

Diving for sunken 'treasure'

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SANDPOINT, Idaho—It all started in 1982 when Don and Kim Cox were sitting around, bored, on a frigid winter day.

In a moment of insanity ... er, inspiration ... the Sandpoint couple, both scuba-diving enthusiasts, decided to don their cold-weather gear and plunge into Lake Pend Oreille to find an outboard motor lost from a friend's boat.

Not only did they find the motor—which started in three tries, Don Cox says, laughing—but they also discovered the genesis of their current business, Pend Oreille Pines.

What the Coxes found were logs—lots and lots of old-growth northern pine and western larch, lying on the silty floor of Lake Pend Oreille where they'd come to rest more than a century before as they waited to be processed at shoreline sawmills.

It wasn't until the mid-90s, when the Coxes heard about the success a Wisconsin company was having recovering such logs and milling them into lumber, that the Sandpoint couple decided to try doing the same thing with the logs they'd discovered.

Initially, Pend Oreille Pines simply brought the logs to the surface and sold them whole to the Wisconsin company, Superior Water-Logged Lumber Co. Now, the logs stay in Sandpoint and are milled by Pend Oreille Pines into lumber for flooring, wall planking, and beams, as well as stock that's used by carpenters to make furniture and cabinetry, Kim Cox says.

The demand for the products is great enough that in August the company broke ground on an 8,000-square-foot plant that will serve as its new sawmill, warehouse, showroom, and office, allowing it to move from smaller leased space in Sandpoint. The new facility, which they're building for an undisclosed price, should be ready for full production next month and be completely finished by March, Don Cox says. There, Pend Oreille Pines expects to mill about 20,000 board feet of lumber a month to start, he says.

The wood produced by Pend Oreille Pines is notable both for its coloring and its fine grain, says Chris Novak, contractor sales manager at Alpine Lumber Supply, in Sandpoint, which sells Pend Oreille Pines lumber.

"It's old growth, which gives it the beauty—you have those tight rings that give it a good appearance," Novak says. What's more, the logs absorbed minerals where they long were in contact with the silty lake bottom, which gives distinctive coloring to the lumber cut from them, imbuing it with yellow, green, gray, blue, and pink tones.

The lumber is "attractive to customers, contractors,

and homeowners. And people like recycled materials instead of utilizing new resources," Novak says.

Pend Oreille Pines' lumber and other products are priced comparably with hardwood products, he adds.

Kim Cox says that prices vary depending on the width of the wood, but generally range from \$3.25 per square foot of coverage for pine to \$5 per square foot of coverage for larch.

Another aspect of the wood is that it's uncommonly stable after being submerged in cold water for 100 years, and resists warping, splitting, or breaking after it's cut, Don Cox says.

Recently, for example, Pend Oreille Pines supplied 6,000 board feet of siding for a house in Vail, Colo., and only one board in that shipment had to be replaced because it bowed, he says.

"When you get (boards) that wide, the chance of cupping is so great," Cox says, but more often than not, the old, water-soaked wood remains true.

Once steady production is up and running at the new plant, Kim Cox says the couple expects that wall planks and flooring will be Pend Oreille Pines' bread and butter, but the potential uses of the wood are "only limited by somebody's imagination."

Don does the diving

Before the Coxes could begin selling the old-growth timber resting on the bottom of Lake Pend Oreille, they had to retrieve it, and that was no easy task, Don says.

After first conceiving the idea to recover the logs, "We spent months and months and months trying to figure out, how do you do this so it's ecologically sound?" he says.

The state of Idaho owns the logs and grants permits for their removal, for which the Coxes must pay per board foot, but the state doesn't want retrieval of the logs to stir up too much sediment, Don says. The Coxes developed a retrieval process that they decline to reveal, saying it's proprietary, and received permits to begin pulling logs in 1998. Don does all of the diving to find and choose the logs, followed on the surface by Kim in a boat. A crew that includes their 19-year-old son pulls the logs from the lake.

Don keeps track of where he's working with a global-positioning system, and Kim keeps track of Don via two-way radio communications.

Sometimes, the lake is so murky from mountain runoff that "it might as well be completely black," Don says. "I can run into a log before I can see it."

For that reason, early spring, before runoff, and late fall are the best times to find logs. The couple's harvest season ends once the temperature drops to freezing—because the water-soaked logs will break if they're



The ceiling behind Don and Kim Cox is sheathed in planks sawed from waterlogged timber the couple's business, Pend Oreille Pines, retrieved from the bottom of Lake Pend Oreille.

brought to the surface and they freeze, Don says.

Bringing milling in-house

After several years of pulling logs and shipping them to Wisconsin, two things happened: Superior Water-Logged Lumber cut back on its purchases from the Coxes because shipping costs were prohibitive, and, says Kim, "We were dying to know what the wood looked like."

The couple in 2001 contracted with a Sandpoint mill to cut lumber from the logs, and the second phase of Pend Oreille Pines was born.

Last spring, after that mill went out of business, the Coxes bought its equipment and began a milling operation of their own that employs one other person besides themselves. They decline to give the company's annual revenue.

Their relatively quick transformation from being "divers and sailors" to millwrights has been exhilarating, although the learning curve has been steep, the couple say.

Says Kim, "It would be really nice to just have (the business) be static for awhile."

Besides their distribution through Alpine Lumber, Pend Oreille Pines' lumber mostly is marketed by word of mouth, sometimes directly to carpenters, builders, and woodworkers, the Coxes say. The company should receive a publicity boost when a high-end condominium project, TimberBay, opens on the shores of Lake Pend Oreille next year. Its units will feature cabinetry and other woodwork made from Pend Oreille Pines lumber. The \$31 million TimberBay project is being developed by an arm of Sand-Ida Services Inc., a company that's owned by Don Cox's extended family. Sand-Ida also owns two hotels and several convenience stores in Sandpoint.

Timber Bay's opening is in the future, however, and Kim Cox says she and her husband have a more pressing concern right now: "Donny and I tend to fall in love with every board that comes off the mill."