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'Worry-free living' - Manufacturer of concrete log homes touts benefits

By LORI GRANNIS



"There's no breaking, settling, twisting, shifting or burning," says Stewart Hansen, co-founder and president of EverLog Systems, a concrete log home manufacturer based in Missoula. "It's worry-free living."
Photo by MICHAEL GALLACHER

Thirty-five years ago, Dick Morgenstern was busy building log structures for the U.S. Forest Service. But they weren't the ones so popular with summer hikers who call months ahead to rent them as wilderness retreats.

The roughly 5-by-8-foot buildings were designed as wilderness restrooms and, despite their woody cedar texture, were actually fashioned of concrete, as Morgenstern began perfecting the material and method of building now found at EverLog Systems.

Today, that same concept is being translated into summer homes and mountain lodges that dot the countryside from Montana, Colorado and Wyoming to as far away as West Virginia, via EverLog Systems – a company the inventor helped found four years ago.

EverLog's structural concrete logs are 8 inches thick and 16 inches high, and can be as long as 28 feet. They're made of heavy load-bearing concrete that is impervious to water, wind, fire and other elements. And, it's maintenance-free.

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"There's no breaking, settling, twisting, shifting or burning," says company co-founder and president Stewart Hansen. "It's worry-free living."

During erection of a home, three separate layers (created in the rebar, insulation and log interlock process) provide a thick wall and vapor barrier to prevent water invasion and cracking – the primary benefit of using concrete logs over wood, says Hansen of the product's many guarantees.

Adding to the company's product mix is an alternative siding, made of glass fiber reinforced concrete (GFRC), that is lightweight enough to affix to traditional framing construction, Hansen says.

Whether it goes on a newly framed home, or a renovation project requiring an updated facade, the 12-foot-by-16-inch faux wood grain panels are lighter than structural log, but with all of the benefits. They're thin, making them easy to screw into flanges to lend the appearance of a log home with less out-of-pocket cost.

In addition, the company manufactures all of the exterior trusses and post-and-beam flourishes so popular in log home design.

As Rick and Judy Cothorn peruse the many styles of log corner profiles in EverLog's sample yard, the two are struck by the authenticity of wood grain in available styles, from dovetail, round, post and saddle-notched. They say that in some cases, until they laid hand to grain it was hard to tell the difference.

"There's a really good variation in texture in our product, and you'd be hard-pressed to find repeats in pattern throughout an entire home," says Hansen.

The Cothorns, who were out shopping in preparation for plans to build a post-retirement home using the structural logs, will develop a plot of land they own at Lake Mary Ronan.

Years of experience with traditional log construction, in a barn that was converted to a home on their property several years ago, mean the duo are anointed in the foibles of the form.

"Our barn just isn't airtight or bug-safe," says Cothorn. "In fact, our exterminator told us about this product and said we should get it."

While still deciding on the style of log home they will erect overlooking the lake, they visited existing homes in the area that employ the method. "One owner says they've had two spiders in eight years – and those apparently came into the home in boxes from the outside," Cothorn says.

Self-titled consumptive environmentalists, the pair say they are also attracted to the energy-efficiency an airtight concrete log home will provide.

Hansen says EverLog Systems recently completed a blower-door diagnostic test on one of their homes, and found it to be seven times as airtight as a traditional wood home, and about six times more airtight than traditional stick-built construction.

The energy-auditing method allows contractors and homeowners to identify leaks, and resulting heat losses, by lowering pressure inside the home and employing infrared technology to locate escaping air. It is slated to become an energy code compliance factor in Missoula in the coming year.

The Cothorns say the advantages of the maintenance-free facade is that it will eliminate a routine refinishing and sealing (chinking) ritual they've grown tired of performing.

"Refinishing is just a lot of work," says Judy Cothorn. "It's a pain and you get tired of doing it."

On average, Hansen says traditional log home owners must redo chinking to restore an airtight seal between logs that settle, shrink, bend and shift naturally over time as an expression of their organic origins.

According to UniversityofLogHomes.com – an online community for consumer information on traditional log homes – chink must be redone every five or six years, and averages between \$12,000 to \$14,000 for a 2,000-square-foot home.

Though their contractor hasn't yet given them a ballpark price, the Cotherns are expecting to spend a little more for the privilege of its many benefits.

According to Hansen, price is based on "per square foot structural floor space" and includes the home's exterior, transportation to the site, erection, and cosmetic chink finish. That usually runs between \$75 an \$85 per foot, he says. Total finish costs of a home, including a traditional interior with sheetrock, flooring, and wood beams and trusses, may cost a homeowner \$150 to \$250 per square foot, depending on finishes.

The company's log siding panel facade product runs \$14 per square foot of wall space, including corner pieces, he says. Energy savings over time are also a factor in defraying initial costs, he says.

Hansen adds that because the home is planned and assembled off-site, costs from construction modifications, manpower over longer periods, and site waste are all minimized, and the average EverLog Systems exterior can be up within a week or two.

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