

GRATEFUL

DEADHEAD

By
May Donnell

**No, not rock 'n roll,
but rather deep
water logging.**

SCARBOROUGH, Me.

Loggers in Maine commenced chopping down pine in the southern part of the state as early as 1621. At the time, Plymouth Colony was the latest big thing in domestic adventure. Over the next 250 years or so, the loggers slowly moved north toward and through a vast supply of yellow birch, maple and spruce growing along the state's remote hardwood ridges.

Between 1830 and 1855, years when the concept of Manifest Destiny ignited with housing and commercial development in America, Bangor, Maine was one of the busiest logging ports in the world. Historians speculate that 8.7 billion board feet of old-growth hardwood logs passed through the town during this 25-year period. They also guess an additional 7-10% of those logs was lost on its perilous way to the mills.

Meet Todd Morrissette, owner of Dead-Head Lumber Co. of Scarborough, a town that sits outside of Portland not far from Casco Bay and Maine's southern shore. His partner is a custom-built and very well-equipped boat he calls the Aqua-logger. As far as personnel goes, 39-year-old Morrissette is the whole shebang. He says his boat, his investigative skills and a few good subcontractors are all he needs to find and collect this long lost timber and bring it to market. It's used in upscale flooring and custom millwork. Even in a recession, demand is high.

Maine is one of the few states that has



Aqua-logger rests near latest catch.



Morrissette oversees milling as well.

an official deadhead salvage program, with a season that runs from "ice out" in spring to September 30 in order to protect salmon populations. The state imposes a limit of 125,000 board feet per year.

Morrissette is in his second year of business, working throughout the state.

"I retrieved 60,000 board feet my first season," says Morrissette, who began his career traveling the world as a buyer of Russian birch for an import company. "This year, we'll make the limit."

There's nothing new about reclaiming old-growth logs from waterways. The State of Florida briefly banned the practice back in 1974 when it got so popular the Suwanee and St. John's river bottoms were churned up willy nilly, compromising fish habitats. Today that state's submerged old-growth, most of it cypress, is considered "picked over" by some with the number of salvage companies down from a high of over 90 to a mere handful.

Scuba divers have been the traditional means of locating sinkers. Morrissette, though, thinks technology trumps wetsuits.

"At the time I was getting started, I



Many logs sank near shore.

just thought it would be far more cost-effective to operate without a crew of divers," he says.

So Morrissette began building a boat. When it was finished, he called it the Aqua-logger. It comes with side-scan sonar, underwater cameras and a long logging tong attached to a steel beam. He describes it as a floating crane.

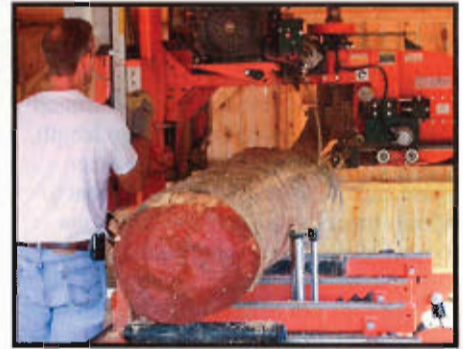
"I use side scan sonar to locate the logs, 90 percent of which is yellow birch," says Morrissette. The picking isn't always easy, as ancient logs without bark have become like grease poles. It takes a keen eye and a steady hand on the controls.

He explains that when most of the hardwoods were cut along Maine's rugged



"Like playing a video game."

hardwood ridges, horse teams transported the logs to landings at nearby lakes or rivers for later transport to small mills. These small mills had sprung up along various waterways because lengthy transport out of the area was not considered possible, considering these hardwoods were quite heavy. Sometimes, if it was late in the season and the ice melted, the dense hardwoods stacked up on the ice near the landings sunk in the melting. Other times in warm weather, hardwoods were lashed to buoyant spruce and these rafts were poled or pulled to the nearby small mills. Some rafts broke up in storms or for other reasons and the hardwoods went to the bottom. In the water, the lack of light and



Sinker log breakdown.

oxygen, along with dense, tight growth and resin content act as a preservative.

"You can find logs in many different places, but it's concentrated around the old landings and it's in perfect condition," Morrissette says.

The Aqua-logger, with its utilitarian design setting it apart most distinctly from your typical pleasure boat, is equipped with a bank of sonar and video screens in the wheelhouse. Once the logs are located on sonar, Morrissette turns on the underwater cameras affixed to the steel beam and logging tong. He uses the cameras to see a black and white image of the sinkers along the bottom and to maneuver the tongs into the right position for picking

them up and pulling them to the surface.

"It's kind of like playing a video game," Morrissette says.

On a good day, he will retrieve around 20 pre-cut timbers up to 40 feet in length. On a bad day, stormy high waves can cause captured sinkers tied to his boat to wreak major havoc, causing him to cut loose. Once when this happened he returned to the spot and salvaged all of them.

The logs are towed to shore and loaded up on Morrissette's truck or by a subcontractor. The heartwood is prized for its rich color, density and scarcity.



Curly birch flooring

Along with the birch, he also retrieves old-growth hard maple and spruce.

"This is the highest grade of wood you can find," Morrissette says. "It is so much better than what's cut today and I'm able to market it without cutting down trees and with very little disturbance to the waterway, so there's a green factor there." Buyers of Dead-Head lumber products can earn LEED points toward certification.

Morrissette subcontracts the milling within three days of pulling the logs out of the water. He primarily subcontracts with two Wood-Mizer operations, both within an hour's drive of the water. Once cut, the lumber is hauled to his warehouse in Scarborough, where he stacks it on sticks for six months up to a year until moisture content is reduced to around 20 percent. Then the lumber is put in a subcontracted kiln for 30-35 days and dried down to 6-8% moisture content.

Morrissette sells rough lumber wholesale to flooring companies and lumber companies; and will also mill the lumber into flooring and countertops and sell directly to builders and homeowners.

The Aqua-logger is a one-of-a-kind vessel. Morrissette says he can count on one hand the number of legitimate companies now going after deadheads, and they tend to use divers.

"It's not a get rich quick type of business, even though there have been plenty that tried it thinking it was," he says. "Deadheading is definitely hard work even when you know what you're doing. When I first started looking into this end of the business, I thought about reclaiming barn wood and that type of thing, but as I was studying it, I found out that Maine sponsors this deadheading program. It made sense to try it."

In fact the State actually owns the submerged logs and Morrissette pays a percentage to the State on each log. It requires permitting from the Bureau of Parks and Lands, with oversight from the Environmental Protection, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Maine Historic Preservation Commission and the Dept. of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

Morrissette, 39, who wrapped up his second season plumbing the depths of Moosehead Lake in northern Maine, acknowledges that his success at underwater salvage may lead to competition. He's not at all worried.

"There is plenty of wood down there for everyone," he says. "I already know where I'm going for my supply next summer and the summer after that. There's enough to keep me in this business for as long as I want to stay in it."