

Stonework takes a special dedication

By Joe Gitter
of the Clarkston News

The stonemason, hand-crafting his field-stone masterpieces, is going the way of the violin maker and wood crafter... toward eventual extinction. It is a dying art, says Carlton Seales, a member of that disappearing craft.

"There are just so few stonemasons around," he said. "Many of the more prominent ones have died or retired in the last few years."

It is not difficult for Seales to understand the reasons behind his trade's plight. The work is difficult and physical; tedious at times and exacting always.

"It is hard to learn and it's hard to find someone to teach

you if you do want to learn."

Seales has taken on two apprentices, the Shell brothers, Dick and John, and taught them the trade. They are now working together building a fieldstone fireplace, chimney and stone front for the Joseph Duris home on Deer Lake.

This summer has been an unusual one for Seales and his masons. Last winter I didn't do a job for two months. Then suddenly I'm barraged with work," he said. He's not complaining.

"There's just so few people that really like stone work and will take the time to find a stonemason. They'd just as soon have brick."

The problem really is that few

people have really seen stone masonry. The art begun out of necessity by early settlers and pioneers has evolved to a carefully thought out and intricate arrangement of subtle multi-toned stones.

The long process begins with fieldstones that are often literally dug out of fields. Seales carefully examines each boulder to determine its grain pattern, and then it is cut using a heavy combination chisel/sledge hammer.

"It's like splitting wood," he said. "You can pound on a rock all day if you don't hit it in the right spot."

By cutting along the grain, one face of the split rock is flat. It is then chiseled to the appropriate size and fitted very carefully into the lattice work of the overall pattern.

A hammer, chisel and mallet are the only tools used in the stonemason's craft. The only innovation modern technology has contributed has been the incorporation of carbide tipped chisels, which provide a much harder striking surface and last longer than typical steel tools. It still doesn't take very long to go through one of those \$30 chisels, Seales said. They are made of a soft steel to prevent chipping and sparking under constant hammering. But, by the same token, the constant pounding will wear an eight inch chisel down to nothing in short order.

As the hammers fly during construction, so do the rock chips. It can be dangerous to stand too close to a working stone mason. "I've seen a rock chip puncture a hole in a five gallon bucket. It went through it like a bullet," says Seales.

The work is difficult,



20-year-old John Shell trims one of the few remaining fireplace fieldstones high atop the scaffolding inside the Joseph Duris home.

The roof is like a furnace, the fireplace is a sauna and the front porch is just plain hot.

All three masons live no closer than Pontiac. Two reside in

guess you just have to be dedicated," Dick said.

"It is creative work," Seales claims. "It's different and it's unique," said Dick. "Every job

