to sauté and savor.

Foraging brings me back to my youth and fond memories of birthday party treasure hunts and looking for Easter eggs. At a recent mushrooming class I attended, the instructor gave each of us a bag and sent us into the woods to gather as many different mushrooms as we could find. Picture two dozen people fanning out in all directions, bags in hand, many in their 60s and 70s, and you will understand how foraging can become a passion for children of all ages and a skill that is passed from generation to generation. Sisler Builders' Randy Pratt remembers his mother's passion for mushrooming and honors her memory in the naming of his dogs – Shiitake and Chanterelle. Upon learning of my own interest in mushrooming, a 90-year-old friend recently bequeathed me his late wife's extensive library of mushrooming books simply because he felt they would be more useful in my woods than on his bookshelf. - part of the fun is in paying it forward.

"That's what I love about foraging – no planning, no planting – just that moment of surprise and the instant gratification of finding something in the woods that you can actually eat."

Anyone who knows Sisler Builders carpenter Shannon Kineson knows he's a man of few words – that is unless you get him talking about hunting or mushrooming. I can remember showing Shannon a bright yellow mushroom that I had proudly misidentified as a Chanterelle. The next day a plain brown bag filled with freshly picked Chanterelles showed up in my mailbox – no note, no explanation. Shannon has also helped me to find and identify Chaga, a woody fungus that grows on birch trees; looks like burnt charcoal and can be steeped to make a tasty and therapeutic tea. Sisler Builders master woodworkers, Seth Allen and Glen Waller are also Chaga fans and often have a fresh pot of tea brewing on the woodstove in the Sisler Builders woodworking shop on cold winter mornings.

Perhaps the best part about foraging is it helps to extend our short Vermont growing season. Where I live, "ramps" (wild onions) begin to appear in April followed by fiddle-head ferns and Morels in May. Chanterelles can be found all summer long, and wild blackberries begin to ripen in July. "Indian cucumbers" (a wild root that has the crunch of a water chestnut and the taste of a cucumber) can be found well into the fall, and Chaga can be found year round but is easiest to find once the leaves have fallen and snow is on the ground.

A word of caution – foraging is not without its risks. Destroying Angel, Angel of Death, Death Cap and The Sickener

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BLACKBERRY PORT RECIPE


- Fill a quart size Mason jar half full with wild blackberries
- Fill the other half of the jar with equal parts maple syrup and brandy
- Store in a cool dark place for 3 weeks
- Strain...Serve...Enjoy!



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Foraging cont. from p.3

aren't video game villains but rather just some of the mushrooms that can make you sick or worse. At the end of our mushrooming class, we spread the mushrooms we had collected onto a table. Our instructor selected one and said "If you eat this, you'll feel sick for three days, then fine for three days, and then you'll die." My rule of thumb is forget about the guide books and only eat what you pick after someone you trust has identified it and is willing to eat it with you. Happy foraging! 

SPOTLIGHT

If all goes well and there are no major snags (there can be many in such a complex undertaking), Sisler Builders' Project Manager Richard Duda is planning to ride the Motorcycle Cannonball in September. This is a race from Daytona Beach Florida to Tacoma, Washington for antiques motorcycles built prior to 1937. It is around a 4,000 mile ride, riding for 16 days with one rest day in Kansas. There are 112 riders with 24 from foreign countries.

Richard is building a 1924 Henderson. The Henderson Motorcycles were built from 1912-1931. Richard says, "I am fortunate to have a Henderson. This is the third Cannonball and I am very excited to be a part of the race. Additional information about the race is at www.motorcyclecannonball.com. If you look in the Rider's section there is a link to my blog." Good luck Duda! 

Milestone Achieved cont. from p.1

his own roof and walls and fireplace, and we're helping him get those things in our shabby little office." I don't find our office shabby, but I do find the same sense of satisfaction Pa expressed. We've been privileged to have been chosen to build and remodel many awesome homes for many wonderful people. Yet I believe the home includes so much more than a roof and walls and fireplace. It provides peace and security, identity, self-expression, family, community - attributes I know our buildings will deliver for decades.

RESPECT FOR PLANET AND FUTURE

How we build is critical to how we will live, and it is for the long term. We are committed to building with respect for the planet. Sustainability includes not just energy use and consumption but emissions and our overall footprint. We build aware of the life cycle analysis of the resources we employ. We will always seek to optimize our people, through training and support, the technology we use and install and in creating custom living solutions with style, quality, and respect.

From here, we will build on the values we have forged and embodied. I plan to help guide our talented people to continue to live up to the high standards we have set and delivered in our first 30 years and raise the bar, as energy issues demand, for the coming decades.

Thanks for your support, past and future! 