



SCOTT MASON/The Winchester Star

Vintage Inc. carpenter Tom Halsey of Winchester, who holds a degree in biology and chemistry from Principia College in Illinois, cuts a piece of lumber at a house his company is in the process of remodeling.

Hammers and humanities

Vintage Inc.: 'worldly guys' who like to build things

By **TERESA DUNHAM**
The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — The banter between Vintage Inc. carpenters is unlike anything you'd expect on a typical job site.

These guys bring up Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov and the prolific English writer D.H. Lawrence on their lunch break.

And they might even throw in a few philosophical jokes while swinging their hammers.

Among their ranks are two biologists, a Princeton University graduate, an English scholar, and a philosopher.

"We're all well-educated, well-spoken, fairly worldly guys," said carpenter Tom Halsey, 44, who lives off

Senseny Road and holds a degree in biology and chemistry from Principia College in Illinois.

Yet, despite the crew's high education, they're not pretentious — and they're definitely not boring.



"Two plus two IS four. Just leave it at that," Halsey recently joked to lead carpenter Barry Phillips, 52, who studied economics and philosophy at St. John's College in Annapolis, Md.

A graduate of James Wood High School, Phillips' philosophy degree makes him notorious for questioning everything.

"[Philosophy] warps you for life. You're always asking why," Phillips said.

He even answers questions ("So why would a philoso-

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pher want to swing a hammer?") with questions ("Did you ever try to get a job in philosophy?").

Basically, Phillips said, he just enjoys the work.

"I don't think any of us can explain why we like swinging hammers," said Phillips, a trim and cabinet setter. "I don't think I'm going to get rich doing this."

For some carpenters, he reflected, swinging a hammer is all they know how to do. And those without a choice sometimes don't like the job.

"We've had other careers," said Phillips, who has also worked as a technical writer.

His wife is a professor of New Testament theology, but he still prefers getting some sawdust on his hands.

"If you're going to cover God's green earth with a house, it had better be a good one," said Phillips.

The Vintage Inc. men operate a small shop in a brick warehouse at 600 N. Loudoun St.

But most of their working hours since February have been spent at a job site at 309 W. Clifford St. across from the former hospital on Cork Street.

The beautiful 100-year-old house belongs to Richard and Melanie Lewis, who decided that it was time for some renovations.

"Since I was a teenager, I liked this work, but I kind of denied it," said company owner David Logan, 39, as he gave a grand tour of the project that's expected to be completed by November.

His crew was busy rebuilding the second floor and converting the top floor into a bedroom. The top floor is dramatically different now, he said, since it used to serve as dormitories for nurses who worked across the street.

"It's historically interesting but not historically listed. The most fun projects are historic," said Logan, who started the company in Loudoun County 10 years ago.

He decided to move his business to Winchester two years ago because of the city's family atmosphere and historical appeal.

Specializing in carpentry and tile, the Vintage Inc. group has completed roughly 30 big historically related projects and more than 100 total jobs.

They restored J.J. Smith's cabin on Fairmont Avenue, and they would like to restore the bell tower at Christ Episcopal Church if the congregation gives them the go-ahead.

Before becoming a carpenter, Logan earned his biology degree at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg and studied under a British chemist whom he considered "just brilliant."

He eventually found a job doing environmental work — but he always had construction in the back of his mind.

"I decided to quit my job," he said.

Logan joined up with a carpentry company, although he wished he could use higher-quality building materials.

"It's fun to build things and feel like they're going to last," he said.

He also wished for a different group dynamic, so he ended up starting his own business.

Along the way, the universe somehow united him with other educated carpenters who enjoy historical restoration and renovation projects.

And that's how the current group at Vintage Inc. was born.

"They're great carpenters. They're really fast," said Logan, adding that they make all of their own trim, cabinets, and doors. "Our jobs tend to go very smoothly."

Part of their carpentry success comes from knowledge that the men apply from their respective educational backgrounds.

Logan and Halsey, who both worked construction to earn money through college, can apply the Scientific Method of problem solving by taking apart a complex carpentry problem until they find a basic solution.

And Phillips' ability to ask "why" helps him figure out the reason a historic structure was built in a certain way.

After all, many old buildings were constructed by farmers who had many different methods of making the same structure. Some of their approaches were more logical than others, he said.

That's why Phillips is always thinking: "How can we do this? How can we do this better?"

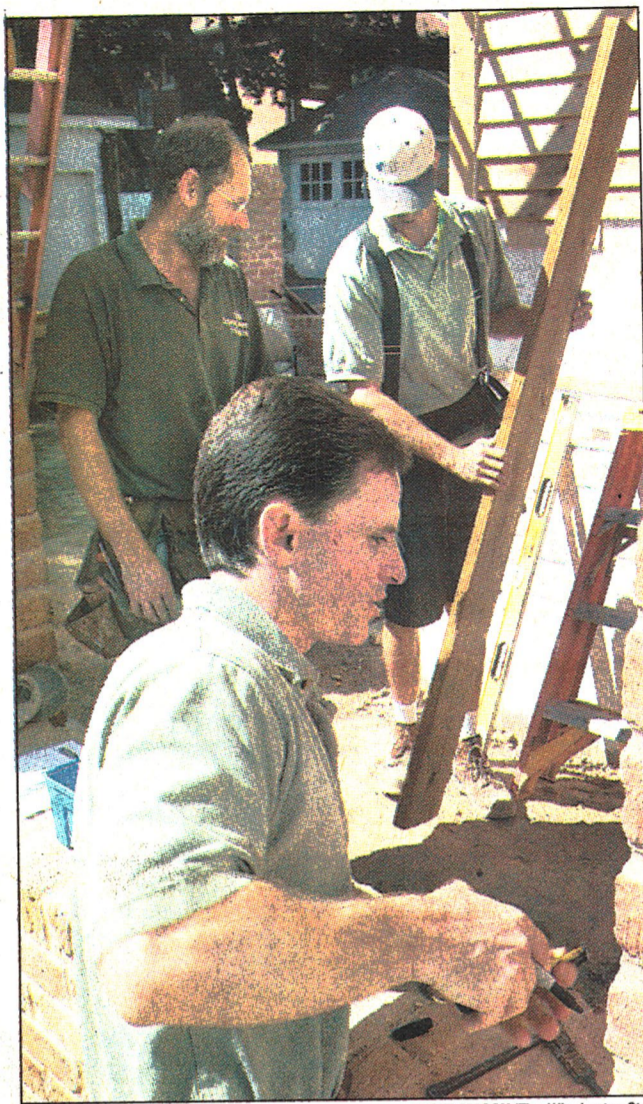
They also get creative, always brainstorming and designing along the way.

"It's intellectually stimulating," said Logan. "It's constant learning because these jobs are complicated. We never do the same thing twice."

Just one example of their creativity in the Clifford Street home is their approach to bathroom design for the Lewis family.

Mr. Lewis is 6-feet-3-inches tall, so his cabinet and light are built higher than that for Mrs. Lewis.

If Logan didn't have a college background, he said, "I don't



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Vintage Inc. carpenters David Logan (center), Mark Brewer (left), and Tom Halsey build a new porch at the rear of a house that the Winchester-based company is remodeling.

"Remember that we are all doing this for the love of history and building and carpentry," he said. "We are really not snobs!"

Someone trained in the humanities can't just walk onto a building site without experience and expect to be good at it.

"I was told by the boss, 'I don't think you can do this work,'" said Mark Brewer, 49, recalling his first construction job.

The former English major at the University of Arkansas had to do plenty of observing and hands-on learning with master carpenters to get good at the job. The rest of the Vintage Inc. crew learned that way too.

"I like to work outside and working with my hands," said Brewer, who specializes in trim.

The Middle Road resident's ability to work with his hands surely would have impressed American writers like Henry David Thoreau.

Besides, he said: "There was nothing else to do as an English major [except] swing a hammer or flip burgers."

And what about Princeton University graduate, 53-year-old Steve LaDrew of Maurertown?

His alma mater may be Ivy League, but his degree in architecture isn't such a stretch for the carpentry field.

He applied to Princeton as a political science major, enrolled as an English major, and then switched to architecture when he realized that creative writing wasn't his favorite mode of expression.

"When I got out of school, I went to work in the construction business," he said.

LaDrew works exclusively for a smaller section of the Vintage Inc. company called Period Woodworking Co.

Every time he turns his creations over to the Vintage Inc. workers, he feels confident because of their attention to detail.

At other places, he could've spent a lot of time making beautiful cabinets only to have workers bang them up by the time they were installed.

For this company, details can be as specific as handmade nails, hand-scraped wood to leave out machine marks, and blown glass for the windows. It all depends on the project and what their client wants.

"They actually take the time and care to do it right," LaDrew said.