

Restoration of the Old Timer's Cabin

Tim Erb and Steve Rapisarda
Narrators

Ben Thoma
Interviewer

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Itasca State Park

Thoma: This tape is being made on the 24th of June in the Old Timer's Cabin at Itasca State Park, and uh, I have with me today uh the two gentlemen who are working on restoration of the building, a Tim Erb, that's E R B, and Steve Rapisarda, that is R A P P A I S A R I D A [correct spelling is Rapisarda]. Uh, Tim, I believe is from Detroit Lakes and Steve you're from?

Rapisarda: Bagley, area.

Thoma: Of the Bagley area. Uh, both of these fellows have worked on the other projects here in the park, such as the ice house restoration and the stonework at Douglas Lodge, the cabins, Bear Paw camp and so on. They are short of completing this project on the restoration of the Old Timer's Cabin, and I'd like to have them just briefly explain what uh, some of the things that they've done here in the past couple of weeks. So either one of you go right ahead. It should pick it up from there.

Rapisarda: Okay, this is Steve. I'm working on the log work and also the roof. Basically we put a new roof on, which are cedar taperson shingles, uh that was basically what was on the cabin originally. Also, some of the roof boards, both sides, had been replaced earlier because of decay. We replaced those also with cedar, which was original. And that takes care of the roof. Also, I guess one more thing, we put a roof cricket in by the chimney, chimney, to help with the water drainage. Now as far as the log restoration, I'll start on the inside. There wasn't a lot of work to do on the inside. Along the side, both, both sides of the chimney uh there because of the chimney leaking water, there was a lot of decay. This we filled with wood, as much as we could, and also with uh wood epoxy, liquid and uh putty filler. On the outside the putty filler is visible and that will be matched as close as possible to the log existing color. On the interior, basically all else there was, was uh loosening the windows which had been tight from debris in the window channels and stain and time moving window frames and also the door the same thing. And on the door side, there was also a log that was held up putting pressure on the window. That we relieved above the door and the window an extra hinge, and that allowed a little extra space above those for settling. That takes care of the interior. The exterior we had two log crown ends

totally replaced. That's on the corners of the cabin. They had been decayed to the point where there wasn't much left. And those we recessed about a foot into the notch, approximately halfway, scribed and inset a new log end, approximate the same size, and fastened those with fiberglass rods and epoxy to hold them in place. Now the remaining crown ends, approximately a dozen, wood plugs have been installed to take care of the decay mostly in the centers of those logs, and part of that problem was the crown ends had extended a little further than the roof line, and because of that they had decayed. Also, possibility the logs when they were put in originally, they might have had soft centers. Uh, along the chimney also on the exterior is wood putty visible. On the two upper soot logs, there had been cement poured, because of the decay, and just a point of interest, on the chimney on the right side as you look at it from the inside was a cement pour about 200 pounds, which we removed and filled in with wood and wood epoxy filler. On the door side of the cabin, the soot log was similar to a dug out canoe, full length, the 30 feet, possibly because of tarpaper that had been put between the roof boards and the log. That we, removed all the decay, filled with lumber and with epoxy, and put the roof back on the top. As far as the exterior, basically that takes care of what we did with the log work.

Thoma: Okay, thank you very much, Steve. Uh, any comments about the uh type of construction as far as the log is, log building, I'm not counting the sides now, but uh the ability of the people that were putting this together compared to the other buildings that you worked on in the park?

Rapisarda: Okay, the quality of this building appears to be super. Most of it's scribed fits are still as tight as when they were new. They done quality work on this cabin from what I can see. Uh, for this size of the log, there could have easily been a lot more trouble. Looks like they had uh technique and properties of the settling of the log building down pretty well. They even splined the chimney uh to make it more stable with the logs and in some of the logs also. The quality of the log building looks excellent.

Thoma: Okay, Steve, you've been concerned with the stonework. Would you give just a rundown on what you did there.

Erb: Okay, first of all, the joints in the, in the chimney itself were uh pretty much decayed back, almost all of them. And what I did was uh took an _____ chisel, and chiseled back every joint that's visible, and uh back to I'd approximate probably an inch to 3 inches, depending on how far back I had to go to get good, solid mortar again. And then after that process was done, I took a small sandblaster and uh blasted all the stones and all the joints and then uh after that was, after they were totally clean, then take and uh a water pressure to the rocks to uh clean them up a little farther. And then uh a uh compound, a joint compound was put on the, on the joints for added uh uh bonding of the old mortar to the new. And then went back and tuck pointed all the joints um to what you see now. And that's uh basically, oh yeah, we uh, where Steve installed the cricket, I had to uh cut into the stone and the mortar and fit flashing in there uh to stop the leaking also. So the entire chimney is reflashed also. Um, normally I'd put a sealer on to help with water uh water pressure that gets on them, but the Historical Society has decided not to do

that, to keep it as natural as possible. Back to the existing, the way it was when it was first built. The firebox was not replaced because the fire uh the fireplace probably won't be used anymore at all. Um, and I guess that's basically. I'm going to do the, the same process is going to be done to the foundation of old building 2. The cleaning and the, and the chiseling out of the old joints. I'll have to reset, there's probably 10 rocks that are gone that I will have to reset back to where they were. And then do the same process with the foundation.

Thoma: In other words, that will be a total replacement of new rocks.

Erb: Uh, well the rocks that are gone are laying around here.

Thoma: Oh, they're still here.

Erb: Yep, they're still here. So they've just fallen away and gotten kicked aside or whatever. But, uh, basically it will be just putting back what was already there.

Thoma: You worked on a number of these stone uh building or parts of the building stone. How would you compare the stonework in this building to the other ones that you've seen or worked on here in the park?

Erb: This one was actually pretty decent. Um, the exterior of the mortar was decayed somewhat but once you get back in there a little ways, it's, this chimney is real sound. Um, the craftsmanship of the, of the fireplace, especially on the inside is real nice. Um, they took a lot of care and took a lot of time to fit their stones properly. Um, so I would rate it, I would rate it real well. It's, it's uh, it's probably in the top 10 percent of ones I've done, as far as the craftsmanship of it.

Thoma: The foundation uh as you know from that little booklet uh was put in afterwards, would that have contributed anyway to the deterioration of the foundation, the fact that the stones were placed in after the building was basically completed?

Erb: I'm guessing that that's the whole uh that's the whole problem. I'm not sure how the, how far down these stones go in the foundation, but uh some of them have broken away and are just loose. And I'm guessing that's, that's because of movement underneath. That these rocks have loosened up. And uh, I have no idea how far down the rocks go. Do you have any idea, Ben?

Thoma: According to all those photos, uh, the floor we're standing on, sitting on here, that's on that footing.

Erb: Yeah.

Thoma: And the rocks are basically, from what I could tell, just on the ground. So I could see that you had a big, broken, floating slab

Erb: That's exactly what it is.

Thoma: This would cause the uh the cracking to take place.

Erb: Yeah, and over the years these rocks have settled. There's some humongous rocks on the outside that are, I'm sure they must weigh, I'd guess at least a thousand pounds, and after so many years just sitting on the ground, they're going to settle. I'd assume that they're probably done settling now so once this is uh retuck pointed, a guy should be all right, I would think.

Thoma: What would you two say if you'd expect the life span of this building now in terms of, if there's no further or major work done? Other than keeping a roof on it, that's absolutely essential, I realize, but other than that, how long would you suspect this building should still be servicable? Any idea?

Rapisarda: I would say this building, if it's kept dry, weeks lasting. [Laughter] I would say it'd last another hundred years, if the,

Erb: Yeah.

Rapisarda: if it's kept dry. It's the most important thing.

Erb: I would say keep that roof on there

Rapisarda: Yeah.

Erb: and there should be very little damage again, except for the problem with the trees being close.

Rapisarda: Yeah.

Erb: Which effects the log work in a big way.

Rapisarda: Yeah. It is awful damp back here. It takes a long time for things to dry. The fireplace, I noticed, on the outside was full of mold, or kind of a moss, a green mold/moss whatever, and that's from not drying out fast. It must sit there damp for a long time.

Thoma: Well any other comments either of you would have regarding this project?

Rapisarda: Armor on the door, very impressive. All iron made by a blacksmith obviously, and uh, not only interesting to look at but functional. Very, very crafty. I haven't seen that anywhere else.

Thoma: Uh, the damper on the fireplace, that's just uh not going to be used, so that's just

Rapisarda: It's, it's stuck open right now so it's been cemented open.

Thoma: Oh.

Rapisarda: For the fact that in case they have a fire ever was. It's non-functional, but the damper it's, it's completely deteriorated in there. Rusted, and uh, it's non-functional so I just pushed it open and now if ever there was a fire in there, it's going to get as much draft as possible. It doesn't seem to draft real well.

Thoma: No, I know that. We had a fire out here one time

Rapisarda: Yeah.

Thoma: in the fireplace, and it just doesn't draft.

Rapisarda: No.

Thoma: And I think it was full draft or a half hour with the fire in there than it was before.

Rapisarda: Yeah, yeah.

Thoma: Okay, well I certainly want to thank you for taking your time to get these comments down on tape and hopefully you might see them some day in print.

[End interview]