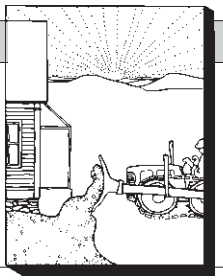

Steeplejack of All Trades

by John Wagner

Some days steeplejack Michael Mastrototaro gets tied up at work. Some days he just hangs around. But no matter what he's up to, there is no rigging job he can't tackle.

Mastrototaro is the proprietor of North Star Rigging of Greenfield, Mass., and he says he can handle anything that has to do with steeples and towers: carpentry, specialty mill work, painting, roofing, lightning protection, and his specialty, gold leafing.

Steeplejacking is an ancient trade. Some of the techniques were originally developed to service ship masts of old. In fact, the chair that steeplejacks use is called a "bosun's chair." Bosun is short for "Boatswain," the sailor who takes care of the rigging, ropes, and anchors on a ship.

"How we rig for high work is not much different than the way it was done 200 years ago." Mastrototaro explains.

But what people really want to know about steeplejacks has nothing to do with safety, or history, or the liability insurance they pay through the nose. The question most people ask is, How do you get the rope up there at the beginning of the day? "Ah ha," Mastrototaro says, "that's a steeplejack's secret. Rigging the job is something all steeplejacks do in the same way, but we don't like to talk about it."

From what we can gather, though, steeplejacks loop a wire or rope choker around the very top of the steeple. A block-and-tackle system is clipped or hooked into this choker. Through the block-and-tackle system, the steeplejack runs a 3/4-inch manila rope that is attached to the bosun's chair in which he sits. Depending on how many times you loop the rope through the blocks determines the mechanical advantage. Mastrototaro likes a 3-to-1 advantage because you don't have to pull as much rope through to gain height; some steeplejacks use 4-to-1.

With this block-and-tackle arrangement, the steeplejack can pull his own weight quite easily. When he hoists himself to the desired height, he loops the rope around a small metal hook on the bosun's chair. This holds him in place for painting or taking down a weather vane or whatever it is one does 200 feet in the air. Mastrototaro replaces his ropes each season, or more frequently if there's unusual wear. There is always an independent safety rope. Even if the tackle fails, the steeplejack doesn't fall far.

Mastrototaro isn't always hanging around in a bosun's chair, however. For some projects, he sets up "flying scaffolds," which hang from the same wire chokers they use for blocks.

Michael Mastrototaro removes the ball from the weather vane spindle atop the Stratford, Conn., Episcopal Church. Greg Kilburn sits below him in a bosun's chair. Both steeplejacks are tied off with safety lines.

A bosun's chair, which hooks into the block-and-tackle, supports Paul Cloutier as he paints the metal roof on the Methodist Church in Burlington, Vt.

Using a block-and-tackle rope system, steeplejack Greg Kilburn hoists himself to repair molding on the Westminster, Vt., town hall.

Using a stand-off ladder system, and wearing a safety belt, Mastrototaro inspects the slate on the Westminster town-hall steeple.

Mastrototaro got into this line of work when he found himself rooming with a steeplejack at school. After school when he went into the Navy, he learned even more about rigging, mechanical advantages, and block-and-tackle. When he got out of the service, this work seemed like the natural thing to do. He is a licensed rigger in Massachusetts.

You have to know about rigging, surely: Mastrototaro explains ,"but you also have to know about all the other trades as well. When you're up there, you can't bring up a mason and a carpenter. You do the work yourself. So, you have to have a wide-ranging knowledge of the trades.

As for heights, I'm not really afraid of them. You learn not to think about it. But I do remember the hairiest job we ever did. We removed and replaced a 10-foot high, 5-foot diameter cross from St. Mary's church in Turners Falls, Mass. Taking it down was simple, but getting it back was very tricky. If we had staged it, as a regular GC would have, it would have cost $20,000 to $40,000 more than the work was worth.

"The most dangerous part of the job is setting up and breaking down. There is a slip-knot you use to take down the rigging. It's a two-man operation. There's a guy inside who you have to trust and assume he is taking care of his end properly. I don't go picking fights that day. That's the day I buy the coffees." ■