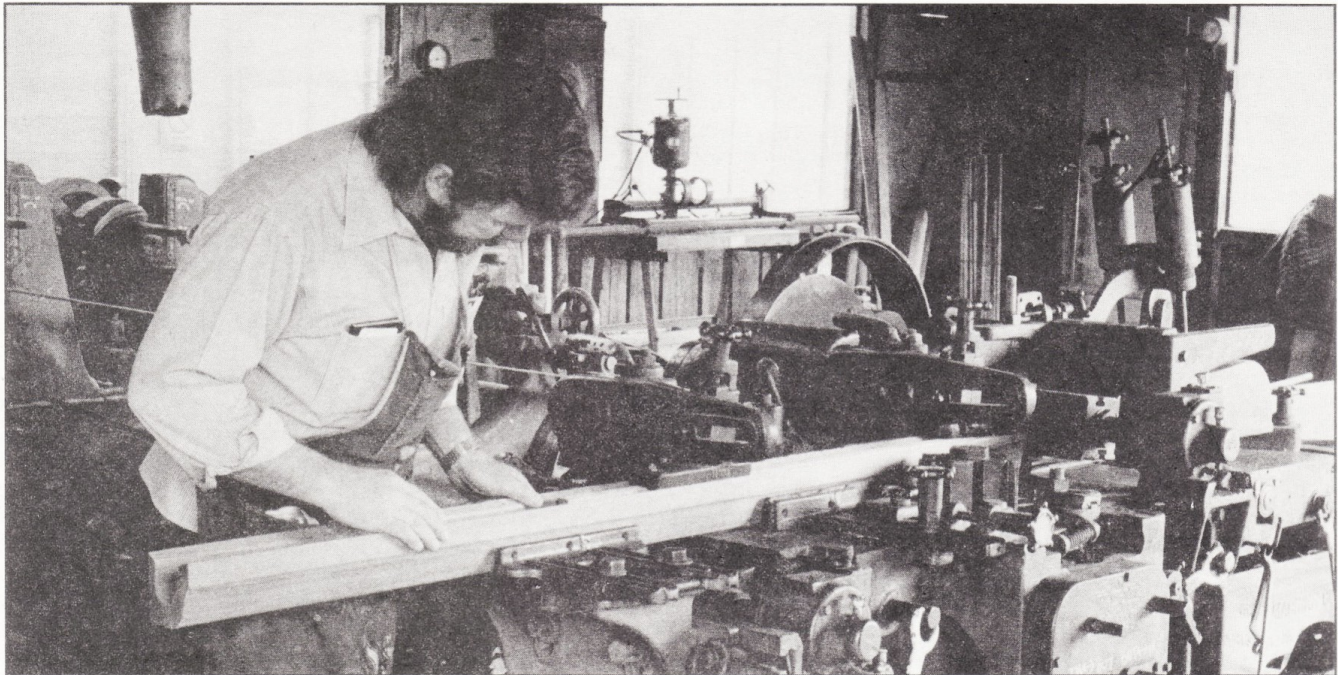

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Miller Turns Junk Into Gold



Mill owner Eric Hollenbeck runs a piece of redwood through an 8" x 16" molder he salvaged from a closed mill. Much of his machinery is turn-of-the-century, and none was built since World War II. He's now in a position to do small, lucrative milling operations the larger mills can't handle.

by Walter Wiley

A couple of decades ago, Eric Hollenbeck decided his logging business needed some help. Perhaps a small sawmill of his own so he could be his own best customer and make a bit of money from selling lumber, too.

He didn't think he was riding the face of a future wave. After all, it was just recycled junk, a little "gyppo" mill with a 52-inch circle blade, long outmoded in the coastal redwood forests around Eureka, Calif., where Hollenbeck lives and where modern, computerized bandsaw mills are slicing out more boards in a minute than Hollenbeck could make in a day, maybe a week.

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But now the lumber business is in turmoil and Hollenbeck's little operation -- called Blue Ox Millworks -- located in a restored powerhouse hard by the Humboldt Bay mud-flats on Eureka's waterfront, is starting to look like a vision of the future.

"All the big timber companies are on the edge, just about priced out of the market," said Hollenbeck the other day. "Us gyppos are going to be all that's left someday, and I think that day is coming soon."

A gyppo, he explained, is a small operator who avoids borrowing money, makes do with the resources available, avoids hiring help he does not need, and remains willing to change whenever circumstances dictate.

"It's also not a bad thing for anyone in the woodworking business. It's a good thing -- as long as you're willing to think like a gyppo."

Hollenbeck, 42, a brawny fellow with a booming voice, a Paul Bunyan beard, and a 1960s hot-rodder hair-do, said his business just evolved out of native gyppo instincts.

"I went to work in the woods when I was 14," he said. "I started logging on my own when I was 22. When I built this, I didn't really know what I was doing, but I just decided to try to make it work."

And it does work. Customers across the United States find their way to Blue Ox for special millwork items such as redwood roof gutters, crown moldings, stair rails and balusters, and a list of items that seems without end.

Owners of Victorian homes and architects creating Victorian reproductions hire Hollenbeck to provide the gingerbread treatments. He and his crew recently filled an order for the White House for 250 planters made barrel-fashion with curved redwood staves. He recalled one time a mysterious, hurry-up cash customer had him make some odd dish-shaped pieces from oak, which he later learned were used as fake clay targets to rig a high-stakes trap-shooting match.

Hollenbeck works a crew often as large as eight, sometimes more, although the permanent work force is two: himself and his wife, Viviana, a whiz at marketing and office organization.

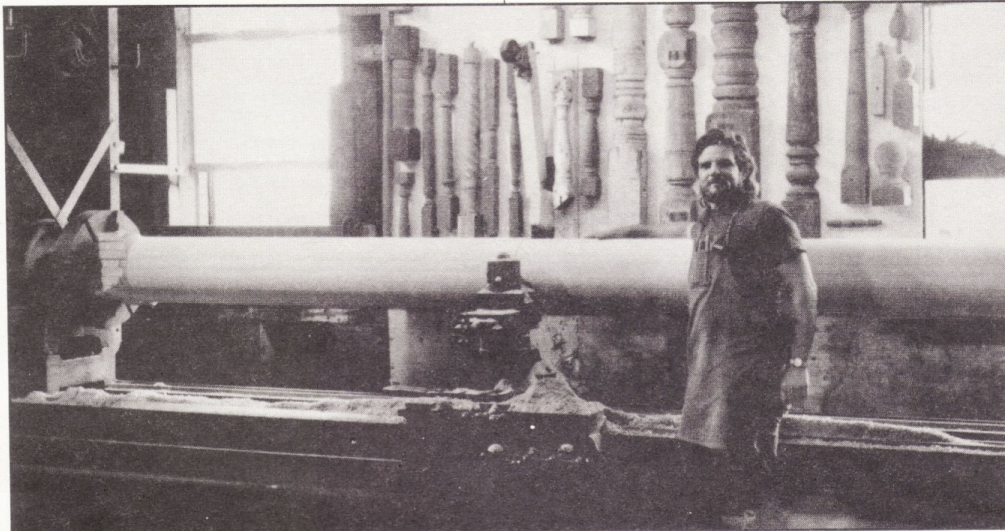
WORKING AS A SUB

A good bit of Blue Ox's sawmill work is done for other gyppos, Hollenbeck said. "These are guys around here with small shops. They buy lumber or they'll have a log they want sawn for some project, so I'll hire them to help me saw it. Then they can pay me for sawing it, or I'll cut on percentage -- keep half the lumber as my fee."

The machinery that makes it all work was nearly all junk before it came into Hollenbeck's possession, he said. Most was made around the turn of the century, none after World War II, "and a lot of it I didn't even know what it was until I got it here."

For instance, he said, there is the 8"x16" molder he had thought was a planer until a retired millworker set him straight.

Blue Ox has three big molders, three 12"x32" planers, a 42-inch double drum sander, three lathes, including one with a 32" swing and a 17-foot bed, a couple of 36" band-



With this 17-footer and two other lathes, there aren't many jobs Eric Hollenbeck can't handle. Small mill owners like himself may be the wave of the future since the large operations are geared for one thing -- high-speed volume.

saws, an overhead elbow router, a lathe-like machine for making rosettes, plus tenoners, jointers, table saws and the like.

One unusual device is an 1852 Portland Picket Pointer. It is a hand-operated shear that puts a very pretty gothic arch point on

point on fence pickets, much more attractive than the usual triangular point.

The mill's latest addition is home-made equipment for making "compo," Victorian-era wooden moldings faced with fancy cast decorations. It all seems quaint, but Hollenbeck said he wonders if it isn't really the image of the future for the redwood country.

"There's plenty of wood around for us guys who make valuable things out of it," he said. "What's gone wrong is that these big timber companies all geared up to turn out volume. Two-by-six decking -- you call that a valuable finished product?"

Now that environmental curbs have sharply reduced the amount of timber available to the mills, prices have started to soar and demand is plummeting because the lumber market has been based upon low prices.

"These homebuilders are abandoning lumber like it

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was poison," he said. "They're going to metal studs, concrete block, plastic — anything but wood. But the timber companies don't know anything but volume, volume, volume."

He told of one huge, modern, computerized mill in the redwoods that cuts a half-million board feet in a shift with a workforce of only 30.

"Now that the timber is getting in short supply and demand is dropping as the price goes up, they're stuck," he said. "They can't slow it down. It only runs at one speed — fast."


It all seems to point to the end of the world as they know it for the timber giants. But that might be good news in the end, Hollenbeck said.

"Now, at least, the trees ought to be able to grow to

maturity instead of being cut as soon as they'll make a couple of two-by-sixes."

And soaring lumber prices should not keep small woodworking operators from making profits, he said.

"I had to pay \$20 for a 20-foot piece of 4x4 redwood con-heart the other day," he said. "I got a 10-foot piece of select out of it, put that in a lathe, turned it and made \$150 in 20 minutes. A lady needed to fix her porch, and she was glad to pay my price."

"Us gyppos, we're like the bears and the banana slugs and the mushrooms out in the woods," he added. "We're native species, and we're not going away. Not until the woods themselves go away." 

Walter Wiley is a roving newspaper columnist from Sacramento, Calif.

Producing Authentic Gingerbread

Anyone who has ever worked on the interior of a Victorian-era house has encountered that fancy cast molding and wished it could be duplicated, especially where a piece of it is broken or missing.

Eric Hollenbeck has found that it can be duplicated.

"They call that stuff 'gesso' these days, but I've learned that it is really something called 'compo,' and it's not as hard to duplicate as you might think," he said.

The secret is in the formula for the cast material. It is not plaster.

"I finally tracked down the recipe at a museum in England I had to get up in the middle of the night to make

the phone call," he said. "The recipe is simple. Just hide glue, linseed oil, balm resin and whiting."

To duplicate an old molding, Hollenbeck inspects it to find how the pattern repeats, then he makes a wooden wheel with a circumference equal to the length of one repeat. Then he coats the wheel's rim with "Sculpy" clay from a crafts store and rolls that along the pattern to make an impression.

The wheel with the Sculpy is baked in an oven until it cures.

To make new molding, he coats a piece of wood the appropriate size with the compo mixture, then rolls the wheel along its length to emboss

the goo with the pattern.

Hollenbeck has also unearthed recipes for old-fashioned stains that enhance the natural colors in wood. A pan filled with alder bark and vinegar and four tablespoons of alum makes a stain that brings out yellows. Giving the same treatment to a container of padauk shavings gives a red stain.

The stains are ideal to use on wood to be finished by the old French polish method, Hollenbeck said.

For more information on his recipes, write Hollenbeck at Blue Ox Millworks, Foot of X St., Eureka, CA 95501.

Walter Wiley

Learning From The Old Hands

Nearly every bit of machinery in Eric Hollenbeck's shop was already on the earth, some of it already discarded as old-fashioned, at the time he was born. But he has had little trouble learning how to operate it from senior mill hands.

"These guys, when they've seen how serious I am, they've bent over backwards to help me," Hollenbeck said.

When he was first getting started he was having trouble making straight cuts with his sawmill until an old timer told him he had to "hammer" the blade first.

"It means just what it sounds

like, and believe me, it's not easy to take a hammer to a \$1,600 saw blade," he said.

But a big circular blade is somewhat floppy unless it has the right conical shape to it. Then, when it is rotating at speed, centrifugal force pulls it out flat and keeps it stiff.

Or how about his big 1912 Hermance molder he dug out of the blackberry vines at a long-abandoned mill site.

"I thought it was a planer, and I was fooling with it one day when this old timer walks in and strikes up a conversation. Turns out that this was a molder, and he was a knife grinder

at one of the mills here that was shut down years ago when a national chain bought it," said Hollenbeck.

After he demonstrated how the machine worked, the man recalled how his foreman, on the last day of work, told him to throw all the molder knives in the sharpening room into a scrap iron bin.

"Well, he didn't do it. He took them home, 3,000 of them. Had 'em in his garage," Hollenbeck said. "He gave them to me as long as I'd promise to use them. I do. That's them above the bench there. All I ever use."

Walter Wiley