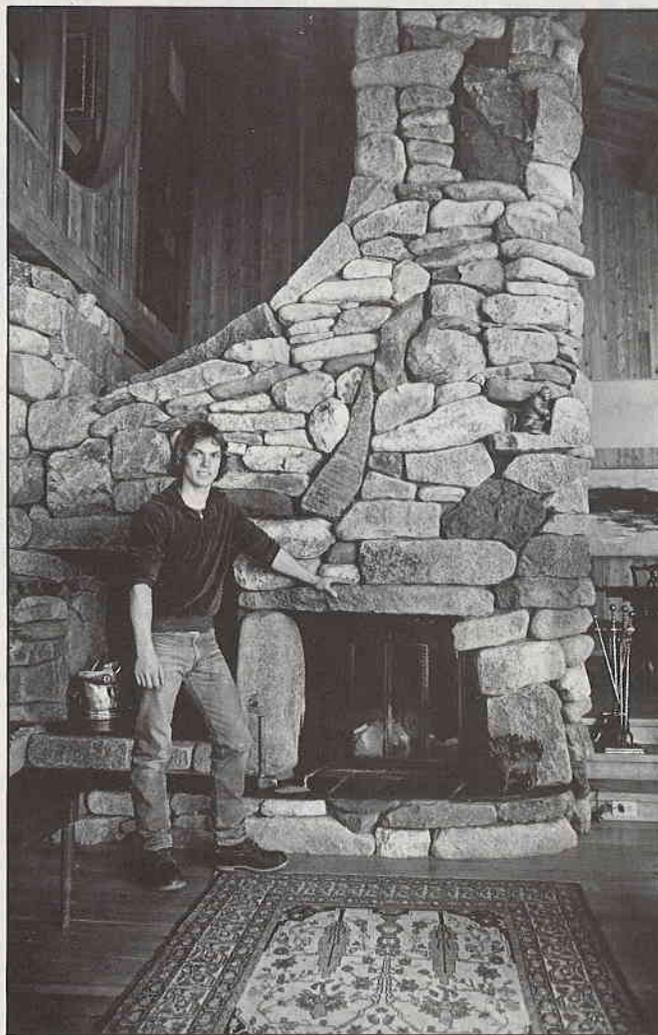


Making It In Maine

Leaving No Stone Unturned

Jeff Gammelin has a strong streak of the master builder in him, but his masterpieces, like the elaborate fireplace at right, which he built three years ago in a Surry home, are hidden away in houses scattered between Bucksport and Mt. Desert Island. When he built his own home, however, Gammelin made certain that his craftsmanship rose up plainly visible for all to see. Protruding through the roof is a twenty-foot-high tower made entirely of Maine fieldstones joined by mortar. This centerpiece resembles a medieval turret and overlooks a remote neck of the woods twelve miles northwest of downtown Ellsworth. Once Gammelin had completed the herculean labor of erecting the tower, which he estimates to have a total mass of thirty-five tons, the former special education teacher decided to begin his own stonemasonry business — Freshwater Stonework. And in the last six years, the thirty-two-year-old native of New Jersey, who moved to Maine ten years ago with his wife Candy, has built more than two dozen stone chimneys, fireplaces, interior walls, and even a sunken tub or two for a mixed clientele of artists, long-settled Maine families, and what Gammelin calls “the quiet rich.” Among his most recent, and technically ambitious, projects was a thirty-six-foot-tall, four-flue chimney fashioned inside a three-story home in Blue Hill. In the spring, as soon as the frost relaxes its grip on the earth,



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Gammelin and an assistant set about acquiring several tons of the granite, basalt, and other igneous rocks that abound on the fields of Hancock and Washington counties. The two men rely on their combined muscle power to heft the rocks, some of which weigh as much as 300 or 400 pounds, onto an old farm truck and, later, to jockey the blocks into place. “Sometimes we’ll handle a particular rock as many

as eight times from when we first collect it to when we set it,” says Gammelin, a broad-shouldered and vigorous young man who, nevertheless, on occasion does avail himself of a come-along winch. The self-taught stonemason possesses a sculptor’s instinct for proportion and balance, and says, “I handpick the rocks so that their individual lines and masses work together in a unified visual flow.” The finished

products are large-scale, free-form mosaics of mineral pinks, greys, yellows, greens, and blacks that beg to be touched. Although he prefers to use rocks that are intact, Gammelin will chisel out a piece of one when necessary for fit. To highlight the natural shape and texture of the stones, he chooses a dark, rather than a light, commercial mortar, which he applies sparingly. “Contrary to what most people think, smaller and shallower joints create stronger walls, and they also shed water more easily,” he explains. (So inconspicuous is the mortar in a Gammelin fireplace that many first-time viewers must look twice between the cracks to see it.) As for the energy-conservation benefits of his creations, Gammelin is quick to point out that “stonework acts like a thermal mass that helps moderate the temperature of a house.” While Gammelin’s business still relies heavily on word of mouth, his unique style of masonry has attracted the attention of local architects, with whom he has collaborated on diverse projects. The cost of a Gammelin stonework will vary according to size, materials, and labor involved, but usually runs into several thousand dollars. No matter what the scale of a job, though, Gammelin always brings to bear an intensely dedicated artisanship. (One customer was so impressed by the quality of a hearth that she insisted on sealing a time capsule containing family history into the masonry.) Having laid such a solid foundation for his enterprise, Jeff Gammelin would like nothing better than to see it rise to new heights.