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State

Library of logs

Associated Press

DARBY - When the public library here moved from a tiny log cabin without plumbing to a stunning new building, patrons may have wondered if they were in a Western lodge: rock fireplace, rustic tables, armchairs that beckon, and the overarching use of logs with warm tones of brown.


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It is the wood that makes the Darby Community Public Library a national showcase.

Beams and trusses were made from lodgepole pine logs so skinny that ordinarily they'd be p for construction. They're intended to show how logs otherwise used for posts, paper or firew they're even taken from the forest at all - can work in modern construction.

Help came from the U.S. Forest Service, which wants to build commercial demand for logs 6 diameter or less so more thin trees can be removed from forests profitably, reducing fuel for cutting and hauling these trees costs more than their market value.

The Forest Service's goal resonates in Darby, population 754, which is surrounded by the Bit National Forest. In the summer of 2000, fires burned 356,000 acres in the Bitterroot Valley ar destroyed about 70 homes.

Eye appeal

Five years later, the Forest Service points to the library, open since August, as an example o small logs' usefulness in construction, but their eye appeal.

"What really surprised people was the aesthetics of it," said Susan LeVan, an administrator a federal Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wis. "We hope the Darby library will show ar engineers and contractors that these logs can make a very attractive structure."

The library interior's graceful wood is the first feature drawing the eye as people enter by the desk. Light washes in through circular windows, one with stained glass.

The 5,000-square-foot building with a masonry exterior has 10 times the space of the old log none of its logistical problems, among them lack of a restroom. Staff and patrons of the forme used restrooms at the nearby town hall or at a gas station across U.S. 93.

Lois Morris of Darby now finds the library a destination, not just a stop, when she is with her 1 preschool-age grandchildren.

"It's a place to take the kids that I know is a fun place to look around," Morris said. "It's an out going to a show or going to eat."

Plans for the new building kicked off in 2001 after library trustees received an anonymous gif \$250,000, with a requirement for matching funds. At the Bitterroot National Forest headquart Hamilton, north of Darby, a newspaper article about the gift caught the attention of the staff's Christianson. She immediately thought of a Forest Service grant program, for use of small-di logs, as a way for the Darby library to get some matching funds.

The agency provided \$30,000 for engineering and architectural work, the first of several gran

"Push the limits on how small-diameter material can be used in the structural components of LeVan said in authorizing the initial money.

In Darby, a struggling timber town that saw the last of its four mills close in 1999, they pushed on fund-raising, too. Music festivals, gourmet food fairs and smaller events such as a pie and sour cream-raisin pie fetched \$900 - helped the \$900,000 library open debt-free. Library Chair Cheryl Kosteczko said about half of the funding came from various grants, and the rest from pie donations and fund-raisers.

Thinning forests

The National Fire Plan initiated during the Clinton administration is intended to improve forests from wildfires, partly by reducing the supply of small-diameter trees that help flames reach the canopy, LeVan said.

"Once we have a crown fire, it's a whole beast by itself and it moves from forest to forest," she said. Heat from these fires can be so intense that the soil is sterilized and forest regeneration hindered.

Small-diameter wood not fully dry has been put to use in Europe, but the Forest Service promotes use of dry wood, finding that it works better for connecting the pieces in a building, LeVan said. Those connections were the leading challenge in the Darby library, said Bruce Haroldson of Be Consulting Engineers in Missoula.

"We do a lot of log work, but it's the more traditional, big logs that oftentimes far exceed what structurally, to do the job," Haroldson said. "Using these smaller pieces is more efficient in so

Uses for small wood

Haroldson helped the Forest Service produce kiosks with small wood for use at the 2002 Olympic Salt Lake City. LeVan sees great potential for use of the wood in recreation settings: shelters for picnickers and nordic skiers, campground amenities, pedestrian bridges in parks. A pavilion is built in Townsend, some 200 miles east of Darby.

"The Intermountain West has the greatest volume of small-diameter trees that threaten to work with intensity, but they are in other areas of the country as well, LeVan said.

"There's a lot more of this smaller stuff out there than the big stuff," said Ron Porter of Porter Pole Co. in Hamilton, which peeled and then rounded logs for the library. "We're optimistic about replacing laminated beams in homes."

The library's innovative use of wood didn't stop with the beams and trusses. The ruggedly styled tables and chairs from Dead Wood Furniture in Darby were made with what the company's name says: wood from dead trees.

Just as the Forest Service points to the Darby library as a model, the state director of library development sees what happened here as an example for other communities.

"When people say, 'We're interested in building a library,' that's one of the places we tell them for a couple of reasons," Bob Cooper said. "One is the interesting design and material resources, the other is the community effort behind this. We think they're an example of how a community grows together."

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