

A Working Victorian Museum

The Blue Ox

“I worked as a lumberjack when I was sixteen,” Eric Hollenbeck recalls as we approach a group of small wooden houses set on a low platform. “We lived in ‘skid’ houses like these. When they finished cutting an area, they would hitch up oxen or a tractor to the platforms, and simply skid them along through the clearing to the next place to cut. That’s where the term ‘skid row’ comes from.” An entire small town, with cookhouse, office and living quarters might be dragged through the clear-cut area, Eric explains.

We are touring the Blue Ox Millworks, located on the Humboldt Bay waterfront of Eureka, California. The Blue Ox is a working museum of 19th-century craftsmanship, created by Eric and his wife Viviana. The big, cavernous building of the millworks was once a power plant for streetcars. These days it provides a historical showcase for over 30 pieces of machinery, built between 1852 and 1940, which the Hollenbecks found, restored and installed.

They also added a gracious 19th-century entrance with railed steps to the old building. Fancy stickwork over the porch door lends further architectural interest. Upon our arrival, we observe that the entrance is “guarded” by the peacefully slumbering Bear and Dusty, two of the Hollenbeck’s five dogs. Viviana, remarking that she was a “cat-skinner” (tractor driver) when she first met Eric, greets us and begins the tour.

Near the entryway, Viviana sits down at a foot-pedaled router and demonstrates how a rosette or wooden trim piece is made. Next, she skillfully creates several stakes for a picket fence by making v-shaped chops with a hand-operated cutter. We walk among huge lathes and past a giant blue and black double-drum sander named “Mother,” built in 1903. Nearby is an old double-ended saw called a “miserywhip.” There are machines to make mortise-and-tenon joints, a single-side planer built in 1905, and dozens of other machines that were the industrial wonders of their day.

The Blue Ox, however, functions as more than just a museum exhibit. From all over the country, owners of



A giant wooden lumberjack welcomes visitors to the Blue Ox Millworks.

By Marcia Battelle Reed

Millworks

Victorian and other traditional homes or buildings call the Hollenbecks to replace hard-to-find wooden gingerbread and other trim. Elaborate corbels, posts, pillars, finials and fretwork are built and shipped as far away as Connecticut.

The Hollenbecks also reproduce ornate plaster medallions and other decorative pieces. Plaster ceilings are rebuilt, and old or lost ironwork restored.

Eric gestures toward an extra-long lathe. It is set up to turn a particularly difficult pillar.

"This one runs on electricity," he says apologetically, "but we hope to use steam power soon, or maybe even oxen, to operate it." Unlike most present-day manufacturers, Eric's goal is to retain as much historical authenticity as possible. He strives to work in the spirit of the old-time craftsmen, as well as using their equipment and methodology. "These are the machines that built the Pacific Northwest," Eric tells us. "We are aiming to re-create the taste, touch and feel of our Northwest heritage."

This philosophy is demonstrated upon our arrival at the blacksmith shop, where intricate wrought iron door handles, hinges, railings and other traditional fixtures are built with forge and anvil. Beyond this area is the molding center, where plaster parts such as ceiling medallions are reproduced.

Eric shows us two small skid buildings. One of these houses the bunk beds, the other the cookhouse. Near the



This "skid row" house served as a bunkhouse. Note the platform which is "skidded" with houses aboard.

Eric brings the two oxen, Babe and Blue, out for a training walk. They will be ready for the yoke soon.



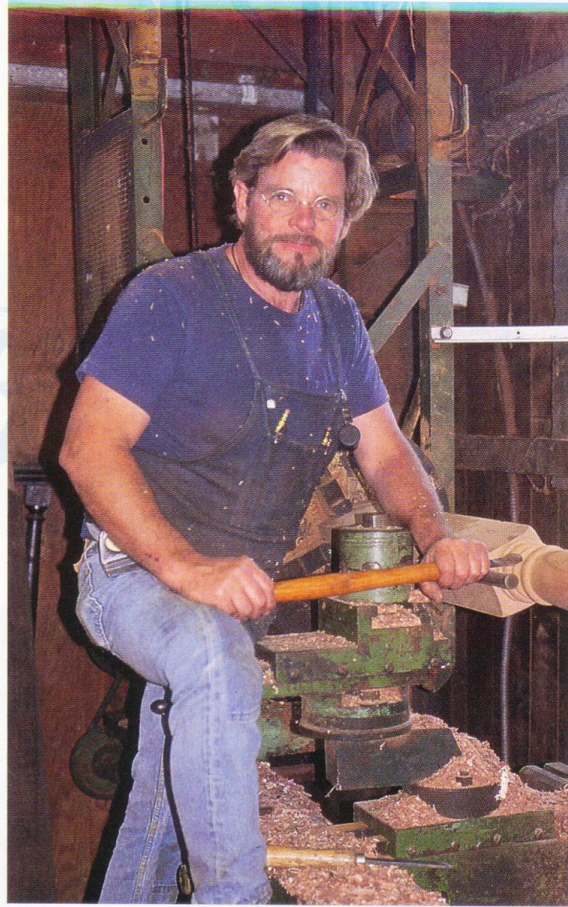
Blue is the recipient of a special treat while lounging in his stall on a rainy day.



skid houses, we catch a glimpse of Babe and Blue, the two young oxen that Eric is training. As we examine the handsome wooden yoke that he is making for the oxen, Eric explains how well its design has stood the test of time. Centuries have come and gone, yet its practical ingenuity has not been surpassed.

The next stop on our tour finds us cowering against a wall, thoroughly intimidated by the deafening roar of two ferociously whirling man-sized blades. Under our nervous gaze, Eric deftly slices a wooden slab on one blade, then turns and trims it on the other, demonstrating the Victorian method of producing a shingle. Elegant 19th-century houses were often embellished with scalloped, fish scale, or diamond point shingles, any or all of which can still be made at this facility.

Blue Ox Millworks even has a kiln to make bricks. The kiln was built, with Eric's supervision, by "kids at risk" — as part of an ongoing program for students who come after school, eager for the opportunity to learn basic crafts. "They had to use math to figure out how to build the kiln," he explains. "It now fires local clay at high temperatures."



Eric Hollenback and his wife Vivian cofounded the Blue Ox Millworks. Eric strives to work in the spirit of the old-time craftsmen, using "the machines that built the Pacific Northwest," such as the vintage lathe pictured here.



This plaster cornice was made in the Millwork's molding department.



An elaborate wooden corbel made at the Blue Ox Millworks.