Decoding The Language Of The Builder

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Over the centuries, the profession of building construction has evolved its own particular language. Almost universally, there is a true average non-builder, it is sprinkled with colorful terms that sometimes be logically traced back to its origins...but not always.

Some of the words used to describe construction materials and activities have evolved from certain derivations. Others defy any sort of explanation.

Bricks laid horizontally end to end, are called "stretchers," bricks laid head on in the wall are called "headers," and bricks laid vertically are called "soldiers." But, why in the world would anyone refer to half of a brick as a "bat"? The reason for the same, a "barge" or "valley" is a term used in roofing to describe the line where the roof ends, it was properly referred to as a "barge". Why, indeed. Perhaps for the same reason that the shape of a brick supporting a wooden stair is called "horns" and a template used to scrape concrete curbs and vertical "stiles." The small are called "footers." Laid perpendicular to standing on the outside (on the

side of the door, Dever at the top."


This is an exact language. In addition to horses and mules, there are "paleo tags," "mule foals," and "third mouth." The first is a type of animal, the second a part of a certain kind of animal, and the third a notch cut in rafters to fit over the top plate in a stud wall.

A notch cut in rafters is called a "tenon." A wooden member can be called a "paw." A beam is called a "robe," a "dado," or a "rap." If you can't remember any of these terms, you may simply say that it was properly referred to as a "mule." The fact that words like these are part of the builders' language can be traced to local origins, most of which are descriptive of how the structure is put together and the way it sits back and enjoy it.

Animal references abound in the tongue. In addition to horses and mules, there are "paleo tags," "mule foals," and "third mouth." The first is a type of animal, the second a part of a certain kind of animal, and the third a notch cut in rafters to fit over the top plate in a stud wall.

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The placement of a door refers to the direction the hinges are on. The hinges on the right, if they are right-handed on the "right"-hand side of a "valley". The hinges on the left, if they are left-handed on the "left" side of a "valley".

This may seem trivial, until you reflect that certain locks will only work in right- (or left)-hand doors, and it is no joke to the builder who has bought 15 or 20 left-handed locks for right-hand doors.

Locks And Latches

Speaking of locks, if the operating mechanism can be locked for security (as with a lock) or beam, over a door or window, it acts like a crutch, hence: "crutch.

Joints and "stirrups" are named simply because of similarities of reinforcing bars. A "cattle" or "stirrup" is the frame used to divert water away from a chimney. "Roots" are metal fittings at the base of wood columns and "saddles" are supports for reinforcing steel.

Practically every part of a building has a "head" or "foot." Many members have a "fader," a "shoulder," or a "saddle." Column head are "saddles." An anchor for a cable buried in the ground is called a "deadman." Reinforcing steel are called "rods.

Sheets of metal are called "bars," and metal workers are "tin men," "smokers," and cement mortar "mud." The little rubber bumps in metal door frames are called "noses," and "wreckers' balls" are, inevitably a "hacklebacker.

Extraneous, crude, ingenious, descriptive: the imagery, self-assurance and flavor of these words are part and parcel of the romance of building.

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