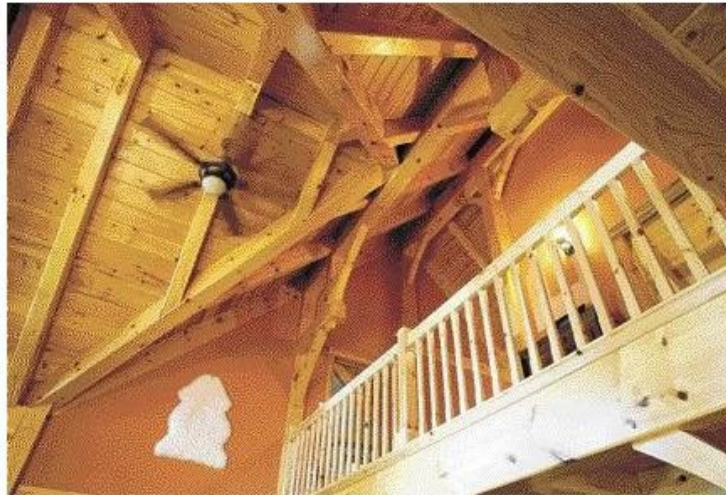


Soaked in history

Gord Black is panning the Ottawa River for wooden gold, giant timbers left behind from 150 years of logging. Now this born-entrepreneur and his wife Kathy have built a riverfront home where every log can tell a story

BY SHEILA BRADY, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN AUGUST 22, 2009



A catwalk links two large bedrooms that are reserved for guests or visiting children and grandchildren.

Photograph by: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen

Kathy and Gord Black live in a country house by the Ottawa River, built with century-old logs panned from the bottom of the river that was the main highway moving timber from the Ottawa Valley to Quebec City and loaded onto tall ships bound for England.

"Life is an adventure and logs are the treasure. They are wooden gold," says Gord, a native of Shawville, Quebec, a town 12 kilometres to the west where his 83-year-old mother, Eleanor Black, still lives in the family's big, red brick house.

"My roots are deep in the community and my mom is only 10 minutes away," says Black, who left Shawville as a teenager to play junior hockey for the Black Hawks in St. Catharines. "There were only six teams and I wasn't good enough to go on," says Black. Instead, the born-entrepreneur took training as an electrical apprentice and went on to open Black Electric in 1985. He then bought, and a

decade later, sold the Nepean Raiders.

In the late '90s, this Pontiac boy who would work 26 hours a day if possible wanted to give back to the community where his father, Allan Black, was mayor and his mother and older brother were also councillors.

Black, the entrepreneur, knew he didn't have the temperament to be a politician, so he started looking around his hometown for a business opportunity to create jobs and bolster the local economy. He also wanted a company with an environmental edge.

The river caught his interest, specifically the sunken treasure of logs that during drives 100-plus years ago, became waterlogged and sank after some of the giant cribs broke apart near rapids and dams. Some were navigation hazards as age made them gassy, and they bobbed to the surface.

In 1997, the man who was comfortable on ice but not in water, bought a boat and a small remote camera and went trolling for logs between the dam at Fitzroy Park and 22 kilometres up river at the Chenaux dam at Portage du Fort.

"It is a whole other world under there. Life changes on the top of the river, but it doesn't under water," says Black, who is a dedicated amateur historian, owning a library of more than 200 books on the history of logging and the Ottawa River.

His research led him to a riches of submerged logs left behind during 150 years of log runs on the river. Twelve years after starting Logs End, Black and his divers have retrieved 75,000 timbers and created a successful business finishing them for fine flooring. He likes to say they are soaked in history. Many carry the hammer stamps from the days of timber barons Philemon Wright and J.R.Booth.

His logs now form glamorous mantels on fireplaces in plush recreational homes at Mont Tremblant, and softly burnished floors in new homes throughout Ottawa.

"No one goes into the logging business to get rich," says Black, who estimates he invested millions in the company, and only last year did the investment turn a profit. Throughout, he was making daily

drives from Logs End offices in Ottawa or his Manotick home to where teams were retrieving logs, loading them onto trucks bound for the small Ontario community of Wilno for milling and back to the original mill in Bristol.

Three years ago, the Blacks bought a small green cottage by the Ottawa River in the centre of Norway Bay, a popular cottage community close to Shawville, and even closer to his mill in Bristol.

The Blacks loved the location and lived in the old cottage for a year, but wanted more room for when their blended family of four children and two grandchildren visited. The couple, together six years, married yesterday.

"Gord gave me a small window of opportunity and I took it," says Kathy, who read countless magazines on timber-frame country homes. She cut out pictures before laying out her ideas. "We hired a draftsman to make sure my ideas worked," she says.

Then they both called on contacts made during years of trade and home shows where they were selling Logs End's wide selection of pine and yellow birch flooring.

They connected with Vermont Frames, signing the deal when the Canadian dollar hit \$1.08. "Our timing was exactly right," Black beams.

Early in 2007, the Blacks cleared the site, giving the cottage to a hockey friend, Chris Byrne, coach of the Ottawa 67s, who moved the building to another site in Norway Bay.

Winter arrived early in the Pontiac in December 2007, dumping 20 centimetres of snow hours before teams arrived to erect the wooden skeleton made with 25 massive white pine beams. Five days later, the frame was complete and in another 17 days crews installed thick, insulated foam panels and the roof.

It took another 25 huge pines and yellow birch logs for the flooring and trim work.

Then came weeks when the couple sealed and finished interior beams and wooden trim, assuring the three-bedroom home would fit naturally into the cottage community. The fit is aided by an exterior that is a mix of softly-coloured green wood, tawny-coloured stone and gabled rooflines.

At 2,800 square feet, the home is larger than its more modest neighbours, but it doesn't overpower. Inside, the master bedroom is on the main floor, with windows looking out over the community beach and the river.

The ceiling soars over the living room and a huge floor- to-ceiling stone fireplace warms the house for pennies, while the open kitchen features creamy white cabinetry, made with river logs finished by carpenters from southern Ontario. The gleaming breakfast bar is a rough piece of pine Gord Black brought from his Bristol mill.

Tile floors in the kitchen and bathroom are heated. Upstairs, there's a bathroom and two bedrooms with soaring ceilings, exposed beams and crib beds for grandchildren. "There's lots of room for bunkbeds when there are more grandchildren," says Kathy, who recently finished landscaping, including a rear courtyard which is a favourite setting for parties.

The couple loves to sit on the front deck, watching swimmers on the beach and neighbours stroll by. "We are in the hub of the bay. It's great," he says.

Their new grass is protected by a fence created with iron chains that once linked the log booms on the river, and the ends of retrieved logs that have been sunk into the ground. A massive anchor sits on the corner of the lot, another find by Black who dives daily during the summer, looking for more treasures. He finds the locations from maps collected from the defunct federal department, ICO that managed the log drives until they were ended in 1990.

"This is home. I love it," says Kathy Black, who describes herself as a small town girl, born in Pembroke and came to Norway Bay as a teenager. A big smile flashes across Gord Black's face. "We're home."

SOURCES

Logs End

Showroom at 1520 Triole St. Call 613-738-7851 or visit www.logsend.com
Vermont Frames: <http://www.vermontframes.com>