Snow College Traditional Building Skills Institute
Gets New Director, New Direction, and Old Pioneer House

By Christian Probasco
For the National Mormon Pioneer Heritage Area

EPHRAIM, UTAH—Woody Challis, the new director of Snow College’s Traditional Building Skills Institute (TBSI), examines the front of the well lived-in pioneer home the school just bought in Ephraim.

“This is pretty scary,” he says, pointing to the cracked cement layer over the base of the original oolite limestone wall. “The Portland cement traps moisture against the rock.”

Dampness is particularly unkind to limestone such as the sort that makes up most of the rock houses in Ephraim, as well as the famous Mormon Temple in nearby Manti and the native rock of caves.

“The effect is the opposite of what they intended,” he says.

Challis also shakes his head at the narrow sidewalk abutting the house, which directs water into the foundation. “We’re going to have to tear all this out,” he says.

In fact, he and his students have a lot of tearing out to do, and then they’ll have to build the house back up, the right way.

Challis, who has three children attending Snow College, had served on the institute’s board for three years when longtime former director Russ Mendenhall, who had completed several major restoration projects in Sanpete County, announced he would be stepping down.

Challis’s background is in building custom spiral wood staircases; a challenge even for experienced carpenters. Entire books have been written on the curvatures of spiral staircases alone.

The skills Challis had to master for his vocation made him a perfect fit for director of the TBSI, which is world renowned for researching and teaching building techniques utilizing traditional materials and hand tools. The institute has classes on blacksmithing, masonry, stained glass, stone carving, furniture making and otherwise restoring all the elements which make up old buildings and, in fact, the whole material infrastructure of pioneer existence.

Over the next months and years, Challis hopes to begin an apprenticeship program and expand the TBSI’s role as consultant for the Heritage Highway Alliance, which manages the Mormon Pioneer National Heritage Area (MPNHA). The mission of the MPNHA, which covers six counties and 280 miles of Highway 89 from the middle of the state to its southern border, is to “preserve, interpret, promote and enhance Utah’s pioneer heritage.”
Within the boundaries of the MPNHA are thousands of historic buildings in great need of repair; homes, mills, mercantiles, city halls, churches, theaters and dance halls.

Challis wants to turn the building known as the ‘‘TBSI House’’ just across the street from the Snow College campus into a showpiece of what the institute can do for owners of historic building in the heritage area.

Well constructed in 1872 by August Anderson, the house has survived two fires, numerous renters, two big Mormon families and a brief stint as a mercantile, all of which have taken their toll. Two coats of paint on the exterior have trapped water in the same manner as the cement on the base and eroded the walls. The sidewalk in the back is a crumbled mess. The weathered wooden lintels above the doors and windows may not be salvageable. A rain gutter spilled onto the adobe side wall and wood porch for years, ruining both. The timber floors are cupped and the interior walls have been smothered with layers of wallpaper. A bearing wall has been compromised by a door opening.

Some of the roof beams may have to be replaced. That wouldn’t be a problem, says Challis, if the beams were not actually thick logs.

A carport next door was too far gone. The institute tore it down.

Later owners added accents like minimalist door frames and plinths and a modern corner window and angled kitchen wall which will have to go.

The house is still standing because of its stout construction and dozens of patch jobs. The front walls are two feet thick; mostly limestone but sealed inside with adobe and plaster. The foundation is stone, mortared with dirt. The walls back from the primary street are adobe, which Challis says was common of pioneer homes. The roofline from the stone front section originally had a gentler slope to the north. The rooms it covered may have been burned in one of the fires. The interior staircase has been relocated and the porch and kitchen were added after the initial construction. But old able August would probably recognize his creation if he were still around.

The most remarkable thing about the property surrounding the house is that some of it has been sold off, and the remainder is practically empty. Other than the aforementioned carport, the lot at one time certainly included an outhouse and an orchard, and probably included a woodshed, pig pen, granary, smoke house, root cellar, and corrals. What the present absence of these accoutrements speaks to is the radical transformation of rural economies during the house’s history.

Like most Mormon towns, Ephraim was laid out in a revised version of the Plat of Zion designed by Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith. Residential blocks were divided into rectangular lots, each large enough for a family to support itself in no small measure with produce and livestock raised on the property. The pioneers’ stock of food and fuel were stored and processed in the now vanished “outbuildings.”

The autonomous pioneer model was made less practical by an increasing influx of mass-produced goods carried into the former frontier on railroads, then highways. The Wal-Mart on the edge of Ephraim, less than five minutes from the TBSI House, contains an inexpensive, functional...
facsimile of every necessity, and every undreamed luxury, the pioneers could possibly have desired, except meals made from scratch, tools forged and shaped precisely to the curve of one’s palm and furniture crafted by skilled artisans.

Snow College held a ribbon cutting ceremony at the house on Oct. 8. In attendance were Snow College President Scott Wyatt, instructors and students of TBSI, a big crowd of owners and enthusiasts of pioneer architecture and local craftsmen like traditional carpenters Orson and Ben Kimble of Fountain Green, in north Sanpete County.

TBSI instructors were on hand to demonstrate blacksmithing, carpentry, stone carving, furniture making and other skills the house’s builders would have been familiar with.

Wyatt said, “To me, when you take an old home like this and restore it beautifully, you are endorsing the values, character and heritage of its builders.”

Challis and others have taken plenty of photographs for the “before” half of the project. Depending on funding, he says, they should get their “after” shots in about two years.

The TBSI House is located at 295 E. College Avenue. For more information on the Traditional Building Skills Institute, go to [www.snow.edu/~tbsi/](http://www.snow.edu/~tbsi/) or call (435) 283-7572.

For more information on the Sanpete County Travel and Heritage Council in Manti, call 435-835-6877 or 1-800-281-4346 or go to [www.sanpete.com/pages/travel](http://www.sanpete.com/pages/travel).