

Meet Peter Papay of Penn Big Bed Slate Quarry Old Slaters Story

Written by Peter Papay

Born and raised in Slatington, the son of a quarry operator where my grandfather, dad, four uncles and two aunts were all working in the family slate business, me and most of my cousins could not help but learn about slate.

At 10 years old my dad said, "You may as well come up on the roof with me and learn how to use the slate we make. At 10 years old, on top of a three story home, looking at the sights from the catwalks; FANTASTIC! I was in heaven. My dad already knew I was not afraid of heights from me being in our quarry, but he still tied me to a safety rope so I couldn't play Superman.

First he showed me how to walk valleys and use a chicken ladder to spread your weight and be careful not to break slates. The tool I thought was a sword turned out to be a ripper and the pointy tomahawk was really a slate hammer. He repaired one slate while I watched, then he said it was my turn. I learned to repair slate using the bib style but he explained how to use hooks, also.

The house was built in 1908 and had a solid boarded deck, space between each board to allow air flow and no felt paper. He said, "Learn from what you see and how well it is done. The man who built this house was one of Slatington's first quarry operators and he knew what he was doing." Thirty- some odd years later I would look up at my first repair and remember what I learned and how I learned it. The roof of that old house was still in very good condition when the house was tom down in 1997 to make a parking lot.

The point learned after forty some years in the slate business is: Rough cut lumber, air space, copper nails, copper valleys, copper ridge caps and slate all go together very well. Even if there are other ways to slate a home, why change a 100-year- old way of installing slate? That old home had 52 rooms and I might add "no-leaks." A few repairs were made mostly because of the beautiful rows of green maples that my mother would not let dad cut down. A chimney sweep broke a few another time and when TV came in the fifties the antenna man got hollered at too.

Slate roofing is my area, it seems to be an art passed on from older man to a younger one. The truth is almost every home- owner knew how to do his own slate work so it seemed there was not too much of a demand for slate roofers.

Here we are in 2002 and it is becoming obvious that we may need some older men to teach some younger men the right and wrong way to lay a slate roof. There are many good slate roofers but not always in all areas. Sometimes when a roofer has to travel too far to a job the job becomes too costly. I think instructional videos with the do's and don't literature will be

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welcome to roofers in many parts of many states. The idea is one of the subjects of the National Slate Association and mine too. Hopefully it will happen.

(Peter Papay is president of Penn Big Bed Slate Company, a member of the NSA).