



Meadowlark Log Homes

Teaming Tradition and Technology

By Clay Clayton

In 1946, when the young Ora Miller began “riding the ridge beam” at Amish barn raisings in Northeast Indiana, he certainly had no idea he would one day found a log home business with a worldwide reputation. Nor would he have ever imagined he would move his family a thousand miles west of his birthplace to Libby, Mont.

Amish Know a Thing or Two About Wood

The Amish have long been renowned for building barns, shops, homes, and other structures constructed to last through generations. Ora established his own place in that long line of craftsmen as he learned the trade throughout the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, participating in the construction of dozens of buildings in and near LaGrange County Indiana.

By 1975, Ora, his wife Orpha, and their family of seven packed up their possessions and, in the company of three other families, established a new life in Libby, a town of just over 2,000 people located at the head of Montana’s famed Kootenai Valley.

Making a Living in Libby

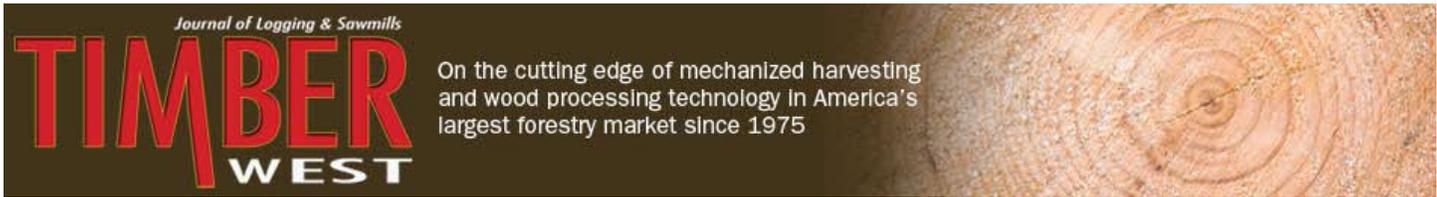
To make a living, Ora established a circle saw mill and began to mill ties for the railroads of the region. At about the same time, Ora’s teenage sons, Ervin and Lloyd, worked to construct a log cabin from scratch. It became the first of what ultimately became hundreds of Meadowlark Log Homes.

Although the Miller family had been involved with raising wood buildings for generations, it wasn’t until the family moved to Montana that the idea of large-scale production building for profit took root. A fire that destroyed the rail tie sawmill solidified the decision and began the Meadowlark Log Homes era.

New Spin on Old Ways

An innovative approach to building log homes soon put the new company on the map. Using a technique they refer to as “flat on flat, hand-peeled, butt and pass corner” construction, the Miller family began to create homes featuring logs sawn to have two flat edges. The flats of each log are pinned, screwed, and glued together to form an exceptionally strong and stable wall, nearly impenetrable to weather, while retaining the traditional round log look. The Millers believe the extra strength and weather tight characteristics are one reason their homes are often the homes of choice in areas of climate extremes and in earthquake zones. Building

In the beginning, the family employed more traditional equipment and techniques for building homes. The family’s faithful team of horses, Dick and Silver, skidded logs in the forest and helped to move logs in the mill yard. Logs were processed using a circle sawmill with tractor-powered block and tackle used to pull beams up to roofs when necessary. According to Elvie Miller, production manager for the firm, as Meadowlark Log Homes’ business grew, a need for improved production speed had them searching for more efficient ways to process logs and manufacture homes. In 1981, the Millers invested in their first crane for lifting logs and in 1987, they traded their circular sawmill for a Wood-Mizer LT-40. According to Elvie, the new mill was a “whole lot safer.”



Current Equipment

Today Meadowlark uses a Wood- Mizer LT-70, which can be fitted with bed extensions, allowing the long tree stems often used in log home building to be easily milled to precision tolerances. “The band saw cuts long logs flatter and with more precision,” says Elvie. “That is very important in maintaining the quality we demand of ourselves.”

Elvie also says the LT-70’s electric motor reduces cost, while the very thin kerf blade run on the mill requires less power to run efficiently and produces considerably less sawdust to deal with than conventional blades. The blades are inexpensive compared to circle-saw blades and easy to sharpen. Keeping Up with the Times The Miller’s blend of the best that tradition has to offer with cutting edge technology quickly dispels the stereotypical ideas many might have about the Amish. For example, Meadowlark uses an advanced website to access its far flung markets.

Meadowlark has shipped log homes to Canada, Japan, and South Africa and, most recently, added customers in Ireland to the list — customers who found Meadowlark via the website and want to introduce log homes to the Emerald Isle. One thing that has never changed for Meadowlark is their commitment to forest health and sustainability.

Meadowlark only uses logs that are dead or dying or trees removed for thinning purposes. Sources include about half private woodlots and forest service sales in Montana and half coming from British Columbia, which is actually very close to Meadowlark’s Libby location. By using these sources, Elvie comments, forest health is enhanced for future generations of the Miller family. Supporting Local Loggers

Meadowlark’s need for logs is also helping woodlot owners and the timber industry. As large scale mills continue to consolidate or close, it can be more difficult for woodlot owners and loggers to find markets within a reasonable distance. Meadowlark’s success may be attributed to many things, but Elvie Miller says what has contributed most is “oldschool craftsmanship.” He says, “It will always be important to us, and we continue to look for new ways to do things better. We grew up Amish but have adopted important technology to complement the craftsmanship.”