

FEBRUARY 1998
U·S AIRWAYS

Attaché



The world's hardest jigsaw puzzles. PAGE 68

PIECING TOGETHER THE SCIENCE OF ROMANCE

Plus: **WINSTON O'GRADY** test-drives a Zamboni ★ **AMY WALLACE** on the Insider's L.A.
★ **RENÉE TAYLOR** on Artful Outrageousness ★ **ED GRAY** on Errol Flynn-style swordsmanship

Does your life lack frustration? Join the likes

GOING

RIE

the toughest jigsaw puzzles ever made. Some

of Bill Gates and Tom Peters and buy one of

ING TO

GATES

assembly required. ★ **BY KATHLEEN BURGE**

If EVER THERE WAS A JOB Steve Richardson wanted to pull off perfectly, this was it. His company, Stave Puzzles, had received an order from business guru Tom Peters for a \$3,000 jigsaw puzzle, a particularly devilish creation called "Camelot" that earned its price tag with a host of tricks lurking among its pieces. Peters was Richardson's hero. More importantly, Peters had named Stave's work his 1991 Product of the Year.

The puzzle got packed up and shipped by UPS. The workers exchanged high fives, and the next day they got to work on their next custom job. That was when one of the Stave people looked at the floor and saw a terribly alarming sight: two tiny pieces from the Tom Peters puzzle!

This is a catastrophe akin to forgetting the disc brakes on a new car. Before the workshop had carpeting, you could get Richardson to run tearing out of his office by dropping a puzzle piece. He could hear the *thock* of plywood hitting the floor above his office. You simply don't leave out a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. You certainly don't leave one out of a puzzle that costs \$3,000, has no straight edges, and is calculated to drive the solver crazy even if all the pieces are there.

And you absolutely don't leave it out of a puzzle you have just made for the *Pursuit of Excellence* guy.

There was only one thing to do: Get Tom Peters' puzzle back and restore the missing pieces. Which raised another question: Were those two pieces on the floor the only ones missing?

That afternoon, a Friday, a Stave employee drove to Peters' summer home in southern Vermont, scooped up the puzzle, and returned to headquarters in Wilder, halfway up the state. There, Richardson and his employees huddled to face the awful truth: They could confirm that the puzzle was intact only by assembling it, piece by painstaking piece. They divided into shifts to attack the puzzle round-the-clock. With less than three days until Peters needed it back to present as a gift, the puzzlemeisters crept toward a solution. It was a scene Stave customers would have paid dearly to witness: The Chief Tormentor fallen victim to his own skullduggery.

Richardson and his colleagues finished with little time to spare and raced the puzzle back to Peters. "It was horrendous," recalls Richardson, who sent Peters a free puzzle to atone. "I was totally embarrassed by the whole thing." But Stave came out looking good. Peters roared when he heard the story, telling Richardson he plans to

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use it in his seminars. Richardson's stint as tormentee didn't diminish the sadistic pleasure he takes in torturing his customers.

"HE THRIVES on all this venting of frustration," says Riccardo Stoeckicht, a DuPont executive who owns 20 Stave puzzles. And Richardson's jigsaw puzzles earn him the right to brandish a pitchfork. Customers tend to use the same words to describe them: fiendish, exasperating, diabolical. "Good Morning America" called them "jigsaw puzzles from hell." Several Stave puzzles have appeared in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the most difficult ever created (with price tags from \$75 to \$14,000, they also won entries as the most expensive). So it's not surprising that Richardson attracts wealthy patrons, including Bill and Melinda Gates, Barbara Bush, Julie Andrews, and a handful of Mellons, DuPonts, and Roosevelts.

Stave puzzles often command prominent roles in the lives of their fans. Four men have proposed with jigsaw pieces carved to say, "Will you marry me?" (All four women accepted, but only three couples made it to the altar. "That's a pretty good success rate," Richardson brags.) Some customers have written special provisions for their Stave collections into their wills. One ordered a custom-made puzzle for his pet toucan, who had an annoying habit of pecking at the pieces his owner was trying to assemble.

Varied as they are, the best Stave puzzles have an unequaled amount of trickery. Richardson rates them according to difficulty with one to five lightning bolts. A one-bolt puzzle signals "hors-d'oeuvres," as the company literature puts it, offering just a taste of "Stave shenanigans." Four bolts brings a warning in the catalogue: "If they made Pepto Bismol for the brain, this is when you'd need it." And a five? "What part of 'impossible' don't you understand?" The company has a new policy that no one can order a five-lightning-bolt puzzle unless they have already solved a four-bolter. Richardson is less worried about the mental health of his customers than about keeping them interested in his company. The rule is meant to save novice customers from committing puzzle suicide with their first Stave work, and never ordering again. "We don't want to kill them right off the bat," Richardson explains.

Some puzzles are monochromatic, denying solvers any color clues. None of the puzzles come with pictures of the finished version. Some of Richardson's favorite tricks: phony corners (pieces that *look* like corners but



JIGSAWN
Microsoft mogul Bill Gates is a fan of Stave hardware. "Lobster Trap" (above left) has three dimensions of jumbled crustaceans. "Hole-in-One" (bottom left) comes with real golf balls to putt through a trick hole. Limited-edition "Under the Big Top" (bottom right) is hand-painted.

actually fit inside the puzzle), split corners (actual corners that are disguised), “whammy” edges (adjacent pieces that seem not to fit together since they don’t interlock), and irregular edges (a puzzle border that is not straight). Other puzzles come with a built-in mystery. Clues are hidden in the puzzle itself and in an accompanying novella. As this story went to press, Pentagon (\$2,795), a 500-piece mystery puzzle, had been solved just twice: by a 7-year-old *wunderkind* from Natick, Massachusetts, and by Bill and Melinda Gates.

Stave’s trickiest puzzles are constructed with pieces that can fit together more than one way. Fred and Ginger (\$1,895), for instance, a five-lightning-bolt challenge depicting two dragons and a castle, goes together more than 10,000 different ways. But only three of those 10,000 ways are correct. The puzzle is so aggravating that Stave created a support group for its victims. Riccardo Stoeckicht conquered Fred and Ginger last fall; he estimates devoting more than 100 hours over a six-month stretch. Never, though, in his darkest moments, did he consider asking Richardson for help. “They love to see people beg for hints,” he says. “It’s like giving away my personal honor if I have to ask for a hint.”

Stoeckicht personifies the Stave addict. Immediately after his triumph he experienced a letdown. “I guess it’s a disappointment that there is really nothing more to look forward to,” Stoeckicht laments. “You’ve made it to Mount Everest. The only way you can go right now is down until something new pops up.”

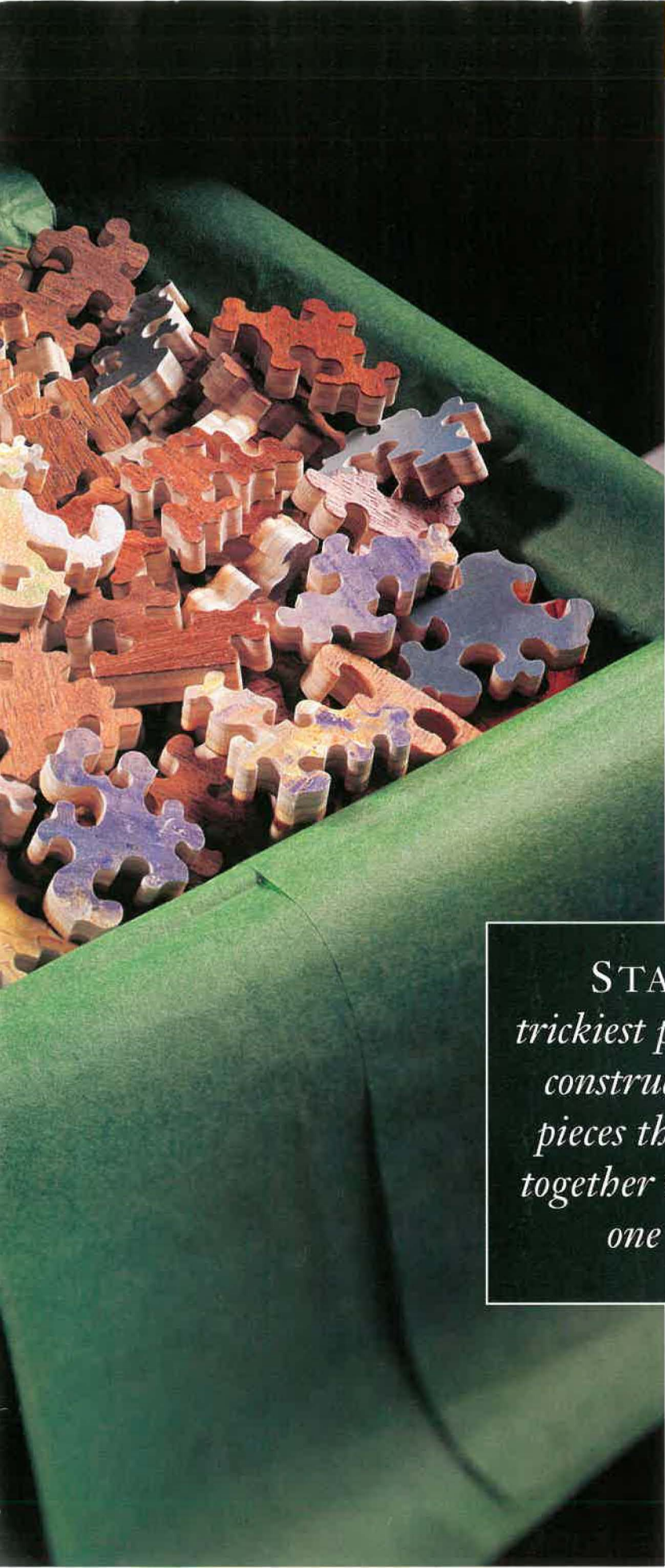
ARE WE STILL TALKING *jigsaw puzzles* here? The relaxing little rainy-day activity you do with your kids? To show you how far the jigsaw frontiers have been pushed back, you need only consider their once-benign origin. The earliest known puzzles appeared in England in the 1760s, created by a map-maker named John Spilsbury. He created “dissected” maps as tools for teaching geography to children. Anne Williams, a Bates economics professor and author of *Jigsaw Puzzles, An Illustrated History and Price Guide*, owns one of Spilsbury’s creations: a 1776 map of Europe from Sotheby’s that cost her more than her first car. Her collection, one of the largest in the world, also includes a Japanese puzzle so tiny it came with a pair of tweezers. She also has a puzzle made entirely of chocolate. (“I used to have two,” she admits.)

Because Spilsbury’s puzzles were expensive—costing more than an agricultural worker’s weekly wage, according to Linda Hannas, author of *The Jigsaw Book*, they became playthings of the wealthy. Jane Austen has a character in *Mansfield Park* express disdain for a poor relative who can’t afford a puzzle: “Dear Mama, only think, my cousin cannot put the map of England together.”

It was nearly a century after Spilsbury’s early puzzles appeared before the first known jigsaw puzzle was manufactured across the Atlantic. A map of the state of New



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES HARRIS



STAVE'S
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York, this jigsaw creation appeared in a box covered with testimonials from the governor of New York and the president of Union College. But soon, as with any great American toy, adults horned in and turned the puzzles into an obsession. In 1909, Parker Brothers, sensing a gold mine, stopped making all other toys and games for a year to concentrate on jigsaw puzzles. The company employed 255 jigsaw operators—all women—in its Salem, Massachusetts, factory. When the Great Depression came along, bringing with it generous amounts of involuntary free time, sales surged, totaling 100 million in one seven-month period during 1933. Puzzles were cheap back then; a 300-piece set sold for 25 cents at

newsstands. The appeal of Depression-era jigsaw puzzles may have offered solvers an ephemeral chance at success. "People couldn't solve all the problems in their lives but they could solve the puzzle," Williams says. "It gave them a sense of mastery and accomplishment that was lacking in their lives."

The Depression also nourished puzzlemakers. Alfred Butts, an unemployed architect, turned his knowledge of jigsaw and crossword puzzles into a game that came to be known as Scrabble. Two other unemployed men, John

Henriques and Frank Ware, created Par Puzzles, an upscale, custom-designed, wooden-puzzle company that set the stage for Stave. Among the buyers of Par's hand-cut puzzles were the Duke of Windsor (who wanted pieces that silhouetted his four Cairn terriers) and a host of Hollywood types, including Marilyn Monroe, Bing Crosby, Gary Cooper, and Marlene Dietrich. The movie-jigsaw connection was not lost on puzzle makers. In 1936, star-shaped puzzles with portraits of Hollywood luminaries—including the likes of Laurel & Hardy and Robert Taylor—went on sale nationwide. They were simply copying a World War I innovation of the German government, which distributed puzzles depicting the likeness of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The British Ministry of Information picked up the idea in World War II, giving away inspiring puzzles with such themes as "The Navy Driving Off Nazi Bombers."

STAVE'S Steve Richardson followed this tradition of



JACK MITCHELL/OUTLINE

SOUND OF MUSING

Julie Andrews is among the stars happily puzzled by Stave.

One reason: The subtle craftsmanship that includes the company's clown logo as a signature piece. Clients order custom puzzles priced up to \$14,000.

facing a crisis with a jigsaw: He entered the business after losing his day job. He had fled New Jersey with his wife, Martha, in 1969, giving up a high-pressure position in a mammoth consulting firm. "I was tired of the corporate rat race," he says. He took a job with a Hanover, New Hampshire, computer company that laid him off six months later, leaving him with a \$247-a-month mortgage and no income. Over beers one night, Richardson and another laid-off employee, David Tibbetts, hatched the idea of starting a puzzle company. Richardson had occasionally created puzzles for fun; Tibbetts knew graphic design. So they created a company called Strategy House, making cardboard jigsaw puzzles and other games out of Richardson's garage in Vermont.

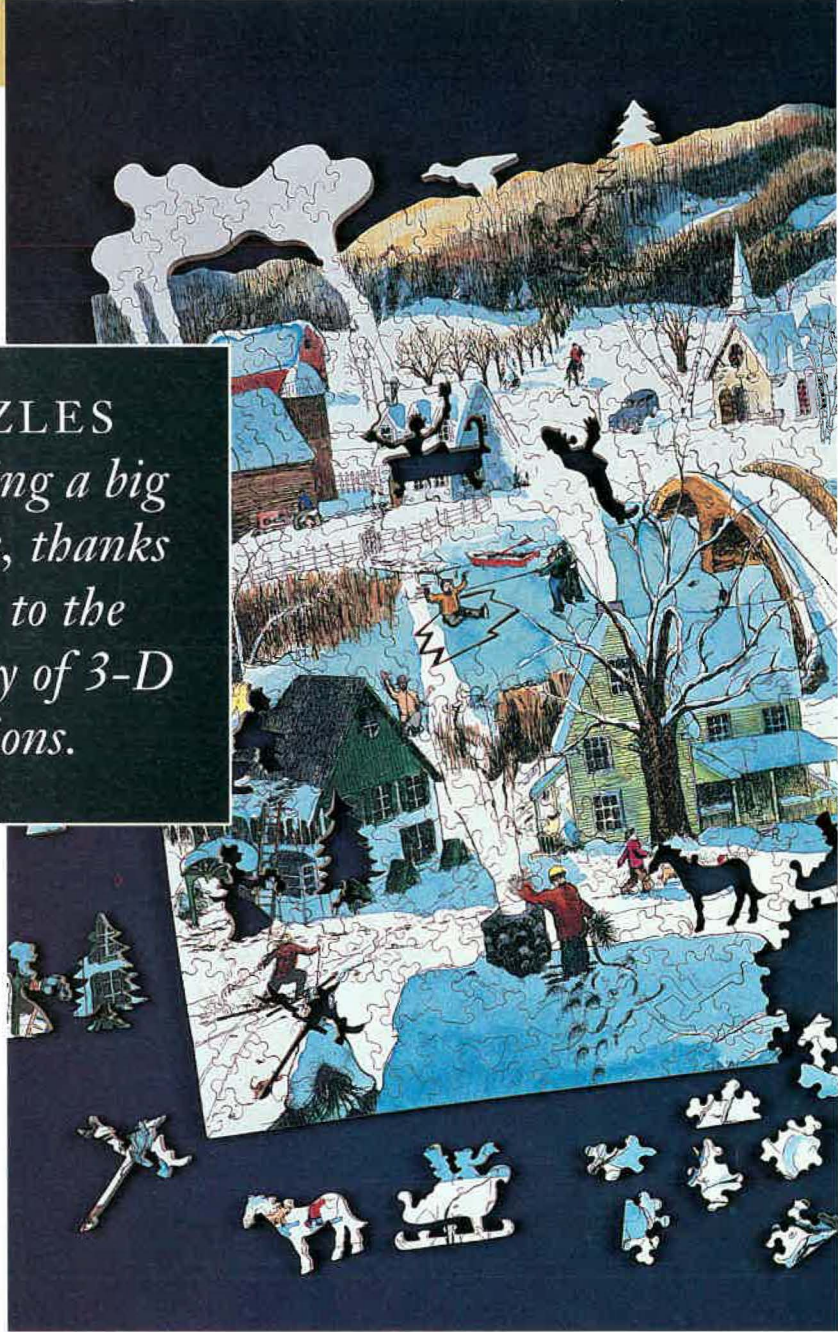
One day in 1974, they got a call that changed their future. A Boston businessman, desperate when Par Puzzles went semi-moribund after the loss of its founders, offered Richardson and Tibbetts \$300 to make a custom-made, 500-piece wooden jigsaw puzzle for his wife. The partners were stunned: It was 100 times what they received for their cardboard puzzles. Richardson got hold of a Par puzzle for the first time, and the scales dropped from his eyes. "I gasped," he recalls. "It was exquisite." He subcontracted that job, not having the tools or skills to do it himself. But he saw a promising—and lucrative—niche for his company. If he could figure out how to make and sell just one super-puzzle a month, he could pay his mortgage.

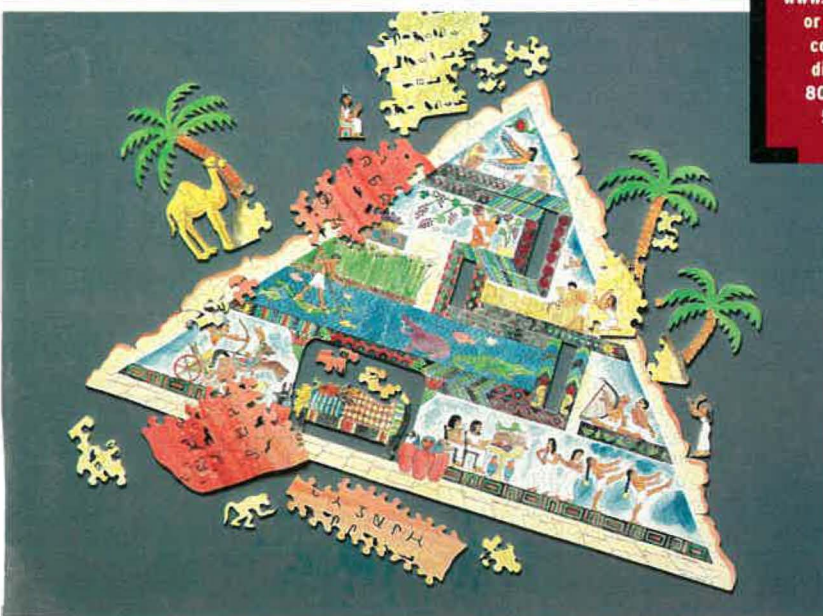
RICHARDSON AND TIBBETTS changed the name of the company to Stave, a combination of their first names and a word that means "to pull apart." They bought ads in the *New Yorker* offering wooden, custom-made jigsaw puzzles.

Hey, they figured, the ads weren't due to appear for three months—by which time, they hoped, they'd actually learn to make the things.

Richardson spent that summer in his garage with an old jigsaw borrowed from his father-in-law. He shopped around for five-ply wood. He scoured the country for the fine saw blades he needed to cut intricate designs. Finding nothing suitable, he took his search to Europe. "Then I started cutting up pieces of wood," he said. "Man, it was terrible." Nonetheless, by the time the *New Yorker* hit the stands, he could make a decent puzzle. The first customers, a Massachusetts couple, sent a \$75 check without seeing the company's brochure. (That couple eventually became the best all-time Stave

PUZZLES
are making a big comeback, thanks largely to the popularity of 3-D versions.





customers, spending \$1 million before they died a few years ago.) More orders began to rush in. It wasn't long before Stave began holding competitions—timed events with cash prizes. This year's event will be held in the Equinox Hotel in Manchester Village, Vermont. The hotel is owned by the Guinness brewing company of Ireland, which also happens to own the Gleneagles resort in Scotland. First prize in the puzzle competition is a golf week for two at Gleneagles. Anyone can enter. Just call Stave.

Part of Richardson's buzz—Tibbetts got bored with the company in 1976 and sold his share for \$1 and a saw—is that he enjoys an unusually close relationship with his customers. He sends birthday and anniversary cards, and presents Christmas gifts to the most loyal. To the first person who solved a lobster-shaped puzzle, Richardson shipped two fresh lobsters.

He is also at the top of his game. Stave's business has increased fourfold in the past decade, riding a national jigsaw wave. The puzzles are making a big comeback, thanks largely to the popularity of 3-D versions. The extra dimension has brought men to a pastime traditionally dominated by women, according to Williams. Meanwhile, educators are returning to the roots of the early jigsaw puzzles and promoting them as teaching toys. In Britain, some teachers use jigsaws as a math activity to teach rotation, angles, spatial relationships, and fractions. Psychologists also say jigsaw puzzles boost the development of problem-solving skills and powers of concentration. Best of all, researchers at the University of Texas-Houston Health Science Center announced in 1996 their finding that jigsaw puzzles—and other mind exercises like crossword puzzles, chess, and bridge—are a kind of low-impact aerobics for your synapses, keeping your brain's nerve cells and circuits healthy.

For his part, Richardson doesn't talk about his puzzles' salubrious benefits. He talks about pain. "The sado-masochistic relationship that we have is apparent in a lot of the customers," he says. "We have lunatics out there who love this." ★

Reporter KATHLEEN BURGE has returned to her home state of Vermont after covering the plight of Croatian refugees in Bosnia.



CHRISTOPHER PARKER

PROBLEM SOLVED

Steve Richardson founded Stave after losing his computer job. His diabolical favorites include "Winter Fantasy" (above left) and the 3-D "Stavely Manor" (bottom left). To solve "Pharaoh's Curse" (bottom right) you must construct a "Rosetta Stone" for the key to a hieroglyphic message that in turn helps you restore a lost mummy to its tomb.

THE TICKET

You can see the puzzles on the Stave Web site: www.stave.com or call the company directly: 802/295-5200.