

In the News

How We Got Here: *JLC* at 25

N*ew England Builder* — as *JLC* was originally called — was inspired by a cluster of five or six tables at the Town and Country Restaurant in the northeastern Vermont town of Lyndonville, recalls Mike Reitz, the magazine's founder and first editor. Because it was just

down the street from the lumberyard, the restaurant was a popular early-morning gathering place for local GCs and subs. Reitz was then working as a carpenter (“I specialized in construction defects,” he says), and he'd found that in addition to being a good place to eat breakfast, the T&C was a valuable educational resource — just about the only one available to an aspiring builder in that area during the late 1970s.

As he noted in a recent e-mail conversation, it was “the only place where you stood half a chance of learn-

ing anything honest, practical, or useful about a problem or a solution with a product or a technique. Being a genuine rocket scientist and a deep and insightful analyst of the human condition, I was eventually inspired to observe, ‘Wouldn't it be cool if we had a bigger space and more people?’”

Farmers, builders, and an Underwood by lamplight.

What builders really needed, Reitz concluded, was a publication that provided straight talk, concise information, and a minimum of self-promotion and fluff. After mulling things over for a few months and noting that an information tabloid called *New England Farmer* seemed to be making a go of it, he decided to take the plunge. “There were a lot more small builders around than small farmers,” he says. “They all needed good information to stay in business, and there were a lot of advertisers who wanted to sell them stuff.” It was, he hoped, a winning combination.

After soliciting a few manuscripts from friends, Reitz

sold some ads, moved a rotary-dial phone and an Underwood manual typewriter onto his kitchen table, and began assembling the first issue. The task was complicated by the fact that the house didn't even have electricity (not an unusual situation in that part of Vermont at the time, it should be said), so Reitz and his wife, Winslow Tuttle, worked by the light of kerosene lamps. The October 1982 issue of *NEB* — a 16-page tabloid — contained roughly an article per page, including features on kitchen and bathroom design, vapor barriers, solar energy, and insulating an old stone cellar. Sprinkled throughout were a dozen or so ads, mostly for local establishments.

Masthead magic. For builders just getting started in business and hoping to land that first good job, a certain amount of resume-padding has always been considered fair play (assuming, of course, that the quality of the work is good), and for its first few years, *NEB's* masthead displayed a similar level of creativity. Reitz beefed up the editorial staff with several imaginary members, including sales representative “Peter Thompson,” production editor “Steve Green,” and circulation editor “Diane Bennett.”

“Our total revenue that first year was about \$9,800,” he says. “I did the accounting myself the first few years in a Dome book.”

Arson and murder. Reader response to the new publication was strong from the beginning. By the spring of 1984, *NEB* had moved from Reitz's home into first-floor office space in a 100-year-old brick building called the Sullivan Block in the town of St. Johnsbury, Vt. With more than 11,000 subscribers, the publication was on the verge of turning a profit for the first time.

Then, just before dawn on June 18, the Sullivan Block went up in flames. The four-and-a-half-story building was completely gutted by the fire. Investigators later discovered that Gregory Reed, a local businessman and state legislator, had hired two young men to torch the old place, hoping that the fire would spread to an adjoining structure that he owned, spinning off an insurance windfall. In a shocking turn of events still well remembered in the area, Reed later shot one of the



In the News

arsonists to death and buried the body in a nearby gravel pit to prevent him from talking to police.

Eventually Reed was convicted of the crime and given a long prison sentence. But for *NEB*, the fire appeared to be the end of the line. All the magazine's equipment and files were destroyed, including photographs, completed articles, and story leads. Reed's business had been well-insured, but *NEB* was not: Although Reitz and a local insurance agent had been working out the details of an office-contents policy for several weeks, the meeting to close the deal happened to be scheduled for June 20 — two days after the fire.

The biggest loss, however, was the thick stack of 3x8 computer cards containing the *NEB* subscriber list. Without them, the prospect of getting the magazine up and running again seemed remote.

Retrieved from the ashes. Remarkably enough, three days after the fire, as a backhoe cleared away the rubble, Reitz and Tuttle uncovered the badly damaged but recognizable remains of the subscriber cards.

"They looked bad and they smelled bad," Reitz says. "They'd been in a water-filled basement under three collapsed stories of hot debris, so they'd cooked into a kind of a stew."

Nevertheless, after carefully separating and drying the salvaged cards, he and his small staff found that even those that were little more than flakes of ash could be deciphered when lightly misted with water and held up to the light at just the right angle. Eight weeks of mind-numbing effort later, about two-thirds of the list had been restored — just enough to justify trying to get the

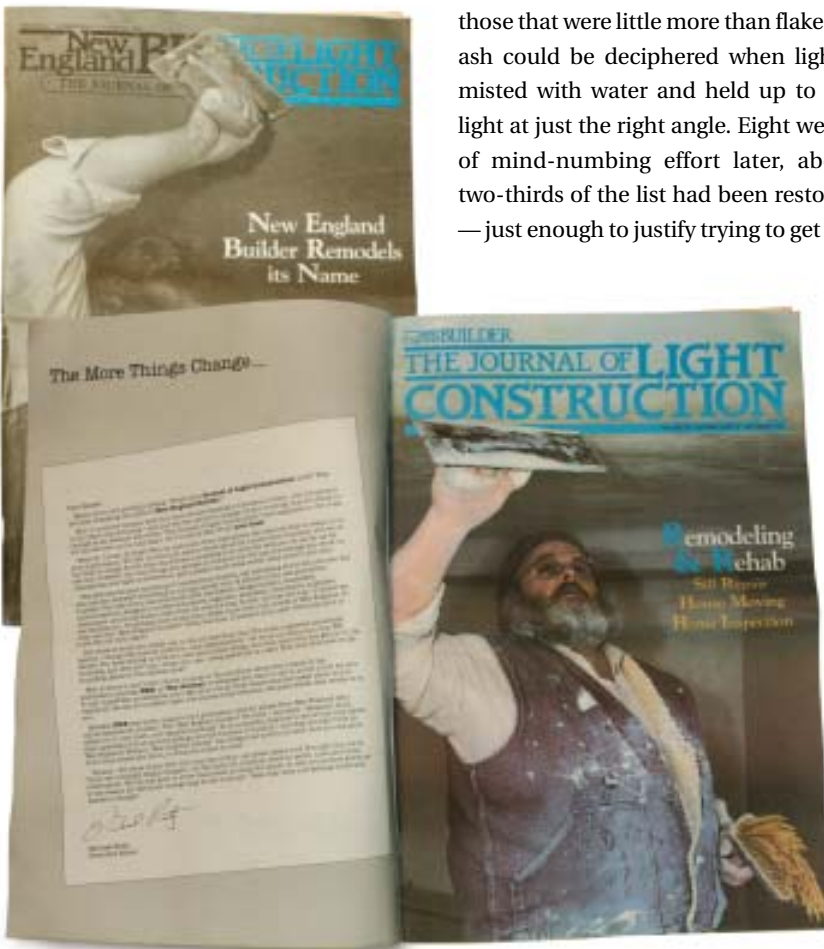
magazine back on its feet.

Fire-sale special. With no insurance money to bankroll the project, Reitz appealed directly to the magazine's readers. In late August, subscribers on the reconstructed list (most of whom had no idea why their July and August issues had never arrived) received a much-abbreviated special issue of *NEB* — a single folded sheet containing three short articles and a half-dozen photos describing the fire and its aftermath.

A two-column item next to the central fold urged readers to help the magazine update and correct its mailing list and offered two "fire-sale special" subscription rates: two years for \$10 (the cost of a one-year subscription at that time), or a lifetime subscription for \$100. Forty-six readers responded with \$100 checks (see "Catching Up With the Lifers," page 28), and *New England Builder* pushed on.

Name change. Major changes lay ahead: By 1988, having expanded beyond its geographical limits, *NEB* changed its name to *The Journal of Light Construction*. "Everyone hated it, thought it was a dumb idea," Reitz says. In 1994, the original tabloid gave way to a magazine format. And in 1999, current publisher Hanley-Wood bought the publication from the Builderburg Group, the name under which *NEB* had incorporated 17 years before.

Despite these various upheavals, *NEB* and *JLC* have continued to hold fast to Reitz's original vision of a place where builders could find answers and solutions to real questions and problems. And today, 25 years after that first issue took shape in a kerosene-lit kitchen, the magazine continues to rely primarily on its community of readers for some of the best practical information available anywhere. — *Jon Vara*



Catching Up With the Lifers

When *New England Builder* — seriously strapped for cash in the aftermath of the June 1984 fire that destroyed its office — offered its readers \$100 lifetime subscriptions, few could have had reason to

think that the publication would last another year, let alone deep into the next century. But the building trades are richly supplied with optimistic risk-takers (those who don't meet that description soon find easier ways to earn a living), so perhaps it's not surprising that nearly 50 readers decided to write the check and hope for the best.

But who, exactly, are those *JLC* lifers? How many of them are still receiving the magazine every month? Where do they live and what are

they doing today? As *JLC*'s 25th anniversary approached, we decided to tease their names from the subscriber list and see how many we could reach by telephone. Here's what we learned:

- Of the 46 original lifetime subscribers, 21 are still on the *JLC* mailing list. There's no way to know what became of the rest. Some have probably died, others moved without leaving a new address, and some may have been accidentally dropped from the list (though any who called to notify us were quickly reinstated).
- As you might expect of subscribers to a magazine called *New England Builder*, more than half the lifers have mailing addresses in one of the six New England states: Seven hail from Massachusetts, two from New Hampshire, and one each from Maine, Connecticut, Vermont, and Rhode Island. On the other hand, the presence of three Pennsylvanians and two New Yorkers on the list — along

with one lifer each in Colorado, California, and Florida — suggests that readers knew that the magazine was moving toward a national audience years before *NEB* made that wider focus official by changing its name to *The Journal of Light Construction*. (Well, okay, our reader in Colorado moved there from Massachusetts sometime in the '90s, but he brought his subscription with him.)

- Almost all the lifers are still actively building or somehow involved in the building industry. The 16 lifers we managed to reach by phone included four builders or remodelers; four construction consultants, home inspectors, or energy wonks; three green builders specializing in energy-efficient designs; two cabinetmakers; one home builder/developer; one slate-roofing and sheet-metal contractor; and one homeowner.
- Four lifers own or work for companies with 25 or more employees, while three work alone. At least one has an architecture degree, and several have taught woodworking or carpentry at a college level. Three or four now have sons or daughters who work with them or are in a building-related business of their own.
- About half the lifers report that they've saved all their back issues and refer back to them at least occasionally.
- Two readers report that they received their lifetime subscriptions as a gift, one from an employer and another from a grateful customer. The rest, however, shelled out their own money. When reminded of what they'd paid, many expressed surprise that they'd had the nerve to part with 100 1984 dollars — which, according to the Consumer Price Index inflation calculator, would be worth just about double that today.

"I look at those forms the Social Security Administration sends that list your income over the years, and the early '80s were just pathetic," one lifer recalled. "It must have taken a lot for me to write that check." Another noted that his brother talked him into subscribing. "Money was a little tight then," another said simply, "but I really wanted to see you guys succeed." — J.V.

