

Levanna Restoration puts old barns to good use

by Traci Gregory

AUBURN - Douglas Holland has a passion for wood.

So much so, that he has created a business around preserving antique barn wood and turning it into new flooring.

Holland officially formed Levanna Restoration Lumber in May 2002, but his interest in the wood he salvages from old barns goes back a few years earlier.

"The whole thing was just intriguing," he says of the restoration concept.

Holland got his start in the business in 1998, after spotting some striking timbers in an old building ready to be torn down. He stopped and spoke to the owner about retrieving the timbers. The building, located on Levanna Road in Scipioville in Cayuga County, not only became the first salvage operation for Holland, but also inspired the name for his business.

Holland began scouting around for more salvage jobs and began stockpiling a collection of lumber. He supplied some lumber here and there to his brother, Terry, who used it to make tables and cabinets.

The beauty of those products inspired Douglas Holland to keep collecting, and he began to think about turning his passion into a business.

The turning point for Holland arrived on Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon. He was moving salvaged material from a barn when he heard about the attacks on the radio.

Holland headed home to turn on the TV. "I stood in front of the TV for hours," he recalls.

The realization of how quickly life can change made Holland decide if he was ever going to start a business, that was the time, he says. Holland had worked nearly 20 years as a draftsman.

Within eight months, he started Levanna Restoration Lumber from his Auburn home with 1,500 square feet of leased warehouse space nearby.

Holland hit the ground running, almost literally, pounding the pavement to talk to building professionals: architects and designers who used reclaimed wood products.

Holland made his first flooring sale to the first architect he talked to: Andrew Ramsgard of Ramsgard Architectural Design in Skaneateles.

Things have changed in the four years since Holland started his company. Holland receives calls from barn owners who have heard about his business so he doesn't have to scout around as much for potential salvage jobs.

A one-man operation, Holland not only locates and assesses each job, but also does most of the salvage work himself. He hires a very capable back hoe operator to topple the barns and retrieve the timbers, but does the rest of the work on his own.

I don't buy barns. It's my labor in exchange for the salvagable material," he says. In return, the owner saves money by not hiring a demolition contractor, and saves on tipping fees at a landfill. Owners are often left with as little as 25% of the original barn to dispose of. Holland says both parties benefit.

The restoration business appeals to owners with a sense of recycling. "The reason people call me is because they like to see good wood put to further use," Holland says.

Holland, who has dismantled about 36 barns to date, sends the wood to others in order for it to be kiln-dried and turned into flooring, because it is more economical than doing it himself.

Outsourcing certain parts of the work to quality local businesses keeps overhead low and allows him to remain a oneman operation, he says.

Holland is currently expanding his warehouse space by moving to a larger location. Holland would like to build his own warehouse at some point.

Eventually, Holland might like to see the business have its own drying and flooring operation, but it's an expensive thought.

"Right now, I'm happy with my current arrangement," he says.

Holland spent the first part of the year taking a Web-page design class at Cayuga Community College. Working up to 15 hours a day learning how to design a Web site, then actually designing Levanna's site (www.levannarl.com) cut down Holland's ability to market his product, but he is gearing up for 2007.

He declined to release sales figures or any future projections, but said the business is sustaining itself. Holland works at the business full time.

Typical customers are those building upscale homes who like the warmth and beauty I provide with reclaimed antique virgin forest wood flooring, paneling, mantels and box beams.

Corporate clients have included Bass Pro Shops, which has Levanna's barn siding in the Auburn store. Holland sells primarily in New York, but has heard from customers as far away as New Mexico, California and Florida.

Flooring and other products made from reclaimed lumber does not move as fast as mass-produced flooring, Holland says. Because of a very laborintensive process, Levanna's flooring is more expensive than the average wood floor, but then, there's nothing average about my product, Holland says.

Levanna's flooring starts at \$8.95 a square foot, but the price gets you a unique product. Most of the wood that Holland recovers is exceedingly old, from old-growth forests, and unique in character. "No two floors are going to be alike."