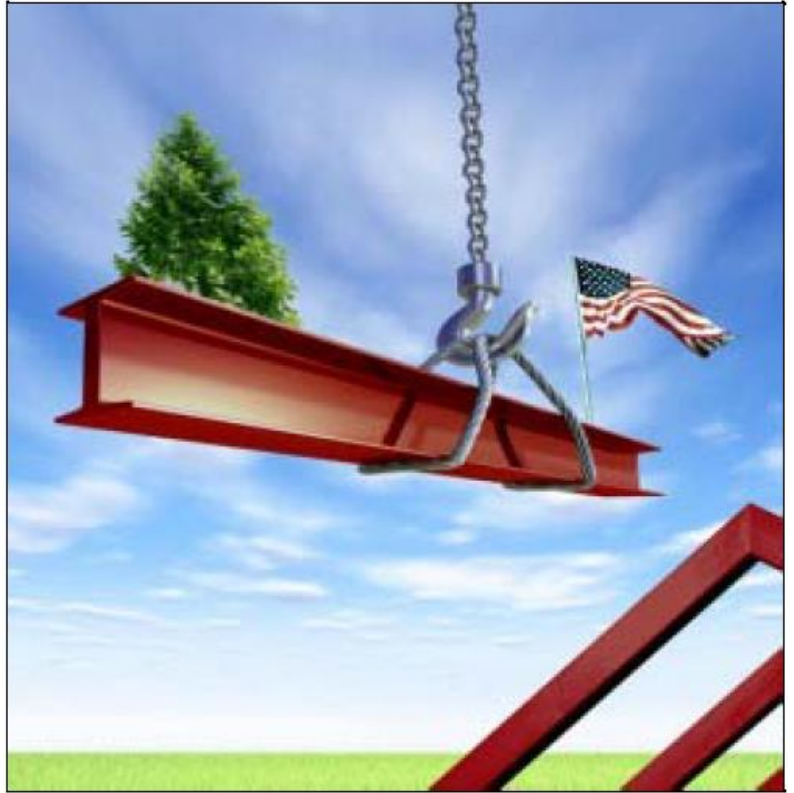


# WOODLAND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL BUILDING PROJECT

## HISTORY OF THE TOPPING OFF CEREMONY

The last steel beam placed is a major milestone in the evolution of a building project. This milestone is commemorated by painting the beam white and having the steel erection crew, construction team, designers, owners and other dignitaries sign the beam for posterity. The beam is typically adorned with a small evergreen tree and an American flag on opposite ends of the beam. This custom celebrates the construction process and is viewed as the first introduction of the building to the public. It uniquely honors the accomplishments of the construction crew and is reminiscent of old-fashion, barn-raising celebrations.

The tree is the key symbol. In the steel trade, it signifies construction has reached the sky without loss of life or injury and it bodes well for the future inhabitants of the building. Throughout history, the tree appears to have conveyed different meanings to different people. It is believed to date back to 700 A.D. when Scandinavians topped their newly completed structures with sheaves of grain for Odin's horse, Slepnir. Odin, supposedly impressed with this consideration for his horse bestowed good luck on the future inhabitants. It was also a signal to those nearby that it was time to start the celebration of a job well done.



The Vikings spread the custom across portions of the European world that they raided and colonized. Britons and Germans substituted small trees for sheaves of grain, and German tribes made a particular point of using only evergreens. Some historians suggest that the Vikings themselves adopted the pine tree for the topping-off. Regardless, the tradition appears to have reached America via immigrant Norwegian ironworkers in 1898. Though others also tribute the custom to the Native Americans who believed that no structure should be taller than a tree. Therefore, Native Americans topped off buildings with an evergreen to appease the forest spirits. Americans have however added their own twist to the ceremony by placing an American flag on one end of the beam.

Whatever the slant, history indicates the evergreen symbolizes positive things – good luck for future occupants, new or continued growth in concert with the environment and a safe job, well done. It is about the satisfaction taken in getting the hard part done. A great deal of labor may lie ahead but in putting that last beam in place, we have prefigured the whole. The ceremony announces the construction and project team's pride in the construction progress and accomplishments.

Excerpts taken from:

*Topping Off* by Peter Wood, BU professor of anthropology

*Why is there a Christmas tree on top of that steel building?* by Bruce Brown, CEO, RHINO Steel Building Systems, Inc.