



DATE 30 MAR 2010

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This is part of an occasional series by the Sanpete County Travel and Utah Heritage Highway 89 Alliance on the people and places along U.S. Highway 89.

Restoration Is Life's Work For Sanpete Brothers

By Christian Probasco

FOUNTAIN GREEN, UTAH: When you drive through the Sanpete Valley and you spot a nicely restored pioneer building, you might have the Kimball brothers to thank for the carpentry work. Since their arrival in Sanpete County in 1996 and 2006, respectively, Orson and Ben Kimball have been busy restoring Sanpete County's fine historic architecture one gazebo, porch and staircase at a time.

"We have a passion for this," says the older Orson Kimball. "We love restoration work."

The brothers were drawn to the area by the unique architecture. Sanpete County was mostly settled by Mormon converts from Scandinavia, many of whom were world-class craftsmen. The famous temple in Manti, visible from much of the Sanpete Valley, is a testament to their abilities. The two were particularly inspired by the temple's freestanding spiral wood staircase.

"Nobody could build something like that now," says Orson.

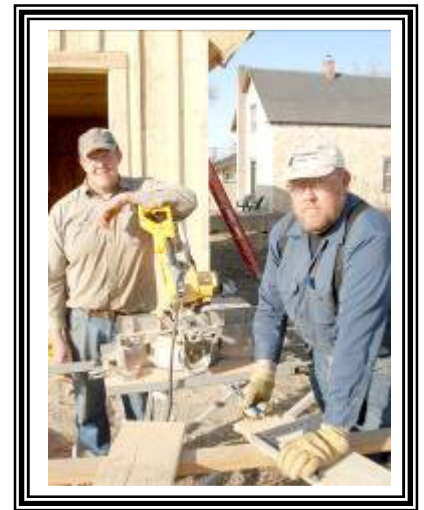
In addition to dozens of jobs involving detail work such as crown molding, plinth blocks and hand rails, the two have completed whole restoration projects, such as the Liberty Hall building in Manti which now houses a fitness business, and a gallery in Ephraim. Both structures used to be auto garages but were renovated to match the local historic architecture.

Orson and Ben grew up helping their father paint houses in Salt Lake City. When he was in 7th grade, Orson convinced his school's shop class teacher to let him come in after hours and use the power tools. He was kicked off a job painting the Brigham Young farmhouse, which now stands at the This is the Place Heritage Park in east Salt Lake City when the owners found out he was only 16.

Orson's big break came when an architect who was planning the restoration for the George Q. Cannon home in Salt Lake City spotted him at work replacing a metal porch on a house in the Avenues neighborhood nearby with a period wood version. He asked him to do the carpentry for the project.

"It was a mess," says Orson. "It was really run down. There was a 20 foot gap in the east wall where the bricks were not."

Orson crafted a historical railing for the exterior staircase and did other custom woodworking. He studied the job the mason was doing (Orson calls him a "miracle worker") and picked up some pointers on brickwork.



Kimball's at work: Ben is on the left. Though they enjoy restoration work, the brothers can construct a building from the ground up. Here they are using their knowledge of the local architecture to construct a garage which will complement the pioneer home of Cathy Whitaker in Manti. In a couple years, the siding will have aged to match the other structures on the property, though it will still stand up to the weather. "Much of the work we do," says Orson, "is making new buildings look old."

After the George Q. Cannon job, he found himself doing more and more historical restoration work, of which there was plenty in Salt Lake City. A divorce in the mid nineties left him looking for a place to make a new start, and he decided to move to Ephraim, in the central section of the county.

Ben, who is 17 years younger than Orson and had also spent much of his life doing construction work, joined his older brother in 2006.

The two bought a sagging two story brick pioneer farmhouse in Fountain Green, near the western edge of Sanpete County, in 2007 and have been fixing it up between jobs, which has meant slow going. They have already torn out the building's rotting staircase and repainted the exterior, and they plan to rebuild the entire north wall, which is bulging outward.

The Kimball's have built replicas using just the partial remains of historic fixtures as their models. They can replicate woodwork exactly just from historic photos, measuring the remaining elements of the building to arrive at the correct scale.

Without the original fixtures or photographs, the Kimball's will often base their work on designs by the same builder. They were able to reconstruct a porch on Fountain Green house built in 1870 based on that approach.

Antique hand tools, they say, are still the best way to get some aspects of the job done.

"A good, sharp hand saw is the best tool to cut steps," says Orson, "It's faster and more accurate than a power saw."

"We still use coping saws for interior work," says Ben.

As Orson tells it, the Kimball's expertise doesn't always work in their favor.

"We put an advertisement in the paper showing some of the jobs we had done," he says. "People would compliment us on our work and say they wished they could afford to hire us. I'm glad people appreciate the craftsmanship, but we're not expensive!"

The two have recently set up a website at <http://www.kimballcarpentry.com/>.

For more information, contact Christian Probasco at 435-851-6485 / eprobe2002@yahoo.com or the Kimball Brothers at 435-340-0763 / orson@kimballcarpentry.com.



Decorative brackets: When the original can't be restored, the Kimball's can always make an accurate replica, even when a fixture is in several pieces.





Old shed/new shed: The only thing the Kimball's added to rehabilitate this collapsing shed was new rafters and a door from the even older original barn from which the wood for the original construction was donated.



Staircase in Springville: Though it's not in Sanpete County, the Kimball's' signature piece is this spiral staircase they constructed in for a house in Springville, Utah.

*Photographs by Christian Probasco
Photographs courtesy of Orson and Ben Kimball*