

EVOLUTION OF AN AMERICAN DREAM

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”—Goethe

BY REBECCA J. RAZO • ILLUSTRATIONS BY NANCY MINK

In many ways, Eric Hollenbeck, founder and owner of Blue Ox Millworks in Eureka, California, is not a typical businessman. He prefers wearing overalls to a suit and tie; favors country living to city dwelling; and seems trusting of people almost to a fault. Then again, Blue Ox Millworks is not a typical business.

A humble man with a kind face and gentle demeanor, yet equally strong and determined, Eric does however share a trait common among other successful business owners: He’s a visionary. And with his knowledge of millwork and extraordinary talent for woodworking that borders on genius, few might

guess that for a period of time, he struggled just to make ends meet.

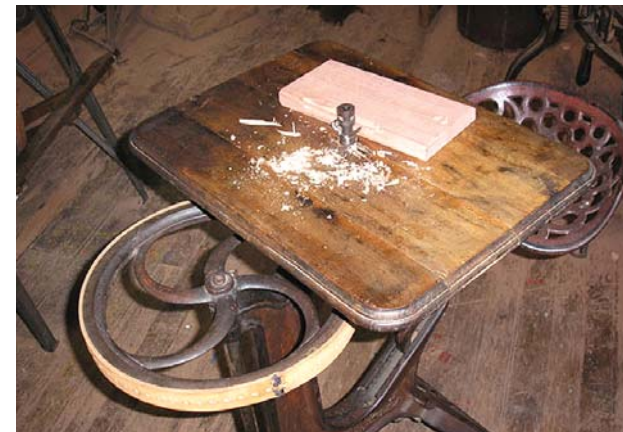
It was the early 1970s when 25-year-old Eric, an experienced logging-road surveyor, went into business with three partners to form the Blue Ox Logging and Lumber Company. A \$300 bank loan helped finance

equipment, and Eric and his associates eventually purchased an abandoned building—the home of Blue Ox today. Business began to grow, but the company’s success was cut short when a series of economic hardships devastated the logging industry, resulting in the closure of mills throughout the nation. Eric’s partners pulled out of the business, forcing Eric and his new wife Viviana to forge ahead on their own. The couple turned their attention toward manufacturing pre-fabricated buildings, but their efforts were no match for the sluggish economy and the Hollenbecks hit upon hard times again.

Despite what appeared to be a bleak road ahead, Eric remained steadfast and his vision for the future of the business came into clearer focus. “For better or worse I have always judged myself and my worth by what I do, what I make,” Eric says. “I remember a particularly hard time about six years into the business. We had lost our crew because of a lack of work, and I would



Not relegated to museum relics, Blue Ox uses its vast collection of antique machines to create quality millwork. Here is a gable in progress on the Barnes Velocipede Scroll Saw No. 2. Built in 1889, the saw contains a flat perforated belt and optional boring attachment.



This Barnes former, known today as a shaper, was made between 1880 and 1886 and is the grandfather of the modern router. Blue Ox makes all of its own bits and can match any pattern. The former works particularly well with decorative hardwoods.

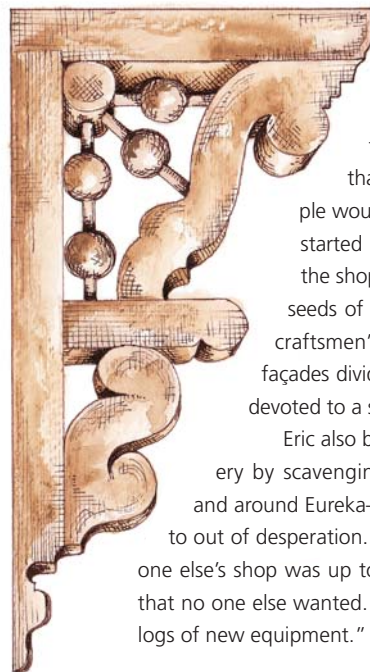


The antique hand-powered tools are right at home inside the Blue Ox workshop.



Carved Scrollwork scale: 1/2"=1'-0"

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF BLUE OX MILLWORKS



go down to that cavernous barn by myself and sweep the floors. It was during this time that the idea came to me that people would tour this place someday, and I started building Victorian façades inside the shop." This early project planted the seeds of Eric's dream to have a Victorian craftsmen's "village" inside the mill. The façades divided the shop into sections, each devoted to a specific trade.

Eric also began acquiring antique machinery by scavenging through abandoned mills in and around Eureka—something he initially resorted to out of desperation. "I used to feel shameful. Everyone else's shop was up to date. Mine had old rusty junk that no one else wanted. I would sit and drool over catalogs of new equipment."



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BLUE OX MILLWORKS



This Barnes circular rip saw, c. 1890, is self-feeding and powered by a hand crank. It is designed to cut through 600 feet of 1-inch-thick pine in an hour, though the feed can be slowed for hardwoods like ash or maple. Its original cost would have been about \$40.

Advice from a Master Woodworker

To those about to embark on a Victorian home restoration, Eric Hollenbeck offers the following advice: "Don't get in a hurry. Remember that these great buildings of the past weren't built overnight. I somewhat jokingly tell our customers here at Blue Ox, 'We offer three things—speed, quality and price—you get to pick one.' These are not off-of-the-shelf items. Each must be handmade. In some cases, jigs must be made; once in a while, whole tools must be made before a job can even start."

Do you have a specific restoration question? Eric answers questions online at www.victorianstation.com/blueoxqa.htm.

But a close friend shared some wisdom that would change Eric's perspective. "She told me, 'The American craftsman is not helped by technology but, if anything, hindered by it.' She was saying that as craftsmen, we are losing the ability to problem solve. We fall into a rut that if the machines can't make it, then it can't be made. Now, her words have become my mantra—bring it on!" And bring it on they did.

The tides began to change when a contractor approached Eric to supply materials for the restoration of a Victorian inn in Eureka. Between the antique machinery, Eric's vision for a Victorian village, and the work on the inn, a niche was born. Soon, Blue Ox developed a reputation for creating quality custom Victorian millwork. Jobs started coming in from all over the country and even from places as remote as Japan.

There doesn't seem to be a job that Eric can't do, and the word "no" doesn't pass through his lips lightly—if at all. "I don't care if we have to make jigs. I don't care if we have to use one of our 50-plus hand planes. I don't care if we have to grind new knives or make new hand planes. That's the



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ANDREWS AND THORNLEY CONSTRUCTION



The 400 hand-turned balusters of this widow's walk, as well as the moldings, handrails and newel boxes were pre-fabricated and pre-assembled at Blue Ox, then shipped to the Noyes Mansion in Napa, California.

challenge, but that's what makes Blue Ox what it is."

Today, Eric is proud to produce millwork using the antique machines he once bemoaned. "We are using machines built just after the Civil War. Sometimes it occurs to me that I am making the same moves with the same dreams and aspirations that my grandfather's father would have made. That gives life a continuum." Blue Ox's inventory also includes a collection of Barnes Brothers human-powered machines, c. 1870-1900, some of which are extremely rare. So rare, in fact, the Smithsonian Institution expressed interest in purchasing the collection; however, the original owner turned down the Smithsonian and sold the equipment to Blue Ox, knowing the mill would put the tools to better use.

As business grew, it became important for Eric and Viviana to give back to their community. Recalling his days as an academically challenged student with poor reading and writing skills, Eric created a youth

program where students can learn woodworking, blacksmithing and more. Blue Ox has even branched out into radio—another of Eric's ideas that's come to fruition. Students will learn journalism and programming skills at the mill's very own low-power, FCC-licensed community radio station. "You do not have to know how to spell or read at a certain level to be a functioning and productive human being. What you do have to do is find out what you're passionate about and good at, and then become the best at it that you can," says Eric with conviction.

And whose advice better to follow than his. 🍀

For information about Blue Ox Millworks, its events and programs, visit www.blueoxmill.com or call (800) 248-4259.

PRODUCED BY REBECCA J. RAZO

ARTISTIC RENDERINGS BASED ON PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY BLUE OX MILLWORKS.



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This home on Portrero Hill in San Francisco originally had flat siding and little else. Eric designed the scrollwork, dentil moldings and balcony balustrade.

The Future at Blue Ox

Always the dreamer, Eric Hollenbeck has additional plans for Blue Ox Millworks, including a move to a new location with five buildings that date back to 1894. Although Eric and his wife Viviana have strong emotions about relocating the mill from its present home for the last three decades, the move will mean they can fully implement their dream of creating a Victorian Village historical park. This will include a new 12,000-square-foot woodshop and feature additional trades such as traditional boat building, glass blowing, spinning and weaving, a wheelwright and wagon shop, leather working and much more.

Blue Ox Millworks

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