

Country Real Estate, #297: September 12, 2013

The only constant in the world is change

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—How many farmhouse dwellers does it take to mourn the passing of a near-100-year-old metal roof? One—me.

Hands that have long been resting in peace installed our standing-seam metal sheets in 1916. This roof has always done its job without whining or excessive venting.

We've witnessed the last 30 of these years and applied four coats of dark-green paint in what has now been declared a lost cause.

Like an old friend, this roof and I learned to excuse each other's shortcomings. Bad excuses, I've always thought, are better than none at all.

Some folks call ours a "tin roof." In the early 19th Century, iron sheets dipped in liquid tin were so named. A later steel version was coated with a lead-zinc mixture, called "terne" or "terneplate." Our roof is old-fashioned galvanized steel.

About 18 months ago during a heavy rain, I noticed two small drips in a second-story back bedroom.

Just cut the old roof a little slack, I argued to myself. After all, how many mostly functional centenarians do I know who don't leak a little around the edges?

The honest answer is that I don't know any centenarians at all, leakers or otherwise. Nonetheless, I think my point remains valid even without having evidence that might support it. I am often impaled on such points, dull as they are.

All roofs deteriorate over time, even the fancy-schmancy copper ones that wet weather changes from bright new-penny color to a queasy bluish green. This patina, which copper fetishists call, "verdigris," is just a layer of copper carbonate, an oxidation product. I throw that stuff in our pond to kill algae. Maybe I should have sprinkled some on our old steel roof to add class to our house and get rid of any simple organisms living up there.

About 18 months ago, my Don't-Use-My-Name marital other noticed the leaks after she discovered the two 42-gallon pots I'd placed under them on the bedroom floor.

“Let’s get it fixed,” she said in that cagey way she has of appearing reasonable.

“Well, not so fast,” I said. “Let’s consider our options.”

“Two open oil barrels in my daughter’s bedroom is not an option,” she said.

I didn’t see a whole lot of negotiating room in her position, so I didn’t argue for the pots...despite the obvious fact that they solved the leaks cheaply, efficiently, sustainably, biodegradably and cardiovascularly.

She also dismissed my eminently reasonable suggestion that she carry a small, easily held umbrella when walking through this bedroom.

Was she being inflexible, or what? Normal people carry umbrellas all the time, I argued. Normal people also wear clothes all the time, both inside and outside. So why can’t Normal people wear clothes and carry umbrellas all the time, inside and outside?

And then I added a sweetener. “Carrying an open umbrella on the second floor will also protect you from harmful sunrays coming through the same holes as the rain. Who can object to preventive health care?”

I think her exact words were: “Whenever you go out in public from now on, just say nothing and smile as if you understand everything. Your secret is safe with me.”

That exchange left the leaks leaking.

So I came up with an even more elegant solution—a unified applied theory that balanced falling liquids against time-release evaporation. It even replicated the physics of our global biosphere.

I placed two jumbo plastic basins in the attic under the drips.

“I’ve fixed the roof,” I announced.

“Two buckets under two leaks are not a fix in my book,” she said.

“They’re basins, not buckets,” I inserted for the record. “Top-of-the-line plastic from the Dollar General. I spared no expense. \$2.50 EACH.”

Admittedly, two high-quality basins did not “fix” in any permanent sense the two leaks themselves, which, admittedly, were probably getting bigger.

But, let’s be honest, I asked her, is anything ever really fixed in a permanent sense? Doesn’t everything fall apart no matter how fixed up? And who of us really believes in permanence in a constantly changing world?

[As I said this, I felt the plasma of my high-school physics teacher running through my veins. He was a man of limits who was not above displaying them. He is remembered for telling our class: “I would be just as

dense on the moon as I am on earth.” This statement was both true and untrue.

From what I can tell, it would not be true physically unless the moon man was wearing a spacesuit calibrated to equal the Earth’s atmosphere...so that his mass and volume (density = mass/volume) would be identical on both surfaces. Without the external pressure of a spacesuit, moon man in the absence of atmosphere would blow up. Density is not a constant.

Taken a different way, this teacher would, indeed, have been just as dense up there as down here.]

Where my pirouettes in philosophical logic might have once persuaded my wife that I knew more than I did, after 30 years of marriage she is convinced that I know considerably less than I let on.

[N.B.: Notice how slickly I’ve slipped into this column my awareness that our 30th anniversary falls pretty soon, which I will remind myself not to forget if I remember to reread this column before it comes. My wife’s wedding, which I attended, was the last time I wore a top hat, the weight of which on my roof squished out a lot of my future memory. Our anniversary is either around the end of September or the beginning of October. Or maybe November. It falls in one of those “...ber” months, I’m pretty sure.]

“It’s been 18 months since the leaks opened,” she said. “It’s time to get the roof replaced. This requires a professional roofer to do more than acknowledge your phone messages.”

To my credit, I had called a professional roofer 18 months ago who agreed to patch the two holes. This was a 30-minute job, counting in a 15-minute coffee break. If the roof had been less high, less steep and less slick, I would have smeared some caulk around up there myself a good four or five months ago and not much more than a year after the first drips had dropped.

I’d phoned this pleasant roofer several times over the ensuing years to remind him that patience was wearing thin on one side of my marital divide. I ran into him in the farmers’ coop about six weeks ago. He said he thought he might come out that very afternoon. Which he did not. Nor the next. Nor any afternoon thereafter.

“It’s time for a new roof,” she said.

I gave a quick thought to possible replacements—including the status-climbing copper, aluminum, wood shakes, asphalt shingles, tile and slate. I

was most enthused about thatch, because I figured I could plug the free leftovers into my own roof.

“We can do metal again,” she said.

“But, but, but...,” I said, “it’s been there for 97 years. It’s survived two world wars and numerous undeclared ones. It’s witnessed the coming of electric and indoor plumbing. Three families have lived beneath it. We changed our first diaper under its protection. It’s even put up with Wifi.”

“Didn’t your high school physics teacher tell you that the only constant in the world is change?” she asked.

I saw the tide turning against preservation of antiquities. “He was less insightful on matters of human density,” I said.

“About 64 pounds per cubic foot, as I recall,” she said.

I raised the white flag of surrender.

A different roofer is coming Saturday morning. He set up a schedule. The materials arrived on Monday. He dropped by to make sure they had. He made it look easy.

His crew will cut through the rusting steel with an electric shear. They’ll pull the old nails and break the crimped seams and soldered joints. They’ll drop the ragged metal three stories -- not counting the one you’re reading -- onto a tarp.

I’ll haul the scrap for recycling. After everyone leaves, my magnet and I will stalk stray nails to protect bare feet and paws.

Once the metal skin is peeled, the spaced roof boards will face the sun for a few hours. The roofers will use them as footholds on the steep pitches as they work down from the ridge.

The new prepainted, standing-seam steel roof will button up everything for another 100 years.

The paint will be so intensely forest green that I anticipate raccoons showing up with security deposits.

It will look new, not old; bright, not weathered; hot, not cool.

If I were an old and slightly leaky roof, would I want to be sold as scrap steel to the Chinese and come home as a Kmart can opener?

Well, it depends on the price of scrap, I suppose.

I don’t mind change being the only constant. It’s just that some changes make me want to swat them away with my old top hat.

And one more item. This sentence is proof that I have remembered Ms. Puts-Up-With-Him's 60th birthday on September 15th, which is next Monday or Tuesday, or thereabouts. Happy Birthday.

I have now remembered both her birthday and our anniversary in the same year—a personal best for which I surely deserve a little extra credit on my next density exam.