

# From boulders to building facades

By Dan Vandenhemel

Some say stone masonry is a dying art, but an Independence Township company is at work keeping the intricate craft alive.

John Shell, his brother Dick and Tony Lieder have had their business, Creative Stone, in Independence Township since 1980.

They grew up in Southfield, where they learned the time-consuming craft.

"There aren't many left who do it," John Shell said. "It's very physical work, but I've been doing it long enough to know enough styles to know what a customer would want."

Most of their contracts have been for building facades, pump houses, barbecues and fire places. Other work consists of floors and walkways.

Shell just completed the foundation facade of the John Green home that's being renovated by Hank and Jennifer Radcliff on Main Street, Clarkston, next to the village parking lot.

"We've done a lot of historical work, too," Shell said. "You have to match the existing stone work with the new stones."

They start out as boulders weighing anywhere from 30 to 120 pounds before Shell and his partners trim them down to 5-inch slabs.

A stone mason doesn't have to be a geologist, but knowing your stones helps.

"Michigan stones come in every color in the rainbow," Shell said. "The glacier deposits in Michigan left a lot of stones. Quite often we find fossils in the stones. Michigan stones are also extremely hard; it's mostly granite."

With Oakland County being mostly on top of a gravel pit, Shell doesn't have far to go for his materials—except when he or a customer is looking for a specific type.

"We also get stones from Georgia, California, from all over," he said. "In Georgia, they've got that gorgeous white stone."

As long as people like the looks of stone masonry, Shell thinks he will have a business. He adds that his craft is more expensive than normal masonry.

"It takes about two or three times longer to get the material ready and the labor takes about two or three times longer, too," the 28-year-old Shell said. "There's no production in this, it's all handwork. People really appreciate the work."

Stone masonry became popular during the mid-1800s because the stones were abundant and they are a very strong material.

The next step for Shell is the possibility of building stone houses.

"People come by when we're working and look and talk to us," he said. "Things like that keep you going. It's very gratifying."



Trimming boulders into rough 5-inch squares for stone masonry is very physical work, but

John Shell and partners Dick Shell and Tony Lieder are keeping the craft going.

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