



singularity in stone

By K. Schipper



The client wanted a pentangle fire platform in the middle of a sunken courtyard, and that's what Keith Middlemas delivered. Because of its location, Middlemas had to install a complete drainage system under the pentangle before finishing it. He also installed the courtyard's corner fountain. (All photos courtesy Keith Middlemas)

OSKALOOSA, Kan. — When it comes to his line of work, Keith Middlemas tells a story regarding the daughter-in-law of a prominent Kansas City real-estate developer who liked taking him to dinner while he did some work on her apartment.

When people he describes as “high-rollers” went by their table, the woman would stop them and say, “I’d like you to meet Mr. Middlemas. His hobby is stonework.”



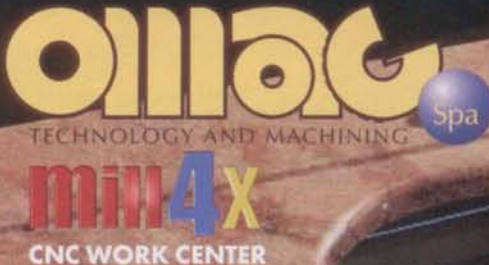
Having just the right stone for a job is very important to Middlemas. He's well-acquainted with the geology of the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas, and often goes out to get his own material.

become the guy providing the ideas. He likes to be called in early in a project to introduce people to the idea

of using curves, rather than inside and outside 90° angles.

A good example is with fire-






places; early in his career, Middlemas installed plenty of veneer for fairly conventional fireplaces. A more





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36,000-lbs piece of Lueders limestone from Mezger Enterprises in Lueders that he and Mohr spent more than 400 man-hours cutting down to its final 15' X 9' X 2' finished size.

"I don't follow sports, but I thought this would be interesting," Middlemas says of the job, which was installed in November. "Going to Texas, I'm not sure how profitable it was, but we had a great time doing it, and we know a lot of people in Kansas

City who are movers-and-shakers and they'll be entertained by our doing it."

CAREFUL WORK AHEAD

Although he doesn't mind describing himself as, "some old man in the woods at the edge of the prairie," Middlemas spends quite a bit of time prospecting for business – or oxygenating the waters, as he puts it.

He's constantly having lunches or dinners with clients, and after so

many years in the business he says they and his suppliers are among his main sources of friendship. Not that he's above doing a little additional seeding of interest himself.

Sometimes it just takes a good eye and the right gesture. For instance, years ago, he was called on to deliver a load of stone for another landscape artist to install. Observing that the client was of Asian ancestry, he left the off-loaded stone in the shape of a dragon – a symbol of good luck in the client's culture – giving the tail a 360° twist around a young tree.



It's just a simple patio for an Episcopal church, but Middlemas cut the orange osage for the bench seats himself, and anchored the stone ends with a system of underground galvanized steel supports.

"When he saw that, he asked me certain things about myself," Middlemas says. "Now, I've worked on the property for maybe 15 years, and he pays me \$20,000 a year to do anything I want to do; it's me all the way."

That approach to jobs is probably the biggest example of how what Middlemas does has changed over the years.

"Every five to seven years I change the nature of my service to others," he says. "I mostly stick with stone, but moving into more carved complexity."

While he began offering what he calls "stone enhancements" to the work of other landscape contractors and masons, over the years he's

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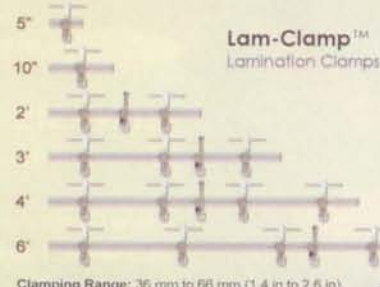


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"I go out in a circle of a couple hundred miles and bring back my own stone," he says. "When I do out-of-state projects, I like to pick my own pieces there, too. Instead of going to stone retailers, I go to the suppliers and get the crème de la crème as they're digging it up."

He cites one instance where he befriended not only the supplier, but his wife, buying her a flowering lotus and sending her the appropriate fertilizer for the plant through the mail.

"Occasionally, they'll feed me a steak dinner," he says. "It's more than just a business relationship."

Part of his success is that he keeps a running mental inventory of what's available in the area. Asked by his alma mater if he could drill a pair of cubic rocks planned for a fountain on the campus, he made the woman organizing the job a counterproposal.

"I told her that every town has two of those," he says, adding it was meant as a joke. "Then I told her that I knew where there was a fabulous stone in a valley about 120 miles

away. I said I'd go get it and make the fountain out of it for the same price as the two cubic blocks would cost from the quarry."

The stone weighed 12,000 lbs, and after cutting portholes in the sides of it, he delivered it to the campus. The school later submitted photos of the job to an annual competition for campus landscaping, and won first place for the project.

However, Middlemas admits to owing some of his success with local stone to science. The Flint Hills of eastern Kansas produce a large variety of stone, but – because of water seeping into the various underground layers – only six percent to 10 percent is structurally worthwhile.

"I've taken some geology courses, and I have a copy of *The Stratigraphic Succession in Kansas* (a 1968 publication of the Kansas Geological Survey) which tells the depth sequences," he says. "There's verbiage about each layer."

It's probably not surprising that when Middlemas was hired to do a

fairly high-profile job for the Kansas City Chiefs professional football team, he and apprentice Gregg Mohr opted to go to Texas for just the right piece.

The job involved carving an arrowhead – the team's logo – for the team's practice facility. The contractor who hired Middlemas found a piece of stone measuring 12' X 17'; the carver felt it had a flaw in it.

"It's what happens trying to find it from a swivel chair with a telephone," Middlemas says. "I didn't say anything to anybody, but a couple weeks later I took money from the bank and went to Texas to visit quarries."

He adds, rather philosophically, that he was in need of a vacation at the time; along with visiting the quarries, he had the chance to bring back a couple pieces of stone from an abandoned quarry that he made into a sculpture for one of his friends. (He also managed to see plenty of scissor-tailed flycatchers in flight.)

Ultimately, he settled on a

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"I'd never been to Dixie or the desert, so I got an opportunity to go to New Mexico," Middlemas explains. "I was going to be a worker bee and that's what I did for awhile, but I ran into a really wonderful Mexican-American guy – a full-time adobe and brick layer – who did romantic, stylized watercolors of desert scenes, and he started teaching me how to build things from adobe and stone."

Even before that, the young man was marching to his own drummer. Rather than living in town for the summer, he bought a piece of land and built a cabin.

"It was way less-comfortable and less-convenient than living in the city, but I had a really good time and when it was over I sold that land and paid off my school loans," he says.

Returning to KU, he finished his course work, and then – rather conventionally – took a job in Atlanta working for a ceramics company.

"The thing is, I didn't want to be under anyone else's tutelage for too long," he says. "I saved some money,

came back to Kansas and bought 22 acres in the country. I built a little cabin there, and a 2,400 ft², really killer, heavy steel-and-concrete stone shop. I live in the cabin and work in my nice, open shop."



Patios, fountains, fireplaces, intricately carved decorations and utilitarian signs are all part of Middlemas' repertoire. Here, the appeal is in the shape of the stone and the carved banding.

The centerpiece of the shop is a vertical lathe that Middlemas designed with the help of an engineer friend that's capable of turning stone up to 9' high or up to 6'3" wide.

"It's great for making fountain bowls, and it's adjustable from 0-30 rpms," he says. "None of it is computerized, but we have a primitive tracer, so we can do tapered stone columns or supports for a bench or a piece of bronze sculpture, and I have a lot of equipment for lifting, and diamond and pneumatic tools.

"It's all hand-and-eye, though. We try to leave a lot of things just as they are in nature."

CREAM OF THE CROP

Middlemas' commitment to leaving things as natural as possible certainly extends into his choice of stones. Much of the material is bought direct from farmers in his area.



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"It's a continuous tug-of-war in me to decide whether what I do is a business or a hobby," he says.

The fact that Bluestem Stoneworks continues as his sole means of support after 30-plus years suggests it's more than a hobby. Being self-employed, he admits there are few jobs he'll actually turn down, but Middlemas' ability to find the clients and the projects he finds most interesting hardly implies he's scrambling for every dollar, either.

It's probably telling that the word "fun" pops into his conversation regularly, whether he's talking about installing a custom fireplace, or taking a 2,000-mile jaunt to Texas to find just the right limestone for a high-end project — but then Middlemas has mastered the art of doing what he loves and getting paid for it.

MAKING OPPORTUNITIES

Some of Middlemas' success may come from his strong sense of place. One of the older Baby Boomers at



The 15' X 9' X 2' arrowhead crafted for the entrance to the practice facility of the Kansas City Chiefs football team is ready to be moved by crane. To fabricate the piece, Middlemas and apprentice Gregg Mohr worked on one side, then had the stone flipped.

62, he moved to eastern Kansas with his family while still a small child and remains enamored of it.

"I'm originally from Illinois," he says. "My father is from New York, and my mother's from just outside Chicago, but they came to Kansas in 1950. I've pretty much been here ever since, although I've traveled to other countries and lived other places."

That's important because he had a life-shaping experience while a student at the University of Kansas. After years of spending parts of summers visiting relatives in those two cities or camping with the family in Minnesota or Colorado, he decided if he was going to have to get a summer job, it would be someplace he hadn't been.

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recent job showcases his own artistic touches.

"I did the fireplace with water lilies carved in the stonework; I made a five-piece arch with the same texture and color and design in it," he explains. "When you come in the front door and hang up your coat, you look through the stone arch down a lot of dark hardwood into a room about 30' away, where the fireplace is on center in the middle of the room."

The freestanding fireplace itself sports slightly rounded corners and a special seating niche in the rear for the woman of the house, who broke her back as a teenager and likes to lean against the warm stone when the fireplace is lit and look out an extensive window system.

The crowning touch, however, can't even be viewed from inside.

"When you're on the deck and look through the bay window, you can see a little quote from Longfellow, which goes, 'In elder days of art, builders wrought with greatest care, each minute and

unseen part, for the gods are everywhere,'" Middlemas says.

Nor is it probably surprising that he adds, "I have lots of little things in my head that I haven't had the opportunity to build; I can imagine captivating details and design improvements in my head faster than I can build them."

And, that's even utilizing outside help for a lot of his larger work. Along with Mohr, Middlemas explains that he trained another stone mason years ago; while the man went out on his own, he normally has a crew of three or four that Middlemas taps when he needs more help.

"I might need them for 90 minutes, or maybe three weeks, but they come and do the heavy stuff," he says. "We design and develop our own intensive elements in the shop. Then, I frame and site and set the standards, and they're willing to do the careful work I require."

His most recent passion is for small carved garden structures built on a hidden steel framework with

highly refined interiors; the units then can be moved by crane onto a prepared site. That was certainly on his mind late last year, although he had two main activities on his schedule as the prairie moved toward winter.

"I have 90 days of carving to do this winter," he says. "I hope to carve at the top of the hill on the prairie where my shop is, and then go down into the valley where my cabin is to read and write. I want to read *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville."

That should take him to April, when once again he'll be back out doing what he's done now for more than 30 years professionally – working stone. Whether it's a hobby or a business, Middlemas says it's good, clean fun, and something he's doing with an eye on posterity.

"When I'm gone there will be my work all over the place," he concludes. "Nobody will know who did it, but there will be kids not yet born who will enjoy what's inside – or outside – their buildings." ■

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