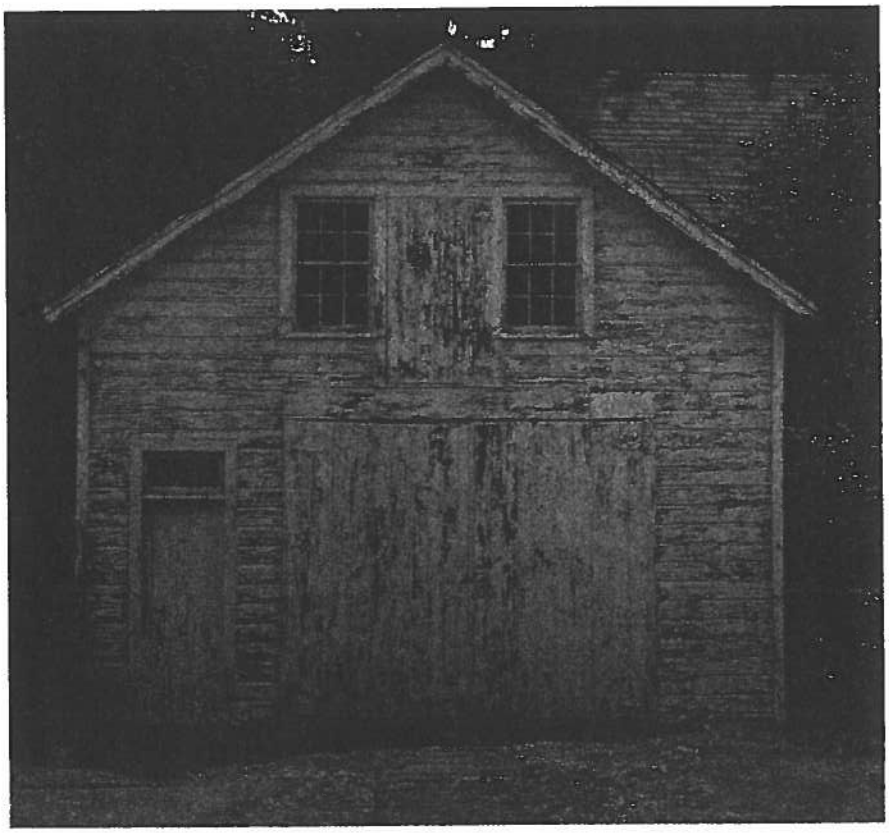
GETTING THE LEAD OUT

BY JOHN KOSMER



If this barn was built prior to 1980, chances are pretty good that its peeling paint contains lead. No one can tell by looking at it, though, so it should be tested with a lead test paint kit.

It's springtime, and time to think about your home's painting projects. As you energetically scrape and sand that parlor wall, be aware that an estimated 74% of all private homes built before 1980 contain lead paint. If that's the case, you can just imagine the number of coats of lead paint on a home built between 1860 and 1912.

Everyone knows the danger of having old, flaky paint on the walls that a child could ingest. But a more insidious way that lead can be ingested—by children and adults alike—is through fine dust entering the lungs, which is why sanding should be kept to a minimum in any renovation project. I have even heard of lead poisoning resulting when the interior side of painted windows (with multiple coats from years of painting) slides against the window-stop molding. The resulting friction causes minute lead dust particles to become airborne. One window won't do much damage; but imagine a large Victorian house with 30 or 40 windows. The cumulative effect of all that window friction could add up to a significant level of lead dust over time.

ASSESS THE DANGER

The easiest way to test for lead is with a simple lead test kit like the one from Hybrivet Systems called LeadCheck. (The same LeadCheck product is also marketed by Homax products.)

I tested it and found it simple to use. You squeeze the middle of a crayon-type tube with a brush at the end of it. Squeezing the tube breaks an internal cylinder that holds the testing liquid. When you see the yellow liquid emerge in the brush on the end of the tube, you are ready to test.

Simply brush the area you are testing. If it stays yellow, there is no lead. If it turns pink or red, there is lead. Remember to do this test on an area of chipped paint so you are testing the underlying areas. The top layer will not have lead if it has been painted during the last 15 years.

Removing lead paint with strippers, scrapers and sandpaper causes its own problems. Vapors and dust can be ingested. You either have to call in a professional (which is advised) or use stringent safeguards including wearing protective clothing, using an air-purifying respirator (not just a paper dust mask) and cleaning up with a vacuum with a special filter, not just an ordinary household filter.

An alternative way to neutralize the lead content in your paint is through a process called encapsulation. The EPA defines encapsulation as "a process that

ChildGuard encapsulant works well for the interior covering of lead-based paint. Use as a primer and then apply a finish coat with your chosen color.

LeadCheck lead test kit is available through both HybriVet and Homax.

makes lead-based paint inaccessible, by providing a barrier between the lead-based paint and the environment." With proper encapsulation the paint layers are rendered safe and do not need to be removed.

One interior encapsulant product that meets or exceeds all federal, state and local standards, according to the manufacturer, is ChildGuard by Fiberlock. It is a water-based product that goes on like paint and costs about $30 a gallon. You can use it as your primer and then topcoat with the color of your choice. If your home exterior has lead paint you want to cover, Fiberlock also has commercial exterior encapsulant product in 5-gallon drums.

Another way to encapsulate the lead paint on interior walls is by using wallpaper; then you would only need to use a product like ChildGuard on your moldings. You can kill two birds with one stone if your walls are in poor condition by first applying a liner wallpaper (installed horizontally) before hanging the new wallpaper. The liner paper will not only smooth out a wall in poor condition but will also give you an extra layer of encapsulation.