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Timber Kings star reflects on rustic beginnings

Marcie Good | MAR 21, 2016

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IMAGE BY: HGTV

How one of the stars of HGTV put Williams Lake—and his booming log-home business—on the map

Every winter growing up in Williams Lake, Bryan Reid—star of HGTV's Timber Kings—would trudge after his father on a 50-kilometre trapline, collecting animals and resetting traps. Especially when the temperature plunged to minus 50 Celsius, he looked forward to their stop at a little log cabin on the trail with a wood stove and a bunk bed. "You'd light a fire, and you're almost dead exhausted," the 67-year-old homebuilder recalls. "Then half an hour later you'd be sitting there in a T-shirt, laughing about what happened during the day, and I thought, 'This is living. This log cabin is living.'"

That hut epitomizes the rustic nostalgia that most people associate with a log cabin, but the homes in construction on Timber Kings are on a much different scale. Now in its third season, the popular show follows Reid's Pioneer Log Homes crew around the world as they carry out astonishing feats of engineering and artistry. The first episode features an 82,000-square-foot summer home near Moscow, with a total budget that Reid estimates at close to \$100 million. On the same episode, a 4,500-square-foot home is built on a steep bank overlooking Lake of the Woods in northwestern Ontario; one of his crew, Beat Schwaller, deftly chainsaws an extra notch in a log while balancing high above the rocky shore.

All of Pioneer's homes are first built in Williams Lake—with western red cedar logs that weigh more than a Toyota Camry—and then taken apart, shipped to their destinations and reconstructed. Reid admits that some of the drama in Timber Kings is forced: every episode features challenges of time, demanding clients or a stuck vehicle. "We can put up a house without saying anything to each other," he says. "But of course that's not good television."

Reid built his first log home at 21, learning the skills from a local First Nations man, Samson Jack. Williams Lake was booming, thanks to the Gibraltar Mine, and people kept asking him to build more. Then came a customer from Switzerland, who suggested his nephew join Reid's growing company. "I thought, 'We don't need no Swiss, we know everything.' Well, I was wrong. Carpentry is steeped in tradition over there. He showed us things that we had never done before." Over the years, more Swiss carpenters came to Pioneer, slowly building the company's capability.

Now, Reid estimates that he and his team of more than 100 employees (including his son, Bryan Jr., and his grandson, also Bryan) build about 100 homes (average 3,500 square feet) a year. The show now airs in more than 150 countries, and it has brought him a certain celebrity, with fans approaching him in Kazakhstan and Korea. But Reid says his goal was never about advertising but rather showcasing the talents of his team and the beauty of Williams Lake. "We're tradesmen, and when you work with your hands, the highest honour you can have is to share your work with the world through a medium like television."

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