

Practicing the Norwegian method of log-home building is like cooking a gourmet meal instead of picking up fast food. Despite the long hours and hard labour, Steve Langberg would have it no other way.

As told to Brendan O'Brien



At a Glance

Location:

Rocky Mountain House, AB

Founded:

2001

Employees:

2 full time; 1B2 part time

Specialty:

Log-home construction

These days, when **Steve Langberg** spends time in the historic mining town of Nordegg, Alberta, he isn't hunting, hiking, or skiing; he's building beautiful mountain cabins out of massive logs. As owner and founder of Rocky Mountain House, Alberta-based **Langberg Log Homes**, his labour of love requires patience and an artistic eye for nature. *CBQ* sits down with Langberg, who started his business about a decade ago, to talk about building with logs, his business strategy, and his relationship with his clients.

How did you get your start in building log homes?

Steve Langberg: I started building conventional homes as an exterior home finisher right out of high school. I did that during the summers in high school as well, so I have been building since I was 16. I got really interested in log homes for some reason—I think it's because it is in my blood. My dad is an immigrant from Denmark, my mother's family is from Norway, and my grandpa was a timber worker in Washington.

I guess I came by it naturally; something I was drawn to. In 1997, I took an Allan Mackie course—one of the pioneers of the resurgent log-building industry in North America. It was a basic six-week course on Vancouver

Island. After that, I started building with a builder straight from Norway who used a style different from the typical Canadian house. It was a Norwegian style, and I have stuck with that concept of building.

What is the difference between a typical Canadian log house and the Norwegian log home that you build?

SL: Just about any log home has a greater "wow" factor than a square framed house simply because log homes are unique but the difference between one log home and another isn't so obvious to the uninitiated. The Norwegian craftsman's tradition is as much about the fine details and precision

joinery as the overall impression the finished house makes.

I guess it boils down to the Norwegian tradition of log home building being less production oriented, since the technique used in the joinery – with a serious focus on reducing the effects of settling and checking – takes significantly more time.

What is your business strategy for the future, and how does it impact how you go about your work?

SL: Build homes that will last. I treat log building as an art form, both aesthetically and technically. I consider the method of installation to be as important as high-quality materials in every aspect of building a house. We concentrate on one log shell at a time to allow for technical development and a constant increase in quality, and we rely on quality subcontractors and suppliers to complete most other aspects of the projects we do.

What is it like to build a log home for a client?

SL: The projects we are a part of range from tiny guest cabins and basic primary residences to luxurious second homes. We pride ourselves on giving each and every homeowner value for their money, and we love to participate in building the blueprint of a dream into reality. The stunning results in each finished home are a culmination of the work of so many—especially the owner of the home who inevitably invests more time and emotional energy in their project than all the contractors put together.

We develop a relationship with clients as we are involved in their individual design processes and frequently give them a hand general contracting their own projects. We have built our business on word-of-mouth referrals, and our booking of new projects stays, on average, a year ahead of us.

Can you describe your passion for building log homes?

SL: This job is something you have to love to do. It's physically demanding, takes patience, and there is no fortune to be made. For me, there is no question that this is what I want to do when I get up in the morning. I lose myself in the work. When I am working on-site,

Below: Handcrafted Douglas fir logs were used in this northern Alberta house for their natural strength and beautiful wood grain.



framing, I will notice the time and I kind of wait for the day to be over. But when I am notching logs at home in the shop, my wife has to call and tell me to come home. I have a real love for the craft, and there is something about seeing logs fit together that just feels right.

Do you have advice for others in the construction industry?

SL: Let's build homes to last generations rather than decades!

What are your plans for the future?

SL: We plan to grow and perpetuate the craft rather than the size of our business. I am constantly tweaking the style I build in to improve the final results, both in aesthetic appeal and function.

I intend to keep leaving time in the production process for continual development. Currently I am exploring new possibilities with huge fine-grained coastal cedar and a staggered-corner look. I would eventually like to pass on my knowledge and passion by training at least one person—not in the static skill, but in the living tradition.

The quality of service we provide is also constantly improving as we gain experience in the business side of things. We want to enhance the positive in the experience of building a log home in every way we are able. People, after all, are why home builders even exist.

Can you describe the log structures you are building in terms of their size and the sites where they are constructed?

SL: We are not building huge houses. The biggest one that we have built has a footprint of 3,500 square feet. We are not a big company, and we do not have huge production capabilities, but if a homeowner was willing and able to let us have the time it takes, hey, bring it on!

What is the difference between the interior of a log home and a traditional home?

SL: People ask me why there are no log homes in towns, and I tell them it's because it'll make all the other houses look bad! No, actually log homes are often chosen to maximize enjoyment of a beautiful outdoor space—often a stunning view. In this type of setting, one interior design advantage of a log home over a conventionally framed home is the ability to span great distances with the

log beams. We have access to Douglas fir timber that is still 18 inches in diameter at the top of a 60-foot log. A log like that has tremendous strength that naturally allows for huge, open-concept great rooms that bring the outdoors into the whole main living area with big, floor-to-ceiling windows.

As far as the interior of a log home, it is very much alive. The logs are really smooth when they've been cleaned up, but they still have a lot of character. Our houses are definitely not drafty when we are done, but the wood is a natural breather, which makes for a healthier home. I make sure that the design process leaves the notching in the corners exposed as much as possible. That is the mystical part of log-home building—when the logs come together in the corners and make a really beautiful fit. **CBQ**

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