

BUSINESS



Auburn man finds a way to make money from discarded old barns

Doug Holland uses the wood to give houses an old-time, homey feel and look.

By Tim Knauss
Staff writer

Look closely at the gleaming hardwood floors in Charlie McElroy's new house and you'll notice that some of the boards are riddled with pinholes and tiny trench-like scars left by insects.

In newly milled boards, those would be defects. In McElroy's floor, which is made from recycled barn timbers, they are "character

marks."

So are the occasional nail holes, knots, weather stains or other signs of age.

Uniformity is not the goal. The antique tongue-and-groove floor boards range in length from two to 12 feet, and range in width from three to five inches.

The result is a warm, textured, rustic look that McElroy says he would never trade for something more modern.

"It's the first thing people notice," he said.

Old barn wood is finding its way into new houses.

The phenomenon is such that Doug Holland, owner of Levanna Restoration Lumber in Auburn, has made a business of pulling apart old barns and recycling the wood as flooring and other products. For McElroy's house, Holland supplied flooring made from beech, stairs made from elm and a mantel made from cherry — all reclaimed from local barns.

A one-man operation, Holland

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Gloria Write / Staff photographer

DOUG HOLLAND, owner of Levanna Restoration Lumber, uses a drawknife, a 19th century tool, to smooth a beam taken from an old barn. At his warehouse in Auburn, Holland recycles old barn wood into floors and other products.



Gloria Write / Staff photographer

DOUG HOLLAND, owner of Levanna Restoration Lumber, stands on a stairway made of old barn wood at the home of Charlie McElroy near Skaneateles.

He works alone with a chainsaw

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has salvaged wood from nearly two dozen Central New York barns, some built as long ago as the late 18th century.

Occasionally, he'll sell the wood to a commercial client. Bass Pro Shops, for example bought 7,500 square feet of weathered barn siding to use inside the company's Auburn store.

But most of Holland's clients are building or renovating homes.

He is among a growing network of barnwood providers that has sprouted up nationwide during the past decade.

Often, the antique flooring and other products they supply are more expensive than new wood, said Skaneateles architect Andy

Ramsgard, who has used Holland's wood on several residential projects.

New hardwood floors typically cost \$5 to \$7 per square foot, Ramsgard said. Holland's prices start in that range and rise to about \$11 per square foot.

But there is something about old wood that satisfies the modern heart's yearning to escape mass-market uniformity, Ramsgard said. He plans to use some of Holland's wood for a ceiling in his house.

"You can buy a calculator or a cell phone — the same one that somebody in china can buy, the same one that a million other people have — and that's the beauty of the Industrial Age. It can provide for enough mass production to satisfy practical needs. But what people are

dying to have are things that have unique character," Ramsgard said.

The popularity of barn wood has grown in the past decade, said Bonnie Holmes, certification administrator at the National Wood Flooring Association. The association lists more than 100 suppliers of such specialty flooring products, she said, up from just two in 1986.

"It's a niche market, but a strong niche market," she said.

Removing valuable wood from a dilapidated old barn is strenuous work, and potentially dangerous. Holland, 52, who formerly worked as a draftsman, started doing it three years ago.

First, Holland has to talk the owner into letting him take the wood, for

free, before the barn is burned or demolished. Before entering, he examines each barn long and hard to make sure it's safe to work inside. He takes anything that's salvageable: beams, rafters, wide plank flooring, granary boards, siding and so on.

Holland works alone with a chainsaw, replacing the chain every time he hits a hidden nail.

He has a 1989 Ford Super Duty flatbed truck, with which he can haul most of the lumber himself. Sometimes, if he recovers a lot of beams, he'll hire someone with a trackhoe to pull them out.

The largest beam Holland has taken out of a barn was a piece of beech 18 inches wide, 14 inches high and 22 feet long. Before he can send the beams to a sawmill to be cut into planks, Holland has to remove all the nails. Those range in size from railroad spikes to small, hand wrought nails made by blacksmiths.

It's grueling work, accomplished by driving a nail puller into the wood with a short-handled 8-pound sledge hammer. Holland uses a metal detector over the wood to make sure he doesn't miss any.

Usually, Holland sends the lumber to one of several sawmills to be cut

into boards. Then it goes to a lumber yard in Moravia to be dried in kilns. Then Holland sends it to another mill to be made into flooring.

"It's not easy work," Ramsgard said. But I'm glad he's out there doing it, because the products you can get are just incredible."

Kristine and Paul Hickey recently purchased ash and basswood paneling from Holland for the walls and ceiling of a room in the house they are constructing on Owasco Lake, near Auburn.

Kristine Hickey said the warm, rustic look of the wood blends well with the home. The Hickeys also like the fact that the wood is recycled, and that it has a long history, she said.

The barn from which the Hickey's wood came once stood near Poplar Ridge, Cayuga County, Holland said. The oldest section dated back to when the area was first settled, around 1800, Holland said. A newer section was built around 1870. He took wood from both.

Holland gave the Hickey's a frameable photo and brief history of the barn when he delivered the wood. "We were thrilled," Hickey said.

The oldest barns in Central New

York typically were built from old-growth trees that settlers chopped down as they cleared the land, said Robert Meyer, chairman of construction management and wood products engineering at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

Species that today would be too valuable for timber framing were often used. During World War II, for example, many old barns were razed for their black walnut, which was needed for rifle stock, Meyer said.

Holland first approached McElroy, who was building a house near Skaneateles Lake, because there were two old barns on McElroy's property that had to be demolished. Holland asked if he could remove wood from the barns. After hearing about Holland's business and seeing his samples, McElroy decided to order wood from him.

As it turned out, much of the beech used on McElroy's floors came from beams in the barns that were on his property.

"I was gracious enough to give him the barns," McElroy said, smiling. "Then he turns around and sells it all back to me."

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