



## Small trees, big vision: Missoula company thins little larch from forest to make floors

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By *PERRY BACKUS* of the *Missoulian*

CORVALLIS - Larch is a lovely wood.

But don't try to force it this way or that. Be patient. Give it time to sweat just right. And make sure you set the stickers correctly.

Then wait.

Wait while it perspires inside the heated kiln built from boards pulled off shed No. 7 at the now defunct Libby mill.

Wait while the moisture is sucked from the air inside the kiln that Mark Andrews built over and over for 30 years inside his head, and is now a reality near Corvallis.

Wait for that day when the kiln master says the flooring blanks are dried just so.

Do all that and you might just have a floor worthy of the governor's shoes.

"There are tricks you learn along the way," says author, environmentalist and aspiring flooring salesman Peter Stark. "It's been a long process to figure out how to make it work."

Stark is the co-owner of North Slope Sustainable Wood. The Missoula-based company manufactures flooring and trim from the kind of small-diameter larch trees that once were bulldozed and burned by loggers looking for something more substantial.

Stark got into the timber business the old fashioned way.

He bought a forest.

Eighty acres to be exact - located on the outskirts of Missoula near the popular Rattlesnake National Recreation Area. He'd hoped someday to build his family home there.

But first he took a state-sponsored forest stewardship class. After carefully counting trees, studying core samples and penciling out complicated formulas, Stark discovered the north slope of his forest was a sickly lot.

There were far too many trees and the resulting spindly thin larch and Douglas fir formed thickets primed for a spark.

In 1997, Stark met Matt Arno, the founder of Woodland Restoration Inc. Arno's company specialized in thinning forests to restore their health.

In 2002, Arno went to work doing just that on Stark's land.

As Stark watched the sawyers saw, he wondered about the potential for all those tiny trees. Someone said the dense-grained wood made good violin necks. Maybe Japanese home builders might like some for the post and beam construction favored there.

None of those ideas panned out.

While the thickets were disappearing on the family plot, Stark received some book royalties, and he promised his wife he'd build a new dance studio out in the backyard. When he gathered estimates for the structure, one thing stood out. The floating oak floor was going to cost \$12,000.

And there it was. The idea he'd been waiting for. He'd make larch flooring.

Long story short, Stark found the right people to help him build that first floor inside his wife's studio. People stopped by when it was done to see for themselves, and word spread about the beautiful floor built from "smallwood." People wanted tours, and the phone started to ring.

Before he knew it, Stark was in the flooring business.

"Never in my life would I have ever guessed," Stark said.

As it turns out, larch - call it tamarack if you like - is the hardest of the softwoods.

"It's way harder than most of the pines," Stark said. "That's one of the reasons it makes really good flooring. ... The one thing I love about it is all the knots. They're particularly dark and tight. It gives the flooring a beautiful pattern."



**North Slope marketing representative Whitney Schwab** shows the average size of trees used to create the flooring.

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**It's not that easy to build a business** from the ground floor up. You have to get the right people on board. You need to make a mistake or two. You have to develop markets, sales plans and inventory.

He partnered with Arno, and the pair sought out others to help make the business work.

At Tricon Timber in St. Regis, they found a mill that specializes in small-diameter timber.

"The folks who set up this mill had the foresight to focus on small-diameter timber right from the beginning," said Angello Ververis, Tricon's plant manager. "We're right in the center of the 1910 fire and they knew there was going to be a lot of (regeneration) from that."

The company took its lead from European woodsmen.

"They use every part of the tree," Ververis said. "The only thing we don't utilize is the cones. ... This small-diameter wood used to be waste. It's not anymore."

Tricon cuts the trees into 4-, 5- and 6-inch-wide blanks.

Then it's loaded on a truck and shipped to Andrews' kiln in the Bitterroot Valley.

"That's the trickiest part - drying larch is difficult no matter what size it is," Stark said.

They'd tried drying the floor blanks at Tricon's kiln, which was designed to get the job done quickly to compete in the fast-paced commodity lumber market.

The standards for flooring are much higher; the wood has to be drier and straight.

Stark needed someone with patience and an intimate knowledge of wood.

Andrews fit the bill.

They dried their first load in a makeshift kiln in the basement of a house Andrews was building. When that load turned out just right, Andrews finished up building the larger kiln he'd wanted to construct for years.

Unlike the old steam kilns that are so hard to control, Andrews' acts like an air conditioner in reverse. It sucks the moisture out of the air in slow, controlled doses.

"Wood is really wet," Andrews said. "The kiln will pull 150 gallons of water a day out of the wood. ... It takes a week to 10 days to dry. There are a lot of depends, a lot of variables. You can't force wood to do what you want it to do. You can encourage it.

"Wood is a living thing, it never dies," he continued. "It's always moving, always alive. It's always taking on something, always getting rid of something else."

Once the blanks are dried, the tongue and grooves are cut by Burnich Frame and Molding in East Missoula. The final sorting takes place just a few blocks away.

So far, the company has been able to price its product somewhere near the lower end of the sustainable wood flooring market. It sells for about the same price as midrange oak flooring.

"It's not a simple thing to take a small-diameter tree and turn it into something that's worth a lot," Stark said. "We're trying to keep the price down, but it is a constant struggle."

North Slope is fortunate that western Montana still has the wood-products infrastructure in place to make

the venture possible, Arno said.

"There are other states like Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado that don't have mills anymore," Arno said. "They're doing less of this restoration work than we are. They just don't have a market for that material."

The goal for North Slope is to create a high-value product that's not as vulnerable to the swings experienced by the commodity lumber market, Arno said.

It's been a challenge to develop markets and match inventory to demand.

The company has installed floors in more than 50 homes and businesses in several states, including a much-touted floor in the reception room at the Governor's Mansion in Helena.

The U.S. Forest Service was impressed enough with North Slope's efforts to award it a \$250,000 woody biomass grant to help with marketing.

"A lot of companies say their products are sustainable by commercially harvesting their wood in a sustainable fashion," Stark said. "We're actually restoring the forest to the way it's supposed to be by thinning out these smaller trees. We're trying to make the forest better."

"I see this as one solution to the ongoing battle in Montana between environmentalists and the timber industry," Stark said. "If we can take the small trees and sell them for a high value and leave the older trees behind, we're restoring the old-growth condition to the forest."

In the end, both sides of the contentious debate are happy.

"Everyone is so tired of that battle," Stark said. "This seems like a perfect example of one way to find a solution."

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