

ADIRONDACK LIFE

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Storied Boards

BY DAVID BLOW

Last July on a sleepy road in the town of Chester, Tyler Russell and his brother, Garrett, began dismantling a silvery, weathered barn at the request of its owners, who feared it would tumble down on its own. Over the next 10 days the duo, with help from their dad, Whitney, methodically pulled boards from the 1830s relic. Using hammers, pry bars and an air-nailer that drives out old nails, they peeled away exterior boards, then hand-hewn beams and lastly, the flooring that had been trampled by cows and chickens and numerous members of the Vanguilder and Smith families who have owned the property all these years.

Two months later, some of those boards reappeared as accent walls in the new L.L.Bean outlet store 20 miles south in Lake George. “It was like, ‘Hey, I know those boards,’” said Joan (Vanguilder) Smith, recalling her first visit to the store. “It was kind of emotional, but it’s nice to see the barn is living on. It still has a story to tell.”

Stories are as much a part of the Russells’ business as the lumber itself. Countless companies reclaim wood from barns across the country, but people who buy recycled barn wood from StoriedBoards also get a book detailing its history, sometimes with ancient family photos. “It’s what makes us different,” said Tyler.

Since starting the Lake George business in 2012, the Russells have disassembled 13 barns across New York and New England, including in Severance, Wevertown and North Creek. Their recycled beams, siding and flooring adorn luxury homes, cabins and even a high-end restaurant in Manhattan. Buyers include architects, builders, designers and others who just want something different in their space.

Tyler and Garrett said a high point for them was seeing their boards in Manhattan’s buzzed-about Gabriel Kreuther restaurant and reading about it in *The New York Times*. But Whitney, whose great-great-grandfather ran a logging camp in the St. Regis Chain of Lakes, said he also values sales to the average homeowner.

“I just got a Facebook message from a guy in St. Albans [Vermont]. A year ago they moved into this house and he’s still like, ‘You gotta see what they look like, what we did with the barn board in the man cave!’” said Whitney. “I’d love to do a Gabriel Kreuther every week, but to me this is just as gratifying.”

Driving throughout northern New York as a building inspector, Whitney noticed numerous dilapidated homes dotting the area. StoriedBoards started as another of his side-business ideas, like his stint driving an ice-cream truck when the kids were young.

The original concept was to reclaim crumbling homes from municipalities stuck with them, sell the building materials and acquire the land for their effort. But legal uncertainties and environmental roadblocks—like asbestos removal—dashed the plan.

With help from Tyler, a 32-year-old aerospace engineer who wanted to start his own business, the idea morphed into reclaiming old barns—with the added hook of providing the stories behind the wood. “The light bulb went off,” said Tyler.

He’s the company’s CEO and focuses on lining up orders and doing much of the barn research for the history books. Twenty-six-year-old Garrett directs duties in the wood yard, filling orders with help from their one employee, Jeremy Burke. Whitney, who still has his full-time inspector job, primarily scouts the barns (nearly all of their referrals come from owners eager to be rid of a liability) and buys equipment. “He’s our gopher,” Garrett joked.

Armed with a new \$150,000 loan through the Lake Champlain–Lake George Regional Planning Board and another \$100,000 line of credit, roles will soon shift, as StoriedBoards expands its product line to include fireplace mantels, barn doors, headboards and tables made from reclaimed wood. Garrett will take over more of Tyler’s duties as Tyler begins the manufacturing effort.

On a sun-splashed October day at their Lake George headquarters, Tyler, Garrett and Jeremy pulled freshly treated wood from the bug-killing kiln and loaded it onto a truck to be delivered to a mill in Thurman, where it would be turned into flooring. Whitney, a few steps away, was answering a call from a barn owner.

Surrounded by graying beams, siding and flooring in all shades of old, they spoke about successes and goals and the philosophy of what they do. The three tenets guiding them, they said, are uncovering the stories behind the wood, transparency in pricing and providing an environmentally friendly product. “To be blatantly honest, though, no one ever discusses the green side of it,” Tyler said. “We realize it’s just inherent, people who want reclaimed lumber know it’s green.”

StoriedBoards products range from six dollars per board foot for barn board to \$14.50 a board foot for rare chestnut flooring (by comparison, new knotty pine might fetch 50 cents a foot). But for architects like Glen Cobin, the man behind the Gabriel Kreuther design in Manhattan, the price is well worth it. “Whether we’re consciously being green or recycling, we’re giving a second life to some of the most beautiful wood we’ve seen,” he said.

Caroline Cardone, an interior designer in Saratoga Springs who recently purchased four 20-foot-long beams to make a new carriage house look old, agreed. “It’s well worth your dollar to find the right material,” she said. “To find hand-hewn beams that some guy spent days making,... that kind of quality is worth it.”

For more information about StoriedBoards call (518) 227-0899 or visit www.storiedboards.com.