A crew of five young adults are restoring part of Leelanau County’s past, and on Aug. 8-9 they’ll show you how it’s done at the Port Oneida Fair. They are bringing new life to the old Goffar Barn, a 30-foot by 40-foot timber frame building in Glen Arbor Township. Located at the north end of Port Oneida/M-22 on Lake Narada, the 19th century barn is one of 366 historic structures located within the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore in varying states of repair. The Goffar barn has a crumbling fieldstone foundation, missing structural timbers, windows without glass, needs a couple new doors and sees a lot of daylight shining between the hemlock boards siding the building. A pluperfect mess? Hardly. It’s one big learning experience.

The Goffar barn re-do is a cooperative project between the National Lakeshore and EcoSEEDS’s Traditional Building Skills Youth Corps program based in Traverse City. The SEEDS worker-students are part of the Hands-On Preservation Experience (HOPE) project. Their teacher is Empire resident Steve Stier, a licensed builder and preservation consultant specializing in the restoration of historic and traditional structures.

As its name suggests, HOPE provides hope. The program trains young adults in the art of traditional and historic building skills that are threatened by extinction. And they learn marketable skills—something of an irony considering they’re focusing on antique methods and practices—that could lead to a career. The SEEDS-HOPE crew will be at Kelderhouse Farm, another historic Port Oneida site, both days of the fair—itself a trip back in time to the 1800s and early 1900s. The SEEDS crew will demonstrate the old ways of building and the hand tools they’re using to restore-repair Goffar barn.

For the purposes of this story, let’s stipulate that they don’t build barns like they used to. “Contemporary builders know modern construction. They don’t know how to build a structure like they did 150 years ago,” said National Lakeshore historical architect Kim Mann. “We’re discovering that there are a lot of skills that have been lost, especially in the construction industry—a point of significance for a National Park full of 19th century buildings. In a time before power tools and the mass transportation of materials from all ends of the Earth, a barn was built from local materials, by local guys, using their hands to do the work.

In a contemporary construction project, “all the builder does is assemble factory-made products, and the only merit to the work is assembling something fast,” Stier said. In his experience, the old ways of building offer “better craftsmanship, better materials, better design.”

The U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) mandates that the restoration of historical park buildings must be done “like for like,” Mann said. The replacement materials can be newer, but they must be the same as or like the original. The most obvious example of this dictate-in-practice can be seen at the base of Goffar barn. The crumbling fieldstone foundation is being restored with the original rocks, which have separated from the ancient mortar that once kept them in place, but have now tumbled onto the ground. Sand from the site, literally from the ground underneath the building, is mixed with lime to create mortar.

Go inside Goffar barn to see other repairs. A hand-hewed hemlock beam waits to be installed where one was removed by a farmer (who left no note explaining why). The beam’s tenon—the male half of a mortise and tenon joint—was hand carved by the SEEDS crew. The old, original hardware from one of the rotten barn doors, hand forged when the barn was built in the 1860-70s, is “cleaned up and put back on for the next 100 years,” Stier said. “We re-use as much of the existing materials as possible.”