

ART ON THE *Prairies*



BACK COUNTRY LOG HOMES INC

Chainsaws and chop saws a-buzzing deep in the heartland of the Canadian Prairies. It's a common sound, almost unnoticed by the locals. In fact, it would

be odd if you didn't hear them.

Often the sound is related to wood being harvested to heat homes over the long Canadian winters. However in some cases, those saws are crafting someone's dream home. Such is the case at Back Country Log Homes, a building company located approximately 35 minutes from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Owner and head builder Jeff Esau has operated Back Country for a little over 14 years. Prior to becoming a log home builder, Esau worked as a framer for a company that built conventional- construction homes. But his passion for something more unique, interesting and artful took him away from run-of- the-mill 2x4 construction and toward 40-foot pine logs and notches. He began his journey designing and constructing log furniture. From there, it was a short walk down the career path to the dream homes he builds today.

Spotlight on Business Magazine spoke with Esau and one of his colleagues, Pete Doucette, about the company's building philosophy and the blossoming log home industry in the Canadian Prairies.

By John Allaire

There's something about a log home that draws you in and sparks your imagination. And log home builders are artists commissioned to translate the imaginations of clients and fulfilling dreams. Stepping away from "box construction" and sculpting every beam and notch. Esau explains the appeal. "I thought about what I wanted to do in the future and it wasn't 2x4 framing. I wanted to do something a little more unique and interesting. So I started looking into how I would go about building log homes."

Keeping the business manageable and remaining true to what they do best is key to their principles. "I work with two or three other contractors pretty regularly. We build the home here in the yard, take it apart and build it again at the customer's site. Then the customer takes care of all the other stuff. We are involved in the planning stage and we consult with the other contractors along the way. But our focus is on making sure the log construction is done properly," Esau explains.

Back Country's homes have ended up being re-constructed as far away as Western Alberta, but the bulk of their work comes from right at home in Saskatchewan. Proximity can be an important piece in the puzzle, because scouting the client's location and ensuring the foundation work is done according to the plan can save on headaches down the road. Doucette adds that communication between contractors at the early stages is paramount to saving time and money. "We find ourselves checking and re-checking and keeping a constant dialogue going with our contractors."

Doucette also points out that some remote locations can pose the biggest challenge to their home construction efforts. "There have been areas where weather conditions and trucking have made it just about impossible to get the logs up and into places. A lot of these homes are obviously in rural locations and the roads are not made for large vehicle access. But that's all part of the game. If it were easy, then everyone would do it!"

Another topper on the list of priorities for Back Country is the quality of logs and wood they use for their construction. In fact, they go to great lengths, and distances, to ensure they are using the best product Mother Nature can offer. This means sourcing out in British Columbia, where the reputation for unique construction lumber is second to none.

"We build with a lot of Douglas fir and Western red cedar, some spruce, and it all comes out of BC," Esau explains.

"The logs that are around here in Saskatchewan, overall they aren't up to par quality-wise for what we're doing. There is a lot of taper and spiral grain to the logs and the trees are just a lower grade altogether for our type of construction. And we like to really focus on quality, so it's worth the effort to get the wood out of BC."

The wood home industry on the Prairies seems to be



trending toward a hybrid of conventional and timber home construction. Doucette mentions that clients are picking the elements they like best from conventional construction and combining it with timber components, resulting in truly unique structures. "Timber accents and elements worked into conventional construction — that's becoming very popular. Say perhaps someone wants a very special kitchen or living room with big timber beams. Or on the exterior, maybe arches and cosmetic timber accents on the house or around the landscape. We're doing that and it's becoming very popular here."

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One thing that the numbers will demonstrate in the new home construction industry is that log and timber homes, while aesthetically beautiful, do not fit everyone's taste or budget.

However, Doucette assures that the company doesn't really have to do much of a sell-job to clients that come to them with their home or cabin projects. By the time they get to Back Country for a consultation, they have generally all but decided that they are in the market for a unique, unconventional home.

"We are really only dealing with one per cent of the market," Doucette points out. "

But those people seem to have this ingrained idea, much as I did too, this romance or love affair with log structures. It's something substantial. Something different... The clients that come around are looking for something unique."

Unique is the word. As unique as the customer's fingerprints, one might say.

Customers generally bring their ideas to the initial meeting and then a back-and-forth ensues until Back Country's designer has whittled down the desires of the client and developed a working blueprint. This process enables clients to put their own one-of-a-kind twists on their homes. Doucette explains that, even with solid blueprints in hand, the final design is not set in stone until the final nail has been hammered. "The blueprints are still just the concept and the guideline. The house is always in flux until it's finished. Changes along the way are par for the course."

Naturally, the attention that television networks are paying to log homes and the companies that build them (HGTV's Timber Kings being one of the more popular of the sub-genre) shine a perceived spotlight onto builders like Back Country. But has it translated into work and actual dollars

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and cents for companies without their own show?

"I personally don't think those shows have changed the market that much," Esau offers.

"Although many people who talk to us know a lot about the TV programs, I think the big change it has made is consumers are more aware of what goes in to making a log home. In the future, it may become more of an influence and get people thinking about log builds a little more. But I couldn't say that it has really increased any sales from our perspective."

For the time being, Esau admits that the workload at Back Country Log Homes suits his lifestyle.

There are no immediate plans to drive toward becoming a big corporate machine. His focus remains more on providing quality homes and exceptional service to his clients. "I suppose a bit of expansion down the road would be OK. But I wouldn't want to expand at the cost of great homes and service."

Doucette adds, "We're a small group and we're dedicated to the art and science of log and timber joinery. We don't want to get to a point where the art takes a back seat. We're all still humble students. Everyday, just when you think you've seen it all, along comes something new. It's fascinating work and it's always changing."

Surfing through their website gallery of completed projects, the term "work of art" does hold true. Each structure embodies beauty and individuality, seemingly resonating harmoniously with each client's character and desire. Satisfying work, to say the least. Home is where the heart is. And Back Country Log Homes puts heart into every build. And they back it up with experience and talent.

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