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TELEVISION

Manifest Destiny: Into the Wild With a Tool Belt

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by NEIL RZLINGER

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The dead of winter may not seem like the liveliest time in the real estate business, but on television one segment of the new-construction market is booming: the cabin-in-the-woods market.

On Tuesday night the National Geographic Channel serves up "[Mennonite Made.](#)" about a Mennonite business in Salem, Mo., that makes custom-designed log cabins. It joins the channel's "[Building Wild.](#)" a workplace reality series that began last month, about two guys who call themselves the [Cabin Kings](#). Apparently being monarch of the forest is a thing, because Destination America has announced a series for next month, imported from Canada, called "[Timber Kings.](#)" Trees everywhere are quaking in their boots, or roots.

Maybe it's a sign of economic recovery that television is showcasing cabin building, since these structures are often retreats rather than primary residences. Or maybe it's a sign of the opposite. Television has been marketing fantasy since "Queen for a Day," back in the 1950s. "Spend an

hour indulging in the fiction that you, too, can afford a second home,” these cabin shows may be saying to the income-stagnated among us. “Though, of course, you can’t.”



A crew builds a cabin in Colorado in “Mennonite Made,” one of several new shows about constructing rustic getaways. National Geographic Channels

In any case, “Mennonite Made” features a charming group of men who use old-fashioned construction methods — Lincoln Logs, the children’s toy, may come to mind — to create a 1,600-square-foot cabin for a customer in Estes Park, Colo. The wrinkle is, Missouri and Colorado are about 1,000 miles apart. They first build the structure on their home ground, then dismantle it and truck the pieces to Colorado for reassembling. Since each hand-cut log is unique, that requires a detailed system of labeling; it’s a 3-D jigsaw puzzle.

There has been quite a run of Amish-themed reality programming in the past few years, a lot of it not particularly complimentary. Mennonites are

[somewhat different](#) in their beliefs from the Amish, including not being averse to using power equipment, and “Mennonite Made” shows these men in a respectful light. All of them are appealing on camera. Now that “Duck Dynasty” has lost its luster, there’s an opening for personable bearded men of faith on TV. “Mennonite Made” is a one-shot special, but, by its end, you may find that you wouldn’t mind seeing more of these fellows.

“Building Wild” is far less reverent, and the building philosophy is considerably less exacting. The show features Paul DiMeo, who is already familiar to construction-loving audiences from “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition,” and a sidekick, Pat Bakaitis. The two specialize in building cabins that incorporate found materials and client labor, supposedly to keep costs down (though costs on these shows are rarely specified).

The resulting cabins and hunting camps are a hodgepodge of new lumber, planks from old barns and pieces of junk found elsewhere on whatever property is being hammered and chain-sawed into submission. The two men do a lot of not very convincing bickering, Mr. Bakaitis playing the role of the guy who is trying to keep things on schedule, artificial deadlines being an annoying feature of practically any reality show involving construction or remodeling.

Despite the supposed deadlines, the Cabin Kings like to throw in something the client didn’t order. In an episode in which they build a hunting camp for 12 friends in the mountains of New York, they add an outhouse on rails. In winter, when no one would want to walk far to use it, it could be close to the cabin. In summer, a shove would send it sliding farther into the woods.

Outhouses may be too primitive for “Timber Kings,” which describes itself as “showcasing massive, multimillion-dollar log mansions.” Sounds as if these structures might make the elaborate creations on [“Treehouse Masters.”](#) an Animal Planet show in its second season, look ordinary.

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