

Forester's Log: Douglas-fir Reflections in the Floor

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The Forester's Log is a monthly column published in newspapers and magazines primarily in the American west. Stuever is a forester in the American Southwest. She can be reached at sse@nmia.com.

My first summer as a Philmont Ranger, back in the late 1970's, I led twelve different groups of Boy Scouts through the forests of the Ute Creek drainage toward Baldy Mountain. Picking up the Douglas fir floor boards at the sawmill, I casually asked about their origin. "Those came from Patrick Griego and were cut off the Philmont." When they named the logger I knew the stand. I had stood out there in the snow not far from Ute Creek the year before with the same man. Just a forester doing her job, making sure the logging was meeting goals of creating healthier forests. Now a few boards from that project will complete the remodel of my son's bedroom.

The wood flooring mill in Las Vegas, New Mexico is a hub of activity. Shift change, the fresh crew will work until midnight, on an order for wood floor tiles generating ten new jobs in the otherwise drooping small town economy. The approximately four inch by six inch wood blocks can be cut from small trees, the kind of trees that most often need to be cut out of the forest.

"Good forestry means having the appropriate forest industry that supports the appropriate forest practices that promote the healthiest forest." The speaker of this mouthful is David Old, owner of Old Wood LLC, but whose web-site is www.douglasfirfloors.com because to the flooring industry "Old Wood" refers to the business of recycling ancient wooden floors. David Old is more concerned with making great floors from new wood.

No new comer to the wood business, Old bought his first mill in the 70's when he was in his early 20's. "I was twenty-two when I inherited the family ranch," he explained referring to the 2800 acre mountain property above Pecos, New Mexico. "I tried cattle for a few years, but it seemed that the forest needed attention, and so I made a stab at trying to make a living as a logger." Over the years, Old's energies bounced between various sawmill ownerships and a passion for aircraft. Operating both fixed-wing and helicopters, Old's aviation company helped the forest in other ways, including fire fighting support.

In 2000, the Viveash Fire burned a significant piece of the Viveash Ranch. "Where did you lose forest?" I innocently asked, but wasn't at all surprised by the answer: "wherever we had not yet harvested." The ensuing salvage operation lured Old away from aviation and back into the wood business full-time. Recognizing the need to create forest industry focused on the by-products of forest health practices, Old set up the flooring mill in Las Vegas. Today the operation employs twenty local workers and markets flooring material around the globe.

Utilization of small diameter wood doesn't stop with flooring. Old engineered a wood-drying kiln powered by a wood-burning biomass generator. "This is a radiator from an old "GM" plant," he proudly taps the contraption that is blowing hot air into the Quonset hut structure. "The challenge we have this time of year is that we are bringing frozen logs in here and getting them up to 150 degrees (Fahrenheit)."

Caressing the cold cants that were moved into the kiln that day, I can easily imagine them as logs, lying in the snow like those Douglas-fir logs I saw last winter by Ute Meadows. Now, with luck, I will admire the beauty of these kiln-dried tongue and groove Douglas-fir flooring boards for decades to come. The gift of being a forester, is in truly understanding the beauty of the forest from where her home originated.



David Old checks the fire in the Garn Biomass burner for his recently constructed wood-drying kiln.