

— wavy line —

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**CARPENTER'S  
LIFE**  
*as told by houses*



**LARRY HAUN**

— wavy line —

*Foreword by Kevin Ireton*  
**former Editor of *Fine Homebuilding***

\$22.95 U.S.



“If the best writers draw from their own experience, Larry Haun is as much a historian and philosopher as he is a 60-year veteran carpenter. Larry’s memoir would be equally at home on the bookshelves of homebuilding and architecture enthusiasts as on those of anyone on a spiritual journey.”

—BRIAN PONTOLILO, Editor,  
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With the houses Larry has built and lived in providing the narrative glue, what comes through is our deep connection to the natural world, a yearning for simplicity, a respect for humanity, and an evocative notion of what we mean by “home.”



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**LARRY HAUN**



The Taunton Press

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*To all who care for our planet. Don't give up.*



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Foreword . . .	2
	Introduction . . .	4
CHAPTER ONE	<b>The Soddy . . .</b>	<b>8</b>
CHAPTER TWO	<b>The Straw Bale . . .</b>	<b>30</b>
CHAPTER THREE	<b>The Old Frame House . . .</b>	<b>48</b>
CHAPTER FOUR	<b>The Dugout . . .</b>	<b>70</b>
CHAPTER FIVE	<b>The Precut House . . .</b>	<b>92</b>
CHAPTER SIX	<b>The Adobe . . .</b>	<b>114</b>
CHAPTER SEVEN	<b>The Manufactured House . . .</b>	<b>134</b>
CHAPTER EIGHT	<b>The Quonset Hut . . .</b>	<b>156</b>
CHAPTER NINE	<b>The Tract House . . .</b>	<b>178</b>
CHAPTER TEN	<b>The Habitat House . . .</b>	<b>202</b>
CHAPTER ELEVEN	<b>Small Houses . . .</b>	<b>220</b>
CHAPTER TWELVE	<b>The Greenhouse . . .</b>	<b>244</b>
	Credits . . .	262



## FOREWORD

THE FIRST TIME I SAW LARRY HAUN swing a hammer, I knew that I wasn't nearly as good a carpenter as I had thought.

It was 1987, and I had only recently walked off of a job site and into a job at *Fine Homebuilding* magazine. The Taunton Press was starting to make how-to videos, and one day the video producer invited me to watch an instructional tape from the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. The star was a tall, thin man in his 50s.

Over and over, he drove sixteen-penny spikes with two licks—one to set and one to sink. The nails disappeared so fast I wondered if some magician's trick were secretly pulling them into the wood ahead of the hammer blows. I never saw Joe DiMaggio play baseball, but those who did describe his movements as seamless and fluid, as having no beginning and no end. One observer quipped, "He made the rest of them look like plumbers." That's how I felt watching Larry Haun drive nails.

Not long after I saw that video, Larry wrote his first article for *Fine Homebuilding*. He went on to write countless more, along with several books, mostly about the production framing techniques he helped pioneer on the frenzied tract developments of southern California. His amazing skills were due, at least in part, to the fact that he kept at it long after most carpenters move on to jobs that are easier on their bodies.

It's telling that when Larry finally did retire and stopped building houses for a living, he joined Habitat for Humanity and started building them for free. I would like to have been there the first time Larry Haun showed up on a Habitat project. At the peak of his powers, Larry and his two brothers could frame an entire house in a day. I imagine the Habitat foreman asking Larry if he had any experience and him replying, "Some."

On the surface of it then, this book is the story of Larry's life as seen through the houses he has known, lived in, and built. This

experience ranges from the sod houses of the Great Plains (his mother grew up in one), to the kit houses sold in the Sears catalog, to the little boxes of the post-World War II housing boom, to the McMansions of today. And given that we now take plywood, nail guns, and the overflowing shelves at The Home Depot for granted, it is fascinating to read about a time when carpenters made their own framing hammers and soaked nails in paraffin so they'd be easier to drive. But it would be a mistake to think of this book simply as a carpenter's memoir or as a history of houses.

As prodigious as Larry's carpentry skills are, and as fascinating as the span of his career has been, neither is what makes him remarkable or this book so worthy. Larry is indeed a great carpenter, but he is hardly typical. Despite a lifetime spent on raucous job sites brimming with testosterone, Larry is a quiet, unpretentious man who has long been more interested in Buddha than Budweiser.

Larry didn't write this book to impress anybody. He's looking for deeper truths. When he reflects on the houses in his life, it is not so much to marvel at how far we've come, but to see what we've lost, and most important, to see what we can learn. For him, it is a small step from *where* we live to *how* we live. Gently and humbly, he raises questions about the decisions we've made as a society, about how we treat each other, and how we treat this planet that we live on.

In this entire volume, otherwise filled with charming tales and timeless wisdom, only one assertion rings false. Having grown up on the high plains of western Nebraska, in an uninsulated farmhouse with no central heating, Larry says he was always cold, even in the summer. He claims that cold has dogged him to this day, which leads him to conclude that all his efforts, all his struggles, the reason for his existence, has been to do whatever was necessary to keep himself warm. Hardly. Anyone who has ever known Larry will attest, and readers of this book will soon discover, the reason for his existence has been to warm others with his remarkable spirit.

*Kevin Ireton  
New Milford, Connecticut  
July 2011*

## INTRODUCTION



**MY MOTHER TOLD ME** that I started to take a real interest in the few carpentry tools we had around home when I was seven years old, back in 1938. She said I would sit on the sunny side of the house for hours taking apart orange crates that came to our village once a year. For a boy with nothing but homemade toys, these sweet-smelling soft pine wooden crates were the mother lode.

Our curved-claw hammer was missing a claw, so I pulled the small nails out of the crate with a pair of pliers. Once the crate was apart, I fashioned the wood into play objects, a small house, a wagon, boxes, and shelves to hold things. It was here that I learned one of my first carpentry lessons: to hold my thumb a good distance from the head of the nail. Bam-ouch-blood!

Our nearest hardware store was 30 miles away, so when something broke, we fixed it. Tools became as much a part of my life as food. I can now be grateful for those days because they allowed me to learn a trade where I can create with my hands. By the time I was 19, I was a union journeyman carpenter in Los Angeles, where the sun shone most every day. Making decent wages, I was able to study

at universities for 13 or 14 years, not to collect degrees, but to satisfy my curiosity. Besides building houses, I taught night school at a community college for nearly 20 years—carpentry to apprentices, Spanish to people who just wanted to talk to their neighbors, and even deaf children (and their parents), helping them integrate into mainstream schools. I was able to travel, buy and remodel a simple house, raise a beautiful family, and in my later years become a writer trying to help others be master carpenters.

Some of my travels took me to countries where I saw firsthand how many thousands of people live on the edge in tin and cardboard shacks. I recall an early morning walk along the Pasig River where my wife, Mila, lived in the Philippines. Near her home many families are crowded together in unstable houses that hang out over this once pristine river, now the recipient of all human waste. A teenage girl with clean, colorful clothes and an armful of school books emerged through a small opening from her tin “house,” which measured no more than 8 ft. by 12 ft. I was encouraged by her bright eyes and smile. I peeked inside and spotted a colorful cloth covering a wall and a flower in a vase. For her, this simple house was a place where she could dream her dreams.



At the other end of the spectrum, as a contractor, I was once invited into a palatial home near Los Angeles to discuss a remodeling project. A servant seated me in a reception room full of thick carpets, fine furniture, and museum art. Maybe ten minutes later a couple entered and we began. It wasn't long before I felt a chill move through me, not from the temperature of the room but from the evident hostility between the man and the woman. Let's just say that I passed on the job.

I can't help but wonder about the relationship between people and their homes. How do these vastly different dwelling places affect the people who live there? How have I been shaped by the houses I've lived in? Who and what would I be if I'd been born in an upscale mansion or a shack by the river? *A Carpenter's Life* is my way of looking at these wonderings.

To state the obvious, we can't choose our place of birth. Given a chance, I would not have chosen to have been born in 1931 in a refrigerator called a balloon-framed wood house out on the treeless high plains, the short-grass prairie, of western Nebraska in the middle of the Great Depression.

I have lots of good memories from those times, but being cold is not one of them. In the 18 years I lived there it seemed to me that I was always cold, due mainly to the constant wind that blew down across the snow-covered sagebrush hills out of Canada and into my life. There was never a question about whether the wind was blowing or not. Rather it was about how hard and how cold it blew. Turn your back on our iron kitchen stove and you could see your breath. Whatever the temperature was outside, that was the temperature in our bedrooms, even when Mother warmed the sheets with her flat iron. We did have those summer days when I would play on the lee side of the house, but the chill never left. I could never get warm all the way through. (In retrospect, I sometimes feel that all my efforts, all my struggles, the reason for my

existence, has been to do whatever was necessary to keep myself warm.)

The house had no insulation, no electricity, no running water, no indoor plumbing, and no central heating. Flannel sheets, down comforters, wool socks, and thermal underwear were something I knew nothing about. Even now, far from snow and wind, as I sit here in Oregon, I can still feel that chill in my feet. Long, lean,

and hungry-looking I am, with not much natural insulation on these bones, growing older daily. By the time my blood is pumped from my heart down through my long body to my toes, it has cooled considerable. Take my guard down for a minute and there will be icicles on my nose.

These days I take time to teach a granddaughter, Julia, and a grandson, Jonathan, how to hammer nails, cut wood to size, and build things we need around our homes. They won't follow my path, but they will know how to fix things as they grow into adults. If they stay here on the Pacific coast, most days they can work without wearing a jacket. And me, I'm sitting here with my feet propped up near a wood fire that keeps the icicles at bay. ❁





**“We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth as ‘wild.’ Only to the white man was nature a ‘wilderness’ and only to him was the land ‘infested’ with ‘wild’ animals and ‘savage’ people. To us it was tame. Earth was beautiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery.”**

**—Luther Standing Bear, SIOUX CHIEF**

# The Soddy



**NOT EVERYONE** lives in a wood-frame house warmed by a central heating system with double-glazed windows, HardiPlank® siding, and solar panels for electricity. There are other ways to build our homes. Nipa huts, for example, are ideal for the Pacific islanders who live near the equator. Made of bamboo with a thatched roof, these huts allow breezes to pass through and ease life lived in heat that can be oppressive.

Tepee structures fashioned from long poles and covered with hides made it possible for the Native peoples of our Great Plains to take their homes with them as they followed the migrating buffalo. Mongolians also have a mobile home. The yurt has a lattice structure made of wood pieces brought from the lowlands. The traditional felt cover comes from sheep wool. A yurt can be taken apart and carried on the backs of yaks as these nomadic people follow their herds to different feeding grounds.



**The Q'ero people live in the high Andes Mountains far above the timberline. They build from local materials—rocks and grass.**

The Q'ero people live in the high Andean mountains of Peru far above the timberline. There are no trees at 13,000 ft. These descendents of the Incas build their homes out of rocks. Farther south, in the lowlands of Chile, the Mapuche live in rukas, round buildings made from the wood that's plentiful in their part of the world. Many people in El Salvador still live in their traditional earth-pole homes.

This is the way it has been throughout our long history. People need a place to live and love, a shelter where they can eat, sleep, and carry on their family activities. The Navajo with their hogans, the Inuit with their igloos, the Bedouins with their tents, and the Ndebele people with their colorfully painted homes in South Africa all built from materials at hand.

Their buzzwords were not “build locally” and “build sustainably,” but that is what they were doing. They couldn’t bring in lumber from Oregon, siding from Australia, drywall from China, and tile from Italy. The materials they were using—earth, snow, bamboo, and grass—came back year after year. They were green builders of the first order.

**AND SO IT WAS** with the birth house of my mother, Elizabeth Brennan. She was born in 1897 in a one-room sod house. It was located not far from the North Platte River (“too thin to plow, too thick to drink”) near a small town named Lisco in western Nebraska. Just a wide spot in the road until it was incorporated in 1909, Lisco was named after Rube Lisco, an early cattle rancher in the area and employer of my grandfather. Not far down river is

Chimney Rock, that landmark sandstone spire that let pioneers on the long trail to California and Oregon know where they were.

It’s important to recall that this vast inland sea of grassland was the traditional home of the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne peoples. Can any of us feel how painful and frightening it must have been for those who had lived on these plains for hundreds of years to suddenly be seen as trespassers? One day they rode freely in search of good



**Chimney Rock, a sandstone spire, greeted immigrants traveling along the North Platte River in western Nebraska in the 1800s.**

water, good hunting, and a place to camp and care for their children. The next day the prairie was being invaded by settlers who were putting up houses and fences saying this land is mine! Native people knew that they belonged to the land. They saw the land as the source of life, not profit. How could the land belong to them or someone else?

It has always seemed strange to me to think that a plot of this earth we live on could actually be owned by anyone. It's a bit like owning air. But really, can a piece of this isolated planet that exists in a galaxy of 100 billion stars be owned by me? Maybe one day someone will figure a way to charge us for the air we breathe. The earth has been in existence for 4 billion years, plus or minus, or so I am told. We as a people have been around for 250,000 years, maybe more. So who owns whom?

Earth has given us clear notice that it doesn't need us, but that it will allow us to be renters here as long as we behave ourselves. If we misbehave, we will receive an eviction notice and forfeit our cleaning deposit. As temporary residents, we have left quite a mess in our wake: foul air; toxic waste dumps; denuded, clear-cut mountains; dirt-clogged salmon streams; and melting ice caps, not to mention poverty and hunger. A pretty impressive list that may not make our landlord happy!

The Homestead Act, passed by Congress in 1862, opened up huge, virgin tracts of Native land to immigrants hungry for a place to live and put down roots. If you were 21 or over, you could settle on 160 acres, live there for five years, and be granted full ownership. This was the reason for a huge migration of people in our country. By 1900, 600,000 homestead claims had been filed. Staking a claim meant that every settler had to build some type of home on "their" land and survive through some difficult times before they became the owner. The majority of these settlers "starved out" and didn't make it beyond two years before moving