HOW TO BUILD A STONE WALL
Homer D. Babbidge, Jr.

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"He will not go behind his father's saying,
"And he likes having thought of it so well
"He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'"

Robert Frost wrote "Mending Wall" a dozen years or more before I was born, and probably thirty years before I discovered it. To me, it was brand new, an exciting find, and in my adolescent exile from New England, a source of comfort and reassurance. It conjured up for me memories of a land I missed, a warm, welcoming landscape of human scale. I remember clearly coming back to New England to go to college. Having sat up all night on what the world knew as a "day coach," and having left the Grand Central Station at dawn, I caught sight of the first stone wall I'd seen in years. I felt I was home again; home in the land of steady habits, a land of ordered, mutually respectful relationships symbolized by those walls. If there was anyone awake on the New Haven that morning, he heard me say aloud, "Good fences make good neighbors."

It was still another decade before I discovered I'd never really read the poem - not, at least, as Mr. Frost intended it to be read. I went one evening, as the most junior of the Fellows of Pierson College, to hear Mr. Frost, then the Senior Fellow in point of age, read a selection of his works.
And I heard him in shocked disbelief, as he read "Mending Wall"; as he ridiculed his farm neighbor, and as he recited with nothing less than contempt, the line I most revered, "good fences make good neighbors." It came out as a trite hand-me-down; a shallow remark mimicked by a thoughtless man, who "moves in darkness" and does not look behind "his father's saying."

Mr. Frost, it turned out, seemed not to love walls as I did. He didn't see in them - even symbolically - inherent qualities of virtue and beauty. He asked questions about walls, troubling questions.

"Before I built a wall I'd ask to know "What I was walling in or walling out, "And to whom I was like to give offense."

The "something there is that doesn't love a wall" goes unidentified in the poem, but Frost thinks "elves" might be good enough for farm neighbors and unthinking readers.

Now another twenty years have passed, and I still haven't shaken the effects of that evening. I still grapple, in odd moments, with the elusive "elves" of Mr. Frost's skepticism, and try to reconcile them with my continuing affection for the stone wall.

During these passing years, I must say, a lot of elves have lined up on Mr. Frost's side. A new look at the Great Wall of China suggests
its eternally grand folly; something, indeed, there is, that doesn't love
the wall that now divides Berlin. John Hersey dwells on who is walled in
or walled out, and to whom we are like to give offense, with some of our
walls. Even in my own business, the newest of ideals is the "University
without walls."

How, then, can a man persist in his love affair with the stone wall,
as I have - above all, with the wall he's built himself? Does that affair
suggest some sinister, exclusionary instinct? How can I take such pleasure
in building and mending walls, when it may betray a dark and hidden moti-
vation?

It seems important, if I am to have my hobby and my conscience,
too, that the point be made - at least among friends - that stone walls
are not simply or even necessarily, devices for fencing in or fencing out.

One way, and an important one, to look at the New England stone wall,
is as nothing more or less than a tidy waste-disposal system. Faced with
the necessity of clearing thousands of stones from every acre of land he
wanted to till, the early Yankee farmer hit, naturally enough, on the idea
of using them as a substitute for the hedgerow he had known in an earlier
time and place. And so he and his oxen and (if he was lucky) his inden-
tured servant went to work and built stone fences.

"When you buy meat, you buy bones; when you buy land, you buy
stones," is a kind of agrarian apologia in my part of the world.
As late as the end of the 19th Century, students of the Storrs Agricultural College went to classes for four or five hours, and spent the remainder of the day in what was known as "instructive labor" — picking up stones from the Valentine Meadow. In disposing of the stones they collected, the students created what must be one of the largest of New England walls, measuring at points, more than fifteen feet across. When in 1899, a Victorian version of the student uprising ended the practice of "picking stones," and intercollegiate athletics were instituted instead, the student newspaper printed what was called "the most popular song of the day." One verse and the chorus are enough to suggest its message:

A freshman once did come to Storrs
As green as green could be,
He went to walk in a nice white shirt
To see what he could see,
But when he saw the rocks that lay
Scattered all over, he swore
As a freshman sometimes will and said
I won't pick rocks anymore.

Chorus
I won't pick rocks anymore
I've picked for years
On my father's farm and
I won't pick rocks anymore.

Viewed in this light, as an orderly means of disposing of (if you will) non-degradable waste, the New England stone wall seems somehow free of the sins visited upon it by Robert Frost. The walling-in and walling-out function of these orderly piles seems distinctly secondary. Whoever saw a New England stone wall he couldn't vault, or that a determined young calf
couldn't clamber? The stone wall stands, rather, as a reminder of the monumental labors of our forebears. Indeed, thousands of miles of stone walls lace now-wooded areas in Eastern Connecticut to remind us that, even with the stonecrop harvested, the land was too tough for succeeding generations.

It is true that frost and man have over the years splayed these walls, and deprived them of some of their clarity; but they still score the landscape, and lend pattern to the rolling countryside. Not the sterile pattern of grid work one sees from the air over open lands to the west, but a random assortment of rectangles, each reflecting the acreage a doughty farmer calculated he could clear in a season.

But I have been speaking of what we should properly call stone fences, as distinct from stone walls. Frost writes of the stones he and his French-Canadian neighbor replaced each spring:

"...some are loaves and some so nearly balls.
"We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"

And he speaks of the frost heave, and the damage it does to his stone fence: it "spills the upper boulders in the sun;
"And makes gaps even two can pass abreast."

With all due respect to Frost and his heaves, no self-respecting Yankee ever built a wall so vulnerable to nature or to man. His neat rows of discarded stone may have suffered so, but when he built an honest-to-God wall,
it stood and still will stand for centuries. Witness the walls he built with care for the edifices and institutions for which he truly cared; The foundations of his house, his barn, his church; and the magnificent walls that he created to delinate the resting place of his ancestors. No "frozen-ground-swell," no poet, nor all the entwining ivy, has succeeded in pulling these creations apart. That's what I mean by a wall.

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There are, I was told years ago, only three basic rules for building a dry stone wall to last.

First be ready to build as much wall below ground as you expect to see above;
Second, always put the flat side up; and
Third, have plenty of small stones.

The first of these, of course, is designed to put the wall's foundation below the New England frost-line. The second ensures a true line, so characteristic of the Yankee wall, by permitting each course to begin anew on the level. The third is, in my judgement, the real secret of good wall building, and the source of one of the great insights to be gained from what otherwise might be thought a mindless pastime. For it is true in wall building, as it is in life, that a vast network of tiny bits and pieces is what supports, holds steady, even makes possible the grand and the dramatic.

One of the obvious pleasures of wall-building is finding the large
flat stones that serve as "toppers," capping stones that finish-off the top of the wall, giving it its clean line and neat exterior. But just as gratifying is finding the small stone or shim that serves to lock a boulder securely in its proper place. A lot of time is spent, as with a jigsaw puzzle, looking for just the right part to lend grace and balance and security to handsome but ungainly lumps of granitic gneiss. It is time well-spent, for Miis Vanderhohe has said that "God is in the detail."

To the basic, ancient rules of dry stone wall construction, I have added a few of my own, intended largely to adapt an antique art to the realities of a flabby 20th Century. First of all, wear gloves, lift with your legs..., and have a strong helper. By custom, stones in the 100 lb. class are called "one-man stones," and those in the 200 lb. class, "two-man stones." I have found it necessary to discount these weights somewhat.

For those who cannot bring themselves to dig a trench and build 2 1/2 feet of underground wall the world will never see to admire (and I confess that I am one), a few additional rules are necessary if the wall is to enjoy any degree of permanence.

1. Use your largest stones - "floating stones" - at the base of the wall.

2. Build the wall slightly narrower with each course, so that you have a tapered wall when you're finished.
3. Lay exterior stones so that they slope slightly toward the center of the wall.

4. Pack the interior of the wall with small stones.

5. Every twelve to fifteen inches or so of height, try to lay a course of "headers"; longish, flat "bond" stones that lie athwart the wall to tie it together.

All of these steps have the effect of permitting the wall to absorb much of the impact of frost-heaves, a kind of New England earthquake-proof construction.

There is, I should add, some argument among 20th Century connoisseurs of stone wall construction with regard to two possible improvements in technique: the use of a stone hammer to give a more finished product; and the use of small amounts of mortar in topping-off, to discourage theft. My view is that both are acceptable compromises of the standards of another time, but that it is important to acknowledge them as admissible evidence of cultural decline.

The rules of the trade, then, are simple, and the skills required few. But the satisfactions are great. A wall well built gives a man the sense of leaving signs for those who follow after.

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But I am wandering afield. It profits one little to know how to build a stone wall if it is in fact contrary to the will of Nature, or detrimental
to sound social relationships. I come back to the crucial question: is building or mending walls a form of anti-social behavior? In an age of freedom should not walls of stone suffer the fate of tariff walls? Do barriers or boundaries of any kind have a place in a world emancipated through the marvels of sensitivity training?

For me, the answer is pretty clear; however contrary to acceptable social thought it may be, I still believe in the stone wall.

But I don't believe in the wall as a protective or defensive or exclusionary device (though I would remind you that Nehemiah could not have rebuilt the city of his ancestors without first repairing the wall). I admire it as a delineating device. Having, in common with all animals, a sense of territoriality, I seek through my walls not to exclude others, but to describe my land, and in doing so, help to define myself. The wall my neighbor and I repair together is as much a gesture of respect to him and his, as it is to me and mine. It is to us a symbol of territorial and personal integrity. It lends to obscure deeds and dusty, doubtful town records a degree of specificity that we, who believe that order is the second law of nature, need.

The very night that Robert Frost shook my faith in walls, he made a remark in passing that so impressed me, I asked him to write it down for me. I pasted it on the fly-leaf of my edition of his Complete Poems. It
suggests not only the ambiguity of the poet, but comes close to saying why, in a border-less world, and a boundary-free society, walls are important to me. He wrote:

"The separateness of the parts is at least as important as the connection of the parts."

I have since learned from one of his biographers that Frost admitted to writing "Mending Wall" in England, as he said, "when I was very homesick for my old wall in New England." He can't have been all bad.

At any rate, I think I am now at peace with myself on the subject of stone walls. I propose to stay at the building and mending of them, while my back holds out.

I have tried to go behind the "father's saying," and I still like having thought of it so well, I say again: "Good fences make good neighbors."