



A Stone Mason's Art

by Kate O'Brien

For twelve years Jeff Gammelin and his crew have built stone walls, chimneys, and fireplaces that have a special flair. For Jeff, each project is a "composition of shapes and form."

Although not all of Gammelin's projects are complex and expensive, some are very much so. Right now he and his crew are working on a fireplace that Gammelin describes as a "depiction of the geological history of the site." The left side of the fireplace wall will be built from large cut granite pieces—one piece is as large as 3x7 on its face. These are meant to symbolize the bedrock at the site. The granite pieces become smaller as you move toward the center of the wall, eventually blending into smaller and more weathered fieldstone on the right. The job will cost a fortune, and take a long time—three months for Jeff's 8-man crew to complete (5 masons, 3 tenders).

Gammelin's first project was a two-story circular tower. On the exterior of the tower there is a living room hearth, while the interior provides circular walls to a bath on the first floor, and the master bedroom on the second floor. More recently, Jeff's crew built the hot tub pictured. The hardest part of the job was making it leak-proof, important because the tub was in a greenhouse located right off the living room (see photo).

Over the years, Gammelin has worked to improve his design and technique. He takes special pride in the work he does on fireboxes. In the past, (and in the two hearths pictured here) he has used a system of firebrick and refractory cement. Lately, when the client can afford it, he has been using a system of five large pieces of soapstone. According to Gammelin, "you have to be careful because it's easily scratched, and it can weigh a lot—but you can get neat pencil-line joints, and it looks beautiful." Because the joints are so tight, Gammelin doesn't need to use any cement.

Gammelin's favorite project so far is actually a "very conservative design," but he is happiest with the composition (see bottom photo). "It was a real challenge. We had to make the stones fit neatly on all facets. And we avoid chipping the stone if we can. So we have to figure out where every stone is going to go, get a really tight fit, and a nice composition before we ever mortar anything."

A lot of this has to go on in Gammelin's head before a stone is moved—since the stones weigh quite a bit. In this project, staging and a chain fall helped get the stones in place. Once a small group of stones is dry-laid to the crew's satisfaction, they mark the stones, take it all apart, and lay the mortar. The mortar is thin and dark, with the color pre-mixed in. It took a three-man crew about four months to complete the project, and cost the customer about \$35,000 dollars. Another extra challenge of this particular project is familiar to any contractor working the coast of Maine—the crew had to take a boat to the site (an island) every day, then hike a 1/2 mile in, before they could even begin to work. Needless to say, they found all the stones on the site. ■



One of Gammelin's earlier projects included this sculptured fireplace. Because the shape itself was so complex, says the mason, there was actually less freedom "to be lyrical" with the stonework. He had to keep the mortar lines and stone sizes simple.



The most difficult part of this hot-tub project was making it waterproof. Gammelin's crew took special care with the mortaring, coated the tub twice with epoxy sealer to stop the porosity of the stone and mortar, and followed that with two coats of epoxy—the clearest they could find. Finally they applied two coats of epoxy with an ultraviolet filter to keep the finish from yellowing in sunlight.



Gammelin's favorite project, this fireplace is 18 to 20 feet tall (before it hits the roof), 8 feet across, and goes right through the wall to form a backdrop for a range of kitchen shelves.