



## A Different Sort of Yard

S & S Logging delivers precise products to exacting customers

*By Cary Clayton*

Three decades ago, Robert Searle chose logging as a career. He might still prefer to log, but times have changed in Montana's Bitterroot Valley, and Robert has changed with them.

Today, having weathered massive reductions in available timber, devastating forest fires, and diminished support of the infrastructure needed to profitably market wood fiber, Robert's firm, S & S Logging, stands as an example of how ingenuity and adaptability can strengthen a business faced with almost overwhelming challenges.

Robert has adapted and diversified what was once primarily a harvesting company into a firm providing specialty products to the log home industry — one segment of Montana's timber industry that remains strong in the face of an ever changing economic landscape.

### **Making the Switch**

As a harvesting contractor, S & S Logging once processed as many as 14 truckloads of long logs daily utilizing ground, line, and helicopter harvesting techniques. Today, they seldom fell timber or skid stems. The heart of S & S Logging is a seven acre sort yard where hundreds of truck loads per year of Douglas fir and pine logs are assembled for manufacture into precision cut components for log homes. "Remnants" from the logs are processed into high value beams using a Wood-Mizer thin kerf band sawmill.

Robert says the value of their service comes from the fact that logs used to build log homes command premium prices. Unlike other log markets, prices in the log home marketplace seldom fluctuate much. Uniquely, S & S provides log home manufacturers stems that are precision cut to the exact lengths customers need, typically 20 feet or longer.

According to Robert, the ability to acquire custom processed logs already cut to precise specifications is a big money saver for his customers. By purchasing custom cut material, manpower costs are reduced and waste is avoided, so the log home builder only has to worry about building the home.

### **Taking Risk out of the Business**

Because he's now taking the risks, brokering and preparing the logs needed by his customers, Robert says a keen sense for meeting the needs of individual contractors must be balanced with optimizing the value in each log. He says his "edge" is a thin kerf saw blade.



The “edge” is mounted on a Wood-Mizer LT40 super hydraulic thin-kerf band sawmill powered by a 51 hp Caterpillar engine. Robert’s mill processes high quality timbers and other structural pieces from log parts left after long logs are cut to supply customers. According to Robert, the value of the recovered fiber sold for use in timber frame homes, or as “accents” in log homes, “Can make the difference between making a profit and seeing a loss on a load of logs.”

### **Finding Quality Logs**

Quality is key to the products S & S Logging produces. To achieve the quality logs he needs, Robert scours the marketplace within a range as far as 500 miles and more. Logs purchased locally arrive at the processing yard by truck. Logs purchased at a distance are shipped via rail to reduce hauling costs. Robert’s self loader is used to bring the railroad logs the last few miles from trackside to yard.

In the yard itself, a Caterpillar 966 log loader transports and stacks the stems. To ensure orders can be filled promptly, as many as 40 truckloads of logs are decked and available in the yard at all times. According to Robert, “Most small sawmills are unable to secure commercial customers because they cannot inventory enough raw material to assure service. It requires a significant financial investment, but I believe at least part of my success depends on having logs on hand to make sure my customers get what they need when they need it.” Robert continues, “When they ‘need it,’ usually means ‘right now’.”

In the yard, full-length logs are cut to length and shipped to builders almost daily. Remainder logs are measured and marked to indicate best possible yields. Once marked, logs for each day’s milling are decked near the sawmill.

While Wood-Mizers like S & S Logging’s LT40 are often used by entrepreneurs who tow them to job sites behind pickup trucks to do custom sawmilling, S & S’s own mill is set up as a stationary unit under a shed. Although 90 percent of the timbers S & S produces are less than 20 feet long, bed extensions allow easy production of materials as much as 32 feet long. Joe Gunder, Robert’s uncle, runs the mill, which he says is capable of milling beams as long as 42 feet.

Robert says, “The materials we produce must be precise and high quality to meet our customers’ demands.” He elaborates, “The thin bands the Wood-Mizer uses produce a smooth consistent surface, and we get less than 1/16 inch variation over the length of a 32-foot beam.”

S & S Logging bought its first band mill in 1996 and is now on its third. “I ‘trade up’ after about 5000 hours of use,” says Robert. “Implementing the advantages of the advanced technology helps increase production, and we capitalize on the high resale value of the used machines.”

### **Edging Boards Add Up**

A Caterpillar 416B loader/backhoe with forks moves logs and lumber at the milling site. Slabs are stacked, bundled, and given to local residents who leave their empty trailers in a designated location in the yard and later return to take away their bounty of firewood - free.



Filches are stacked separately for edging later, after a large volume has accumulated. Edging in this way frees up the mill, allowing more time for producing the primary product — high value beams. Edged boards and other “fall-down,” produced as a by-product of customer orders, are stacked separately and labeled for sale to walk-in customers.

### **Continuing to Evolve**

Robert recognizes that markets continue to change and that his company must continue to change as well. He has observed a trend in construction practices that makes the future of his sawmilling operation even more promising.

“Last year, 60 percent of one local log home builder’s business consisted of providing accents for store fronts of a national retail chain,” he says. “In the residential market, some home buyers are choosing to combine the benefits of modern construction with the appearance of more rustic buildings and getting the best of both worlds. Many log home builders are using the timbers S & S produces for accent uses rather than structural purposes.”

S & S’s log yard also serves another log buyer as a centralized location for sorting and distributing log home logs. Logs arriving from Canada are sorted for size and distributed to the appropriate purchasers.

Although western Montana’s timber industry has suffered serious setbacks in recent years, S & S logging has definitely been able to adjust and adapt in remaining viable as a business.