

BY JON VARA

1. Postmen and other inhabitants of the Landes region in France routinely traveled on stilts, as in this posed photo from the 1920s.

2. Stilted English farm workers assemble a support structure for hop plantings that will be used to flavor beer.



Stilts Beyond Drywall

Drywall stilts are a staple tool for hanging and finishing drywall and plaster, painting, and installing suspended ceilings. But while working stilts are now pretty much limited to the construction industry, it wasn't long ago that workers in other fields relied on them, too.

Until the early 20th century, shepherds in the Landes region of southeastern France tended their flocks from 5-foot stilts, partly for an enhanced view and partly because their longer "legs" allowed them to move swiftly across the flat pastureland. When the Empress Josephine visited the area in 1808, she noted that stilt walkers easily kept up with her carriage even when the horses were moving at a full trot.

English farmers traditionally used even taller stilts for tying twine to overhead wires to support growing hop vines. Similar stilts were also once used in California fruit and nut orchards at pruning and harvest time. But modern safety rules have pretty much put a stop to that—and have sharply limited the use of drywall stilts

in the Golden State. (California OSHA prohibits their use, even though federal OSHA rules permit them.)

While stilts have lost ground in the working world, they're gaining in the world of entertainment: Because they're available commercially and are comfortable enough to wear for hours at a time, drywall stilts have become standard equipment at theme parks, where they're used to elevate costumed performers for dramatic effect.

Stilt manufacturers are aware of that off-label use, and they're careful to point out that their products aren't designed for it. Still, they appear to view it with a certain pride. "I was in Orlando Disney during the STAFDA [Specialty Tools & Fasteners Distributors Association] conference a while ago," says Chris Lin, office manager at Sur-Stilt. "There were some performers on stilts at the opening party, and when I asked, it turned out that they were our stilts. That was pretty cool."

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