



Reclaiming Our Heritage

The phrase reduce, reuse, recycle is purposely listed in order of sustainability. It is always better to reduce our consumption, then reuse products, and only then to recycle as much as we can.



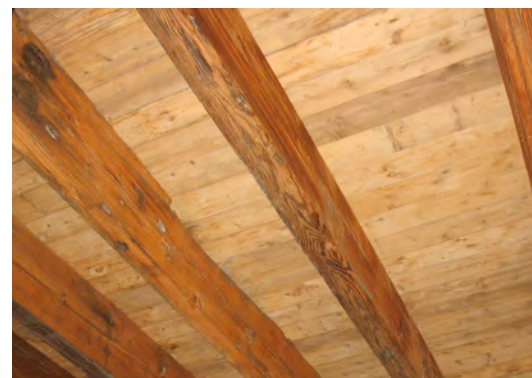
In our new house so far, we have made a commitment to reducing our floor space to under 2,000 square feet and to using reclaimed building materials as much as possible. Lumber is a renewable resource but, despite the best precautions, logging is a destructive industry. Much of the mass of a tree is burned or buried or left on the forest floor just to harvest the trunk. Landscapes are inevitably destroyed and sequestered carbon is released in the logging process. There is always waste in milling, and many levels of transportation are required from forest to mill to distributor to consumer.

It may make environmental sense to incur only reclamation and short-haul transportation costs by using reclaimed lumber instead. Another riff on the theme of “buy local”, as long as we don’t try to dismantle our neighbour’s shed when they are away on holiday.

Most reclaimed lumber comes from timbers and decking rescued from old barns, factories, and warehouses, and some companies have been known to source wood from less traditional structures such as boxcars, coal mines, and wine barrels. Reclaimed or antique lumber is used primarily for decoration and home building and is often used for siding, architectural details, cabinetry, furniture and flooring.

So far, we have been able to use reclaimed lumber as fir structural beams and inch-thick pine tongue and groove ceilings. We will also use reclaimed cedar barn board for siding.

Reclaimed lumber is popular for many non-environmental reasons: the wood has a unique, aged appearance, the history of the wood’s origins can be interesting, and the wood’s physical characteristics include strength, stability and durability. Survival in an old-growth forest can be difficult. A tree grown on a tree farm doesn’t have to compete for space and light, and it will be harvested before it gets very old, so its growth rings will be widely spaced. But a tree that grew in an ancient forest had to compete with other trees, so it grew more slowly. That’s why old-growth timber is strong and its rings are dense.



Many of the largest fir beams in Canada, like the ones in our house, came from British Columbia. In 1865, Hastings Sawmill opened on Burrard Inlet in Vancouver and was given timber rights to much of the surrounding area. Soon there was a mill in North Vancouver.

In 1868, Gassy Jack Deighton opened a saloon nearby. (O.K., I know his credibility as a cook is immediately shot but, in those days, “gassy” meant someone who talked a lot.) This was the beginning of Gastown, the small village that would grow to become Vancouver.

Logging was mostly done by hand. Horses or oxen dragged felled trees along corduroy roads, trails with small logs placed across them. The logs were greased to reduce friction and the ridges made by the logs resembled corduroy fabric. These were called “skid roads” and they led to the water where the huge timbers were floated to the mills.

In B.C., loggers put a springboard into the tree above the ground. Two axe men stood on the board and chopped at the tree with heavy, double-edged axes. They also used long saws with handles at each end. You can see the loggers standing on their springboards in the photo below.



When the last of these majestic giants were felled and the big timber taken to the saw mills, it was the end of a special era in our country's history. The conditions that allowed them to grow slowly and develop their dense heart centres would never be present again. Old growth by its very nature, taking hundreds of years to mature, was not considered for replanting

and is now replaced by faster growing varieties.

Reclaimed beams can be sawn into wider planks than the harvested lumber. These old used wood beams come in sizes that are unmatched in today's lumber yards and are much less likely to twist, warp or shrink because they have been exposed to many changes in humidity over a long period of time. In some cases, the timbers from which the boards were cut have been slightly expanding and contracting for over a century in their previous installation.

Barns serve as one of the most common sources for reclaimed wood in Ontario, and most farm buildings constructed up through the early part of the 19th century were typically built using whatever trees were right there on the property. They often contain a mixed local blend of oak, maple, pine, cedar, poplar, and sometimes hemlock. The wood was either hand hewn using an axe or squared with an adze, and has a lovely character.

Next time, I'll provide more information on the B.C. and U.S. west coast milling operations, including the famous Long-Bell Mill, and include a list of where reclaimed lumber is available in our area.