

One Carpenter's

An aerial, black and white photograph of a city, likely Los Angeles, showing a dense residential area with a river winding through it. The background features hazy mountains under a clear sky. The foreground is partially obscured by dark, leafy branches.

Still driving nails at 75,
a veteran framer recalls the postwar housing boom of the 1950s
and how it changed the way we build

BY LARRY HAUN

Life



I was born in 1931 on the high plains of western Nebraska, an isolated prairie where the only constant was the Wyoming wind. We lived in an uninsulated farmhouse with no central heat. Three feet from the kitchen stove, and you were freezing. Whatever the temperature was outside, that was the temperature in our bedrooms, even when mother warmed the sheets with her flat iron. My strongest memory of that time is that I was always cold. Sure, we had summer days. I would huddle on the lee side of the house and try to warm my deepest parts. The chill never left.

Our nearest hardware store was 30 miles away, so when something broke, we fixed it. Tools were as much a part of my life as food, and I learned how to use them before I knew how to read. My siblings and I made our toys from apple and orange crates, and we cobbled together forts from wood scraps and nails salvaged from a barn that had burned to the ground.

When I turned 16, I went to work driving spikes into railroad ties, and the next year, I worked on my first house. A neighbor had ordered a two-bedroom house from a catalog. All of the bundled pieces were shipped in by rail and then brought to the building site by a team of horses and a wagon. A master car-

Today, the San Fernando Valley looks a lot different than it did in 1950, when Larry Haun first moved there and started building houses. As he puts it, "We had 345 square miles of valley floor on which to build and 25 years of stored-up energy from the Depression and the big war to get on with the job."

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Southern California, 1950. In the five years after World War II, 250,000 new residents flocked to Los Angeles in search of warm weather and good jobs. To meet the unprecedented demand for housing, builders took a cue from assembly lines in Detroit and started specializing in everything from floor-nailing to roof-cutting to door-hanging. Instead of the work moving on conveyor belts, the workers arrived in pickup trucks and station wagons and rolled from house to house, street to street, and block to block.

penyer and I unwrapped the bundles and nailed all of the pieces together.

Finishing high school in 1949 freed me to head south, where I had heard the sun shone most every day. I went to work for a contractor in Albuquerque building houses, foundation through cabinets, for 87¢ an hour. Floors were sheathed diagonally with 1x6 boards. Every cut on every piece of sheathing was made with a hand-saw. The only power tool on the job was a tablesaw. Six months later, the house still wasn't finished.

In 1950, I moved to Los Angeles. I found work building houses and began my studies at UCLA. I was in paradise. In the first year, I never once wore a coat to work. By 1951, when I turned 20, I was a journeyman carpenter in the union. What I didn't realize at the time was that one of the greatest revolutions in construction our country has ever seen was about to break wide open.

Vets created a huge demand for new housing

With the end of the war, thousands upon thousands of returning veterans, both men and women, needed a place to live. Between 1945 and 1950, nearly 250,000 new residents had moved into the San Fernando Valley, suburban Los Angeles. By 1960, another 450,000 people had arrived. What they found was good weather, lots of jobs, and a housing crisis. What we had was 345 square miles of valley floor on which to build and 25 years of stored-up energy from the Depression and the big war to help us get on with the job.

My older brother, Jim, was able to use the GI Bill to move into a new three-bedroom house in 1951 for \$400

down. With the median house price around \$9,000, his monthly payment was \$65, which included taxes and insurance. For the first time in our nation's history, masses of ordinary workers could afford to buy their own homes; it was the American dream fulfilled.

But the demand for new houses was so enormous that it required revolutionary thinking about how to build them. At the time, houses were built by general contractors who might finish only five or six homes a year. Carpenters used hand tools to cut dimensional lumber and hammers to nail everything together.

Given the size of the job that had to be done, we couldn't afford to work that way. We didn't have time to build one house at a time. We needed to find ways to build 500 houses at once. Henry Ford had proved you could make Model Ts very quickly on a production line. We were going to take the production line to the home-building industry, and it would require us to learn to work differently—not necessarily faster, but a lot more efficiently.

We changed the way we worked

My wages as a journeyman carpenter in the early '50s were less than \$2 an hour. Jim and I found a builder in the valley who was willing to let us do his framing for a flat, per-house fee. For \$90, we would frame a 900-sq.-ft. house on a slab. It had two bedrooms, one bathroom, and a gable roof. A three-bedroom, 1100-sq.-ft. version went for \$120, which included setting door jambs and window frames, putting siding on the front, and making it ready for stucco on the outside and plaster on the inside. My younger brother, Joe, joined us, and soon the three of us were framing one of these houses every day, nearly doubling our wages.

In 1953, Jim got a contractor's license, and we became a union shop. We were specialists, and in time, we became one of the biggest framing subcontractors in southern California. At one point, we were sending out 1,000 sawblades every week for resharpening. (If you hit an old-growth knot in a piece of Douglas fir, you had to change blades.)

We weren't alone in taking this path. To compete, you had to specialize. We became house framers, and in busy times, we hired pieceworkers who had subspecialties like roof-cutting or joisting.

As specialists, we got pretty fast—and so did everybody else. When I started out as a carpenter, I was expected to

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bungalows. We were building solid tract houses that working-class families could afford to buy.

hang eight doors a day. With a helper and the advantage of production tools, my friends Al and Royal Schieffer could hang nearly that many in an hour. They hung doors on valley jobs for 30 years, maybe more.

Single houses now could be framed, ready for drywall inside and stucco outside, by two or three carpenters in a day or so. But to produce houses at that rate, we had to look hard at every step of the process. Every time we found a way to save a few steps or a few minutes, we adopted it.

When I first began framing, for instance, I laid out a common rafter with a framing square and made the plumb cuts at each end and the bird's-mouth cut at the plate line. Then I used this rafter as a pattern for the rest of the rafters. I laid the pattern on one 2x at a time, marked the length and bird's-mouth cut, then made the cuts with a handsaw.

Several years later, I was cutting the same roofs in an hour or two. I made low, long sawhorses on which I could rack up hundreds of common rafters upside down and on edge. I snapped three chalklines on the stock to mark the ridge cut, the tail cut, and the bird's-mouth cut. Then I could make the cuts with special tools, one pass on

each chalkline (photo p. 101). Getting the rafters in place took longer than marking and cutting them to length.

Building materials changed, too

Materials changed, though not always for the better. I miss working with old-growth Douglas fir. It is such beautiful wood. We used to get 2x4 studs on which you could count 100 growth rings. Today, our fir framing lumber often has no more than three or four growth rings per inch. It's little wonder we use manufactured wood.

Before plywood came along, we used 1x6 sheathing to cover floors, walls, and roofs, but it was somewhat dangerous. Most of this material was utility grade, which meant that it could have large knots. Walking across a newly laid subfloor was like walking through a minefield, especially if you had a load of studs on your shoulder. Step on a big knot, and down you went. The sharp edges of a broken knot could rake holes in your body. Fifty years later, I still have visible scars on my lower legs from leaving behind some skin and blood after I broke through a knotty board.

So I was happy when plywood arrived on the job site in the late 1950s. Now we could cover the floor with big

Pacific Palisades, Calif. By 1951, Larry Haun (left) had given up the Sears bib overalls, like those worn by his brother Jim (right), in favor of jeans and a cloth apron, which allowed more freedom of movement. In the next few years, he would buy his first leather nail bags from a local shoe-repair shop.



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sheets and not be fearful of injury from poor-quality sheathing. But the whole idea of floors sheathed in wood didn't last long. Soil permitting, it was much quicker to build on a concrete slab. If the slab was poured in the morning, I could snap chalklines in the afternoon and start framing walls the next morning.

Backyard welding creates the first California framing hammers

Although I missed wearing the white carpenter's overalls I used to buy at Sears, they were one of the first things that had to go. They had a dozen pockets and offered some protection from both the weather and from job-site scrapes and abrasions. What they didn't offer was the freedom of movement I got with a pair of jeans and a cloth nail apron. I wore the cloth apron for a few months, but I couldn't get my big hand in the nail pockets without having to straighten up every time I wanted to grab a handful of nails.

Then I noticed that some of the pieceworkers were wearing leather belts with a hammer loop and two easy-to-reach leather bags worn on the back. These first nail bags were made at a local shoe-repair shop. By 1955, I was wearing this uniform, along with most framers. In the early 1960s, I added suspenders to take some weight off my waist.

The curved-claw 16-oz. hammer has a long history, but it wasn't what I needed. Try a Plumb rigging hatchet (photo facing page). Just feel it. Here was the tool I needed. It had a 28-oz. head; a grooved face; a long, flat 18-in. handle; and perfect balance. I understand that it got its name from being used to set up rigs that were drilling for oil.

The good and the bad part about this tool was its hatchet blade. The sharp blade was handy for chopping out 1x6 flooring around plumbing pipes. But then one day I cut my forehead with the hatchet and left some blood on the job site. It also didn't work well when you needed to pull a nail.

In 1954, I saw a joister (a pieceworker putting floor joists on framed walls) using a remodeled Plumb hatchet that had claws welded to the hammer part. I took my Plumb tool home and cut off the hatchet blade with a hacksaw. I had an old Estwing hammer that

supplied the claws. I took the pieces to a friend who had an electric arc welder in his garage, and he put the parts together. Although my hammer was a rough-looking tool, it was now safer to use, and I could drive framing nails easily with one lick. The straight-claw, long-handle California framer was born.

When I started out as an apprentice carpenter, I had several sharp handsaws that I carried in my toolbox. But by 1951, I had bought my first power saw (photo below). It was a pretty dangerous-looking tool with a guard over the top of the blade but none on the bottom. That same year, I bought a used worm-drive Skilsaw 77 for \$85. In time, that saw became an extension of my arm. Eventually, I got my hands on a circular saw with a 16-in. blade that could make the ridge and tail cuts on rafters. Common rafter-cutting projects that took days now could be done in an hour or so.

The art of driving nails

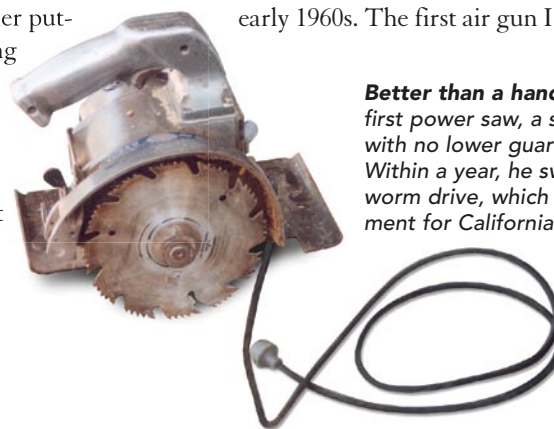
Most of our nailing was done by hand, so I became a master nailer, which is as much art as skill, like dancing. To avoid nailing floors on my knees, I made a nail buggy, a 16-in. square piece of plywood with small wheels mounted on the bottom. On one side, I fixed a small bread tray to hold nails. Sitting on this buggy, I could grab a handful of nails, push myself backward on a sheathed floor, and drive nails through the 1xs or plywood and into the joists. Finger out a nail, set it, drive. Before long, I could drive nails almost as fast as today's nail guns.

The first pneumatic nailer on our job sites in the early '50s was a "walking nailer" by Nu-Matic Nailer of Los Angeles. It was a production tool, operated by a person standing upright while nailing off floors and low-pitched roofs. Four hundred or 500 regular 8d nails straight out of the box were put in a tray, then dropped down a tube, one by one, to a driving pin. At the bottom of the tube was a loop through which you slipped your foot. This tool allowed you to walk along, driving nails through the floor into the joists. A good operator could easily nail off 7000 sq. ft. to 8000 sq. ft. of floor or roof in a day.

Regular handheld nail guns were not available until the early 1960s. The first air gun I had was actually a stapler



State-of-the-art nailing in 1959. The first pneumatic nailer was the "walking nailer" made by Nu-Matic Nailer. After filling the hopper with up to 500 nails, the operator slipped his foot into the loop and, walking along, fired nails as he went. A skilled operator could nail off 7000 sq. ft. in a day and, according to the brochure, could work on roof pitches up to 6-in-12.



Better than a handsaw. In 1951, Larry got his first power saw, a scary-looking sidewinder with no lower guard, made by Sioux Tools. Within a year, he switched to a Skil Model 77 worm drive, which became standard equipment for California tract builders.



Evolution of the framing hammer. Because the traditional 16-oz. hammer wasn't adequate, some carpenters started framing with Plumb's long-handle 28-oz. rigging hatchet. When they tired of the occasional bloody forehead, carpenters got local welders to cut off the blade and attach a pair of straight claws. The design lives on in hammers such as Vaughan's new Blue Max.

used to nail floor and roof sheathing. It wasn't until about 1962 that Paslode came out with a good 8d nail gun called the "gun nailer." Their 16d nail gun, The Stallion, was cumbersome and jammed frequently. So we continued to nail walls together by hand until around 1970, when better 16d guns were available.

Before any of these developments had taken place, we used ordinary bright nails. We bought them by the truckload. In the early days, they were delivered in 100-lb. kegs shaped like small barrels. Later, they started coming in 50-lb. boxes.

Although these nails hold well, they're hard to drive with one lick. So once they arrived at the shop, I would treat them with a gas-wax process. I took a 5-gal. bucket of gasoline and set it in the sun. Once the gas was warm, I dropped in a bar of paraffin. After the wax melted, I would open a box of nails, pour in a bit of the gas wax, and shake the nails around in the box. The solution would cover the nails with a thin coat of wax, and the gas would evaporate. Other people used dishwashing soap.

These nails went into wood like a hot knife through butter. One lick, and a 16d was home. Building inspectors wondered whether gas-waxed nails had the holding power of unwaxed nails. I had to explain to them that most nails in a framed wall hold in shear and not in tension. Beyond that, once the nail was driven, the wax would dry and give the nail holding power much like a regular nail. The industry responded later with green sinkers, 8d and 16d nails coated with a thin layer of vinyl.

Some changes came hard

As you can imagine, these changes didn't arrive without some resistance. One of the biggest defenders of the status quo was, unfortunately, the carpenters' union. The group feared that change would mean less work for its members. I remember a union business agent visiting our job site in 1954. He asked to see my long-handle hammer. He walked to a saw and cut off several inches of the handle so that it would comply with union rules. I went home that evening and put on an even longer handle.

There's an old saying, "You can cut the flowers, but you can't hold back the spring." We couldn't meet the housing crisis using the old rules. Change was inevitable.

During those days, I used to hear folks say, "We don't build houses like we used to." Well, that observation was true. We actually built them better. I have torn down and remodeled enough old houses to know that structurally,



One at a time takes too long. The demand for housing was so great in the 1950s that tract builders used every trick they could to build faster and more efficiently. Cutting multiples was a common theme. Here, an entire roof's worth of rafters has been ganged up, and Larry is cutting the bird's mouths using a worm-drive saw with a swing table.

the houses that we built were generally better than the ones built before the war. In the old houses, floor and ceiling joists frequently spanned distances that were too great. Wall bracing was often nonexistent. Door headers could be as simple as a 2x4 run in flat. So what was lost in this massive building boom was not quality. What was left behind was all the handcrafted details that take time to create.

We weren't building California bungalows or Victorian gingerbread houses. We were building solid tract houses that working-class families could afford to buy. And you know what? More than 50 years later, despite frequent earthquakes, those houses are still there. Hundreds of thousands of them. □

Larry Haun lives in Coos Bay, Ore., and even today, at age 75, he can outwork anybody on the *Fine Homebuilding* staff.

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