

# MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE



## NEAR NORTH

— LOG HOMES —



From the time he was a teenager, Near North Log Homes' owner Jon Sheppard wanted to build himself a log home. Admittedly, log homes are special and not for everybody. But if you live in the right environment and are someone who enjoys the unique, individual appeal of natural wood, a log or timber home may be right up your alley. Sheppard was definitely one of those people.

Returning home from a job as a fly-fishing guide in Northern British Columbia, some 20 years ago, Sheppard's route took him past a log home building company.

He doubled back, pulled into the lot and asked if they were looking for an extra hand to build their homes. They took his information and sure enough, one week later he got the call-up to join the crew. Like most people breaking into the industry, Sheppard learned the ropes from on-the-job training, not from any formal certification program. His new-found job was step one in what has turned into a life-long passion.

Ah, but best-laid plans... a hockey injury cut Sheppard's career short with this particular builder, and he returned to Vancouver to rehabilitate. Once back on his feet, he managed to make ends meet with various carpentry jobs in the big city.

But the log home building bug hadn't dissipated, and he sought out a job building dovetail-style square-log houses in BC. Unfortunately, there just weren't enough people looking for the rustic homes at the time, and Sheppard found himself pulling up stakes and moving to his wife's home town north of Huntsville, Ontario.

After a few more years of sporadic carpentry jobs, Sheppard put an advertisement into the local newspaper offering his services as a log home builder. That ad brought him his first contract, and he has been building log homes ever since.

Spotlight on Business Magazine spoke with Jon Sheppard about the log home business and its place in the residential construction industry.

Near North is a small family-owned business based in South River, Ontario, just west of Algonquin Provincial Park. Like most builders in Canada's harsh climate, Near North is for the most part a seasonal business. Sheppard handles most winter duties, like wood preparations and planning, himself. In fact, he lives on a farm, so there is no shortage of daily tasks. However, come spring, the company hires on a couple of seasonal workers.

"We are definitely looking to grow, and we are thinking that this year might be that year where we expand," Sheppard explains. "It's still going to be mostly seasonal, because when people start building, they want their house at some point in the spring, summer or fall. With the snow and weather we get around here, it's just too hard to move around and do anything. So people don't really want winter construction anyway."

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For Sheppard and Near North, the building season typically runs from March, with home assemblies taking place in the warmer months, right into November in some cases. Logs are ordered in January and February so they can be prepared and ready to go once the snow has gone. Logs are sourced from suppliers in Ontario, but Near North will go further distances to fulfill customer requests. "If somebody wanted red cedar or Douglas fir, we can do that as well. There is, of course, a price tag attached to that... I do have Western suppliers that are available at any time to send specific logs our way, should we get the request."

Standard operating procedure for most log builders consists of erecting the structures in their own yard, disassembling, shipping, then reassembling on site.



Sheppard says that many clients solicit his advice on not just the log frame, but where to go for roofing, flooring and interiors. "Our clients generally aren't contractors, so they have no idea how jobs are split up. So the minimum we have to do is close it in so it's dry, and put windows and doors in it. The finishing can be done by someone we contract out, or someone they find. We occasionally do some interiors and finishing, but not often."

To date, Near North hasn't had to venture any further than a couple of hours away from their South River, Ontario home base. "Our clients have so far been pretty close to home. When I was working out west, we were building homes all over the world. The U.S., Germany, Finland, Iceland, it was interesting. We haven't gotten to that point yet. I don't know if we will. If a client is willing to pay for all the things that are attached to travelling great distances, we'd definitely do it."

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Crossing jurisdictions also creates its fair share of red tape, due to possible insect infestations and disease. "The only logs you can ship to Europe without kiln-drying them first is red cedar from BC. So if someone over there wanted white pine, I'd have to kiln-dry it. And I don't really know of a kiln that's 40 feet long and could dry 70 logs. So that gets costly. I'm not sure I'll ever go that route," Sheppard points out.

That's not to say Near North needs Europe, or any far-off land, to sustain business at the moment. Their location near cottage country is keeping their chainsaws busy enough within a two-hour radius. "We are north of the Muskokas, which is the getaway area for Toronto and the big urban areas. Lots of cottages, and I think that because the Muskokas are not only full, but property there is really expensive, people are looking further north. Up where we are, it's very similar geography. It's all forests and lakes. So there are a lot of people moving up this way for cottages or

four-season homes. It's affordable and available around here."

All this translates into busy summers for Near North. "We're right at the beginning of a boom, I think. Not only for log homes, but cottages and property development in general," Sheppard explains.

A boom indeed. It never hurts to have popular culture focus its attention on your industry. In this case, television shows like HGTV's Timber Kings has perhaps sparked some interest in the log and timber construction options. Sheppard admits that he tends to be too busy to watch the show, but feels that it has had a positive effect on the industry. "I'd say the TV show absolutely has had an impact on what people want in a country home... Every single person that I show homes to asks if I have seen certain episodes of Timber Kings. It is definitely in the minds of consumers."

Visitors to Near North's website are met with a half-dozen designs and floor plans of beautiful log-constructed homes. However, these are merely a few examples from the draftsman's table. Near North has a go-to book of 100 or more designs that potential clients can peruse. And customization is the name of the game in the log and timber business.

"Some people approach me with their own ideas and drawings and I just take it and hand it over to the draftsman. He draws it up and fine tunes it, going back-and-forth with the client until they are happy. Then we go ahead and build it at that point. I only offer samples if they need guidance. Many of the custom ideas come from the clients themselves."

The current log construction trend is leaning toward open concept with lofts overlooking the great room. And why not? If you are going to the trouble of designing a home that highlights the splendour of nature's creations, you'll probably want to see it from every vantage point inside.

Sheppard figures that log homes, on average, are actually more efficient than a standard home construction build. The logs' natural insulation properties make bats and bats of fiberglass insulation unnecessary. And log homes



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use less material than conventional homes because of the waste associated with milling wood.

But honestly, efficiency and better material usage are mere welcome by-products.

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The true appeal is in the aesthetics.

Sheppard agrees that it's the “look” of the building that draws people into a log home. “You walk into another type of house and you think, ‘yeah, this is a house’ and that’s that. But when you walk into a log home, it’s a conversation piece. There’s something to talk about at every turn. They’re all different.”

Near North’s recent purchase of a sawmill has upped their game when it comes to making the square timber dove-tail-type homes. “This just gives our potential customers more selection and styles of homes to choose from. It keeps us competitive because we aren’t paying for milling and it’s really nice to be able to control the milling process.



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Also, all the off-cuts from the logs become useful lumber. It really makes sense to own the sawmill.”

With the nice weather just around the corner, it may be time to start thinking about that summer getaway. Near North builds quality hand-built log homes, and will ship it and reassemble it anywhere you call home.

Go on!  
Dare to dream!



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