

Confessions of a Former Deck Builder



In October, I attended the Principia Composite Decking and Railing Conference in Atlanta. The speakers at this two-day conference included lumberyard managers, distributors, manufacturers' reps, deck builders, designers, code people, and me. The audience was pretty much the same demographic. It's the third year I've attended this conference, and it's a valuable tool for assessing what's going on in the industry. Here's a synopsis

of my talk, which was a retrospective on deck building based on my own experiences and observations. The point is to show how little many of us knew back in the day, and how deck building has matured.

In 1980, I was 19 and a friend's father hired me to help tear down their deck. Its Douglas fir joists extended back into the house framing, paralleling the cantilevered house joists that supported part of the kitchen floor. The rotting deck was rotting the house, and we got showered with carpenter ants taking it down. Determined not to repeat the previous mistakes, we fixed the house framing, and built the new deck with CCA-treated southern pine. To avoid the moisture problems that had sprung from the old deck joists extending into the house's cantilever, we hung a ledger off the cantilever. Yeah, we did that.

I built my first solo deck as a subcontractor for a tract-builder in the boom of the mid '80s. He paid me \$1.30 per square foot for labor, he supplied the material, and I built as I was told to. The material was untreated Douglas fir, again. Now, you can probably build from untreated fir in Utah or Arizona, but it's a bad idea in New Jersey. I asked about it, and he said that the painter would stain it and it would be fine. There were no lag bolts, flashing, or joist hangers in the hardware pack-

age. I asked about that, too, and was told that nails would hold the ledger just fine, the sider would handle the flashing, and the joists were to be toenailed. There were no railing posts, just 2x2s face-nailed to the 2x6 rail and to the rim joist. The next deck was better — the builder supplied treated lumber because it was cheaper than having a painter stain a Douglas fir deck.

By my third deck, the building inspector insisted on a lag-bolted ledger. I asked how many and what size. The answer was something like, "Stick a $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch lag every couple of joists." There was no mention of the lags needing to be galvanized. And when talking over a beer at the end of the day, another contractor on that site mentioned that rather than take the time to drill and ratchet in the newly required lags, he simply whacked them home with a hammer.

These houses were modular, and that contractor didn't bother to flash behind the already-installed vinyl siding. He simply installed the ledger over it. Joist hangers became the rage, and lots of hangers got installed with roofing nails or drywall screws. No one used end-cut preservatives. Decking was gun-nailed down.

We were so bad for several reasons. First, the old guard was largely flushed away by the bust of the 1970s, so there was no one to teach us young guys. And, decks were a pretty new phenomenon in the '80s, having only become popular in the '70s. We didn't know what worked. We got better. By the early '90s, every permitted deck I built or saw built was lagged and flashed and had railing posts. I can't speak for the unpermitted decks, many of which would have been built by homeowners, many of whom would have repeated our mistakes. So when I hear of deck collapses today, I'm pretty sure I know which decks those are.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Andy Engel".

Andy Engel
Editor