

The house the

TORNADO

built



by DIANA ZLOMISLIC

OUT OF a natural disaster, one man in Haliburton County has created a growing business and a family of Kennebec Lake cottagers has found the perfect way to exercise a special kind of tradition — thanks to the hemlock tree and its poisonous reputation.

Four years ago, a two-minute long tornado ripped through the county, taking down several thousand acres of trees at a local sustainable forestry operation.

Peter Schleifenbaum, owner of Haliburton Forest at Kosciusko Lake, was left with thousands of uprooted trees.

He managed to sell most of the wood to area saw mills and lumber yards. He had no problem unloading the pine and spruce but no one wanted to touch the fallen eastern hemlock.

Schleifenbaum wasn't too concerned with the lack of interest because he had a plan. Before the storm hit, he had been conducting a small building experiment using the out-cast lumber. And this seemed like an opportune chance to test his project on a larger scale.

Schleifenbaum decided to build his own sawmill and get to work on his concept of affordable and environmentally-friendly housing that he would call Eco-Log.

Investing money into this venture was the best way for Schleifenbaum to prove to the mills and lumberyards that all of the claims made about hemlock being an unfriendly wood to work with were not substantial.

Inside the model home office, Eco-Log's marketing manager Wayne Cowling sits at his desk with a pile of folders in front of him. Each folder contains a new client's plans, with the

hemlock cabins popping up in areas including Perth, Collingwood and Aylmer.

Cowling took the concept to the Cottage Fest and Cottage Life trade shows recently and says his result lies in those tapico coloured folders.

"Between the two shows, we did really well," Cowling says. "We've created enough interest to attract sales," he adds happily.

It looks as though Schleifenbaum is turning things around for the unfavoured tree.

The name hemlock actually refers to two different things — one of which is probably more responsible for the bad name the conifer has received.

Hemlock is also a type of flower, a biennial. All of its parts are very poisonous because of the presence of the alkaloid coniine, used as a poison since ancient times. It's reputedly the same poison given to Socrates by the Athenian leaders when the Greek philosopher was charged and found guilty of impiety and corruption of youth.

However the toxin contained in hemlock's long, tough fibres serves as more of a threat to insects than humans.

"It is a hard wood to work with," Schleifenbaum admits, "because within the wood itself are natural fungicides and insecticides."

But the extra work is worth it, the forester says, since the product is more rot resistant because of these natural chemicals.

At his mill, a fine tooth blade (like a bandsaw blade on a travelling bed) cuts the dense wood very fine, leaving a fairly smooth surface.

Schleifenbaum says there are 100 year-old barn structures still standing around Southern Ontario, made of hemlock, which testify to the wood's durability.

Considering the hard facts,

See "There" page 11



Using hemlock trees felled by the 1995 tornado, Haliburton Forest's Peter Schleifenbaum, left, decided to make the best of a bad situation by creating a new business, Eco-Log Concepts. The model home, above, is giving new life to hemlock's reputation as a building material. The logs are pre-cut at Haliburton Forest's mill, below. No one else would cut the wood.



“There are a lot of trees that we don't value and it was time to think about uses for them”

from page 30

Schleitenbaum says he saw no reason why he shouldn't go ahead and form a business that centered around one of the most underused woods in the building industry.

"I couldn't see the reasoning," he says. "There was nothing to suggest that it wouldn't behave like any other wood. Bit by bit we used more and more of it until I built my own home out of it."

That was 10 years ago. So Schleitenbaum had six years of testing out his product before the tornado hit and gave him ample reason to build a business around the wood.

"For me, he says, "it was also a message. We always view the forest as something 'given' - it's there - and the high value products, such as the hardwood, there's a lot of market for that. But there are a lot of trees that we don't value and it was time to think about the uses for these different types of wood."

Schleitenbaum's Eco-Log essentially provides people with a cabin building kit. After consulting with his clients and deciding the cabin size, the materials for the building are cut at the Forest's mill.

Basically all Eco-Log buildings are 8' x 8' squared-timber wall pieces and 4' x 10' heavy

roof trusses. Each kit includes foam insulation for between the timbers, external log-chinking, threaded rod and hardware for roof truss assembly. There is also hardwood doweling to secure wall sections and an optional gable kit.

While most of the cabin kits they cut tend to be on the smaller side, Schleitenbaum says they have built Eco-Log cabins as large as 2,000 square feet.

Upon receiving the kit, it's up to the clients whether they prefer to build themselves or hire a contractor.

Blair Johnston and his wife Catherine, cottagers from Peterborough, opted to build their log cabin as a family project two summers ago.

"I like tradition," says Blair Johnston. "I like something to mean something. And the kids appreciate it - having worked out there on it, sweating and getting eaten alive by bugs."

Surprisingly, it can take as little as a week to get the shell of the structure up. The Johnstons estimate it took their family of six and their friends about two weeks to erect the main structure and add in the finishing touches - not to mention clearing a one-lane road that would lead to the cabin, nestled into their 322 acres of treed land at Kennis Lake.

A Kubota tractor was the only piece of machinery the Johnstons used in putting up their cabin. And the tractor was only used for its front end load - to carry the gravel that would surface the road.

A 1967 Army jeep lugged in all of the box-cut, eight by eight logs that would be pieced together on site by hand and hammer.

Inside their pioneer-style cabin, a full black bearskin and beaver pelt hang off the wood surfaced walls. There's no electricity but an old Findlay wood stove provides heat in the winter.

While the family owns a fully wired house down the road where they spend most of their vacation days, the cabin is a quiet retreat they look forward to in winter weekends and especially at Christmas when they have a "Campston" gift exchange with their favourite neighbors, the Campbells who helped build the cabin, from across the lake.

"But can anything beat the romantic ideal of a getaway in the middle of nowhere?"

"In the winter, we snowshoe in," says Mrs. Johnston. "We bring some wine and cheese and light a fire."

By the smile on the couple's face, it seems to be a really close call.



The only heavy equipment Catherine and Blair Johnston, above, needed for their Eco-log home on Kennis was a 1967 Jeep to haul in the pre-cut logs. With the help of family and friends, they built it in two weeks. At left is the interior.