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## Longing for A Log Home

Thursday, December 21, 2006  
**BY KRISTINE KISKY for The Columbian**

Maybe you played with Lincoln Logs® as a child, and imagined living in the cabin of your creation. Perhaps your interest was piqued long ago, upon hearing stories about Abraham Lincoln's boyhood home. Or it might have been that fantastic weekend in a cozy vacation rental that got you thinking.

For most, the idea of living in a log home living is a fantasy, but for a growing number, it's a way of life.

Chris and Cliff Wheeler are living the log home dream. When the Wheelers were looking to move from Portland to Bend more than a decade ago, they contacted a REALTOR®. When the agent asked them what they were looking for in a home, Chris recalls being astounded when Cliff said, " 'A log home.' After 25 years of marriage, it was the first I'd heard of it, " she says with a laugh. However, when the Wheelers found a great 10-acre piece of property with a 5-acre pond in the center, they knew it was the perfect spot for their log home.

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"When we purchased the property, I went to Toys R Us to see if they were still really making Lincoln Logs," recounts Chris Wheeler. She found a set "and I made a cute little model of a log home with a pond and gave to my husband as a gift."

The Wheelers conducted extensive research regarding the feasibility of building a full-scale log home. They were astounded at how many choices there were, and surprised to learn how many others were interested in log home living. For instance, just during the course of casual conversation with a group of women, "I said something like, 'We're going to Bend to look for land and we want a log home,' and one of the women says, 'Oh my gosh, I have tons of books and magazines about log homes.' ? I was shocked. She brought me a pile of magazines, and inside one log home magazine was (an ad for) a seminar the magazine put on." When the Wheelers made reservations, Chris wondered if they'd be the only ones there. She remembers thinking, "Who in Portland is going to go to a log home seminar?" However, when the day came, the Wheelers were just two faces in a sizeable crowd.

Later, Chris Wheeler heard a radio advertisement about a log home company with Lincoln Logs in their name. She recalls marveling, "They make adult Lincoln Logs?!" The Wheelers researched the product and the company. Now, 12 years later, the couple not only lives in the log home of their dreams, they help others realize their own dreams. The Wheelers established Baker Pond Log Works in 1994. Authorized dealers of The Original Lincoln Logs Ltd., they have had a hand in building numerous log homes throughout the Northwest. "Now, this is what we do for a living and we love it," declares Chris Wheeler.

Times and places

For centuries, logs have been used in home construction, most notably in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. When immigrants from these areas came to colonial America, they put their knowledge to use, harvesting their new country's abundant natural logs to create shelters. Simple to construct, requiring few tools and little training, these early log homes were typically one room dwellings, often devoid of windows.

By the 1800s, there were still modest dwellings being built, but there were also grand log structures, some with soaring cathedral ceilings and inviting balconies. Often, they were vacation lodges for the wealthy.

The evolution of log structures took another step forward in the 1920s, when machined logs were first used in construction. Shortly thereafter, the first log home kits or packages were produced, with logs being milled at a plant, the structure erected there, disassembled, transported and then reassembled on the owner's site. Many of today's log home companies follow a similar procedure.



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The days of the drafty cabins are long gone. Advanced tongue-and-groove joinery and modern sealants and gaskets make today's log homes energy efficient.

The popularity of log homes has proliferated dramatically in the last 20 years. According to the Log Home Council of the National Association of Home Builders, more than 25,000 log homes are built each year, an increase from around 7,000 annually in the mid-1980s. In fact, sales in the United States and Canada have more than doubled since 1998, to \$1.37 billion. Log homes now account for 7 percent of custom homes built.

Back when the Wheelers were looking for a log home, a fair amount of legwork was involved, including attending shows and seminars and visiting manufacturer's sites. "Today, that can all done on the Internet," Chris Wheeler says of the research.

"The Internet is the best resource for any information," agrees Kevin Moehnke of Kalama's Mountain Homes, a log home fabrication and construction company. "I think most people have done quite a bit of research by the time they to come to us, they have a good idea what's out on the market."

As people learn about log homes, they're often surprised to find out just how many options they have-and how many parallels there are to traditional custom home construction.

"You can do anything with a log home," contends Wheeler. "There are some things you do a lot differently with log homes than a regular home, but anything you can do in a regular framed home, you can do with a log home." Wheeler says most Baker Pond Log Works customers take one of The Original Lincoln Log's 90-plus designs and customize them to meet their needs. "You design the home and go though the construction," says Wheeler. "From that point forward, it's just like building a custom home."

"If it's a vacation home, they usually keep it pretty simple," Moehnke says of log home designs. However, if it's the dweller's primary residence or dream home, "It's bigger, pretty customized, a pretty fancy home. There's really no limitations."

And whom are these people longing to live in a log home? "There is a certain demographic. It's kind of interesting," observes Wheeler. "There are a lot of people who as a career deal with the public in some way or another," including those in law enforcement, firefighting, emergency medical technicians and teachers. "They want to go home and decompress in their own home. The other thing is they're kind of an independent person who doesn't want to be the same as everyone else. It's someone who wants to be a little different."

"We get a lot of interest from all segments," reports Moehnke. "The majority who

end up actually buying are people for whom it's not their first home. Maybe they're nearing retirement age-that's at least half (of the buyers)."

Often, says Wheeler, "Our client is ? in their 50s, someone who's looking to do something for themselves. They've done for their families and raised their kids and now they're thinking about retirement. It's something they've always wanted and they think, 'Dang it, if I can afford it, I'm going to do it now!' "

### Weighing options

Today, more than 200 companies offer log homes. Some sell kits, others are geared for completely custom projects and some can handle both. Some firms offer just materials, while others handle everything from site prep to construction.

Baker Pond Log Works' involvement on a project might include everything from site visits to consulting on floor plan design, to helping people connect with financing and overseeing delivery. Plus, as licensed and experienced contractors, they can help homeowners start the building process or oversee the entire job.

Chris Wheeler says "kind of a huge percentage" of Baker Pond customers have a hands-on role in their home's construction. Perhaps, "It's because we did it ourselves. We talk them into it," she says with a chuckle. But seriously, "If it's something they have a desire to do, they can do it. ? We try to empower them to do it. They can do as much as they want," or as little. "My husband is a general contractor. He can walk them through the process." And if the project becomes a bit much, "They can bail at anytime they want," says Wheeler. It's not uncommon for a customer to have their log package delivered during the week, "And then on Saturday, they get their friends together and they stack logs all day." Come Monday, they turn the project over to experienced builders, "But they got to have some ownership in it-got to have some fun," Wheeler reports.

Mountain Homes builds all types and styles of log structures, as well as manufacturing log components for homeowners and general contractors. They supply key components for log accent projects and build entire log shell structures. Their complete log package includes the log walls, the log roof system, and any second story floor joists, log staircases and railings if plans call for them. Their involvement on a project can run the gamut from just fabrication through to complete installation.

At Mountain Homes, "We use Douglas fir logs, all locally harvested, most within an hour radius of the yard here, both in Oregon and Washington," informs Moehnke. Log diameters typically range from 10- to 24-inches, with the majority of the homes using a 14-inch average diameter log. The logs are brought to their Kalama yard just west of Interstate 5, where they're debarked by drawknife or high-pressure

water. Next, craftsmen scribe, cut and mill the logs, then each piece is fit together. "It's all done by hand," says Moehnke. "We hand cut it, fit it, pre-build it in the yard and dismantle it," before delivery to the customer's site. Constructing a log home's shell usually takes the Mountain Homes crew between 10 and 16 weeks, depending on the size of the home. The company generally takes on between five and 10 homes a year. While many of their creations wind up being built on sites in Southwest Washington, they have delivered homes as far away as Hawaii and Japan.

At Mountain Homes, says Moehnke, "We use green wood. We do that for several reasons," one being that "we can control checking in the logs. Cracking naturally occurs (in logs), but we can hide it out of the weather," via a control cut in the top of the log, focusing the cracking out of site and out of the weather. "The other concern is with dry, standing trees, there can be bugs and sap stains. With green wood, you don't have any bugs or sap stain. There are no bugs in the wood at all." The greenwood homes are constructed with future shrinkage due to drying in mind.

Log home packages from The Original Lincoln Logs Ltd. use bug free timber independently certified by Timber Products Inspection, Inc. The logs are air dried at the Lincoln Logs' facility. Natural air drying results in fewer and less excessive checks than kiln drying, according to the manufacturer. Complete packages from The Original Lincoln Logs Ltd. have everything needed to build a weather-tight shell from the sub-floor up. This includes exterior doors, windows, load-bearing walls, interior partition framing, hardware, insulation, sealants and the complete roof system.

Log home manufacturers offer a variety of log profiles, including round inside and out, flat inside and out, or the industry's most popular option, the D-shaped timber that's flat on the interior and rounded on the outside. There are also variances in how logs and corners are joined together and the type of timber used.

The question of a log home's cost is difficult to answer because of all of the variables. Mountain Homes tells customers that many of the dramatic homes they see in magazines would fall in the \$200 to \$500 per square foot range, but a dwelling could run under \$100 a square foot if the homeowner does a fair amount of the work.

According to Wheeler, the cost of a log home "is very comparable" to a stick framed custom home.

If a full-fledged log home isn't in your future, "Log accent homes are a growing segment," notes Moehnke. "It could be anything-something as simple as a mantle to staircases and railings, log siding, there's really no limit. You can make it as loggy as you want," he says with a chuckle.

## Resources:

Baker Pond Log Works: 888-303-5647, [www.bakerpond.com](http://www.bakerpond.com), 19434 River Woods Drive, Bend, OR 97702, Oregon Construction Contractors Board #119602

The Original Lincoln Logs Ltd.: [www.lincolnlogs.com](http://www.lincolnlogs.com)

Log Homes Council: [www.loghomes.org](http://www.loghomes.org), 800-368-5242. Founded in 1970, the Log Homes Council, part of the National Association of Home Builders, is an organization whose members are log home manufacturers and producers who have united to develop and promote quality building systems and ethical business practices by participation in both mandatory and voluntary council programs designed to benefit log home customers.

Log Home Living: Online version of the first log home magazine, founded more than 20 years ago. Floor plans, photo galleries, info on log home expos, links to builders and manufacturers and more. [www.loghomeliving.com](http://www.loghomeliving.com)

Mountain Homes: 540 Hendrickson Dr., Kalama, 360-673-6611, [www.mountainhomeskalama.com](http://www.mountainhomeskalama.com)

## Log on:

Want to watch a show all about log homes? Tune in to "Log Home TV," an online video show hosted by Log Home Living editor-in-chief Mike McCarthy. The program, available at [loghometv.com](http://loghometv.com), allows consumers to tour log homes across the country, watch homes being built, see logs being stained, check out the latest furniture options and learn from an array of how-to features.

## Did you know?

Lincoln Logs, the chunky wooden toys generations of children have used to construct creatively, were the brainchild of John Lloyd Wright, son of famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Invented in 1916, some accounts say the interlocking basement beams of his father's famed Imperial Hotel project were an inspiration for the inventor.



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