Versatility Is Key to Success

Long Tom Custom Sawmill looks outside the box

By C. Clayton

Long Tom Custom Sawmill in Veneta, Ore., began as a salvage log yard on Long Tom River when owner Pony Boy Gilbert began saving old and damaged timbers from construction jobs.

Custom re-milling of recovered wood fit well into Pony Boy’s philosophy of environmental stewardship by reducing the amount of wood sent to landfills, chipped, or left to decay emitting greenhouse gasses.

A Good Mix

Pony Boy quickly discovered that versatility is the key to success in today’s construction industry. His recycling efforts led him to take on small logging jobs and, ultimately, to the purchase of a Wood-Mizer brand portable sawmill. The sawmill allowed Pony Boy to utilize unsalable logs from his harvests in the manufacture of salable timbers and custom lumber. This outside-the-box thinking, coupled with equipment adaptable to a variety of situations, proved its value to Long Tom Custom Sawmill in a time of economic challenge.

Originally seeing financial and environmental value in timbers he was removing from job-sites for customers, Pony Boy formed Long Tom Custom Sawmill and began re-milling smaller or heavily damaged timbers into beautiful old growth flooring and trim, and larger pieces into rustic timbers with a custom-made 36” circular saw that he describes as “a table saw on steroids.”

Safer Option

Because of the unpredictable nature of recovered wood and the distinct possibility of cutting into old metal with each pass, Pony Boy made the decision to replace his circular saw, commenting, “It is dangerous and expensive to hit metal with a circular saw. A circular blade can be ruined if a piece of metal is struck or, worse, can send shrapnel flying through the worksite.”

Pony Boy researched his options and, in 2004, purchased a Wood-Mizer LT15 transportable sawmill. He made the decision because the LT15 band saw utilizes thin-kerf blades, which are inexpensive compared to circular saw blades, less likely to shatter when encountering metal, and about 30 percent more efficient than what Pony Boy used previously. That means, he says, more lumber recovered from the resource.

Portability Expands Business

The portable mill allowed Pony Boy to expand the scope of his business significantly. In addition to salvage lumber, Long Tom’s offers flexible, cost effective logging services, tree care, and recovery of lumber from blow downs and other downed timber. Pony Boy mills on or off site for clients throughout the Central Oregon region, providing timbers for both large and small projects. “Although the LT15 is one of the smaller sawmills that Wood-Mizer makes,” Pony Boy explains,
“it is very versatile and nimble.”

**Vineyard Project**

Pony Boy points to a number of projects and the range of services he provides.

In 2008 LaVelle Vineyards, one of Oregon’s premier vineyards, was dissatisfied with the looks of the existing steel clad building housing the winery and associated tasting room. After discussions with Pony Boy, they decided to “resurface” and dress up the exterior of the structure with board and batten from custom-milled lumber.

The result, Pony Boy points out with justifiable pride, is a strikingly beautiful “new” building representing the winery with elegance at a cost of tens, or even hundreds, of thousands of dollars less than a demolition and rebuild would have been. “This is recycling at its best,” he comments.

Incense cedar for the building came from a harvest less than 15 miles away and was milled on site providing the lumber needed to complete the project.

“We wanted to use Incense Cedar to demonstrate how environmental sensitivity can be practiced on a project like this,” Pony Boy says. “It’s a beautiful wood that is normally just piled up and sold for making chips. And the LaVelle building is an example of how underutilized species can be put to their highest and best use. Landowners throughout Central Oregon can visit the winery and see how the potential for logs on their own lands can be fully realized.”

**Leaburg Dam**

The versatility of the mill also paid off when Pony Boy milled timbers and lumber for the Eugene Water and Electric Board’s Lloyd Knox Visitors Center behind the PUD’s Leaburg Dam.

“The Wood-Mizer bridges the gap between the lumber that is commercially available for a project and the cost,” Pony Boy says. “I can mill timbers that allow the structure to be what it wants to be at a competitive cost. Without my saw, cost considerations would have required laminated beams. With my sawmill, the architect’s vision can be fully realized.”

**Tree Removal**

Pony Boy also provides problem tree removal service with the option to mill logs and large branches into lumber. Long Tom Sawmill operates a National 6000 Crane originally used for timber framed construction but also serves double duty when Pony Boy is removing hazardous trees.

“When I saw lumber, often the alternative would have been firewood or wood left to rot,” says Pony Boy. “Lumber traps carbon in a durable product rather than releasing it into the atmosphere — and healthy trees are left standing in the forest. Also, the thin blades make more boards and less sawdust from each log. Higher yields give customers more lumber, and it is a better utilization of natural resources.”

For example, the University of Oregon calls Pony Boy Gilbert when their Sustainability Department removes a tree due to damage, disease, or other potential hazards. Pony Boy is able to mill the resulting logs into lumber on campus.
This allows Pony Boy to:

• Divert wood from the waste stream because it is not chipped or sent to a land-fill

• Show students the value of timber resources and teach them about real world cost-effective sustainability

• Save the University money over traditional problem tree removal and disposal

• Provide the University’s Project Design Department with material to construct furniture for use on campus.

“It’s the ultimate in sustainability,” Pony Boy says. “The university benefits, the environment benefits, and my own sustainability as a business is improved.”

Pony Boy continues to innovate and is currently contemplating new ways to help timber owners capture maximum value from their wood fiber by milling on-site and shipping direct to customers. A “lumber agent” would connect customers directly to tree owners and portable sawmill operators who would fill the order. When the building market picks back up, he would also like to devote more time to building timber frame structures from beams made with his sawmill.

“Versatility is what keeps you going when times are challenging,” he says. “I’ll work on any project I can to keep bread on the table. When all is said and done, my four kids really do not care where the money comes from. They just want dinner.”