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LIFE OF CONSTANT DANGER Steeplejack of the Cathedral

By Carol Van Den Berg, printed in the June 5, 1975 issue of the *Catholic Herald*

After an architect creates a structure, be it high rise, church or bridge, a handful of 20 all-around competent steeplejacks in the world keep the towers from crumbling to ruins. The men in the field love the challenge, freedom, and excitement of tackling an assignment that uses all the imagination, ingenuity, and physical dexterity they have.

Bob Young of Sacramento has steeple jacked throughout America and Europe for 20 years. He started at the age of 16 and there is no area of steeplejacking he can't handle. His work has been mainly with flagpoles, smoke stacks, TV antennas and church steeples. He has repaired many historical landmarks – the clock face of Big Ben in England, for example. He did mortar work on Notre Dame Cathedral in France. He painted the steeple at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, flag poles at the White House and Embassy Row in Washington, DC, to name a few of his jobs around the globe. His life has been daring and fascinating.

Bob's career began when he was a teenager. He said that one day he saw a man painting a flag pole, and he asked him if he could help him. The man told him to stick around. Little did Bob dream with that chance encounter that someday he would be at the top of the Empire State Building in New York City painting the antenna at a dizzying height, or that most of his life would be spent matching wits with the elements in a dangerous job. Bob traveled with this steeplejack throughout America and Europe. He learned to be a carpenter, roofer, painter, electrician and welder, all while balancing himself at "full mast."

Some of the history of steeplejacking is interesting.

"A two hundred family clan of gypsies dominated the steeplejack trade all over Europe for two hundred years," says Bob. "They got caught in Hitler's Germany, and only about five survived. The others were sent to concentration camps and killed."

"A professional jack has to have almost suicidal tendencies, at least in the beginning when he is inexperienced, or be very young to start," Bob says. "I control my fear when I am up high. And I've been in the business so long and know my structures and capabilities so well that it is rare that I feel anything when I am up high. I just settle down and do the job. The main thing I like about the job is that I am my own boss."

Going further into criteria of steeple jacking, Bob explains: "To survive, a steeplejack needs to be a good judge of what he is climbing. You must know about steel, metal, and wood. I take soundings on steel, and can tell the condition of the steel on the inside as well as the outside of the pole. Or in climbing a flagpole made of wood, you must be a shrewd judge. Many of the knots extend all the way through the flagpole and the wood around the knot often becomes brittle or rotten. You have to know when to climb a pole and when to back off. Wood often becomes rotten, and through experience, you have to be able to determine its state."

Bob has been noted for his work with gold leafing on steeples and church crosses. He also makes a gold paint that is as pretty as leafing and won't tarnish. Of gold leafing, he says, "It is difficult, tedious, and time consuming. And the wind that blows at heights makes the job doubly hard. You can hardly buy gold leaf now." Bob applied gold leaf on the cross at St John's Cathedral in Chicago. At the time, it was the tallest in the United States. Presently, he is interested in gold leafing or painting the dome of the State Capitol building here in California if the building is going to be restored.

Regarding safety techniques, Bob has had to invent most of his own. "Safety equipment on a high rise building is not that safe," he says. Many church steeples, especially the older ones in Europe, do not have crawl holes at the top of the steeple, he says. It is dangerous to get in position to work on them because you have to go up on the outside and climb your way up with ropes.

Bob does practically any kind of high work. About the only thing he backs away from is a rotten structure, and most of the time, he tackles that too. He even does light standards that can be two hundred or three hundred feet high.

"With a light standard, there is lots of sway at the top, and when you come down, you feel like you are still moving for a few hours," he says. "Perhaps the most dangerous work is painting the inside and outside of large water tanks," he says. "The inside is more dangerous. When I go inside an enclosed tank, I wear tennis shoes, tape all the metal on me down, and wear no nylon because it creates static electricity. Inside the enclosed tank, there is just a four foot window at the top, and bad air or no air. Air has to be piped into the tank."

"I wear a compressor and back pack like a skin diver when I am doing this type of work. You have to be careful because the kind of paint you have to use gives off fumes, and this builds up inside the tank. In New Jersey, a whole tank was blown apart because of paint fumes inside the tank."

One of Bob's narrow escapes was when a flag pole he was painting broke on him. He was working over concrete, but there was a building 16 feet away. He quickly jerked the pole into the building. He states he has invented equipment so that he can paint a flag pole from the ground if it is no higher than sixty-five feet. This eliminates much of the danger of his work.



Photo by Cathy Joyce, Catholic Herald

**Steeplejack Vitek Baginski Refinishing the Cathedral Cross
On the Center Spire**