

featured

A Cabin IN THE Woods

by Carolee Smith

Bill Plumb spent more than 20 years in the health care industry as CEO of North Country Home Services in the Saranac Lake area. But in 2001, in his early 50s, he decided it was time for a change and he began looking around to discover what he wanted to do for the rest of his life.

"I knew I wanted to stay in the Adirondacks and I was looking for something

where I could use some of my construction skills to work in a way that would take me through to retirement," he said.

He found it in the mountains of Tennessee.

"It" was a group of little wooden cabins in a campground. "Each was unique, but they were similar to each other in some ways," he recalled. "I was smitten by the idea of these cabins. They were made

of Adirondack white pine and I thought they'd be great for our area. They looked like they really belonged in the Adirondacks."

Looking closer, he found a real surprise underneath the cabins — wheels.

"They were actually recreational vehicles (RVs)," Plumb said, "although you would never know it from looking at them."

Plumb met the owner who was manufacturing the cabins on a limited basis and thought he might like to distribute them in the North Country. But the idea soon went further than that.

To make a long story short, Plumb decided to get into the manufacturing end (joined the Recreational Park Trailer Industry Association (RPTIA), the Georgia-based trade association that rep-

resents recreational park trailer manufacturers and ensures their compliance with federally approved construction codes) studied how to build them and wrote a business plan. His son, Joe, who has a business degree from SUNY Oswego, joined him in the business. They hired a third person, put up a building on Route 3 just outside Saranac Lake, and went to work.

Today Adirondack White Pine Cabins is a young, but flourishing business and Bill Plumb, in his own words, is "having a great time!"

These small cabins, rated as recreational park trailers, evolved in the 1970s, Plumb explained, as a result of the first big energy crisis. At that time, lots of people were hauling their RVs all over the country behind large vehicles. As the prices of gas



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Evan Durfee, Joe and Bill Plumb

rose, the costs of moving regularly from, for instance, the North Country to Florida and back every year, or just from campground to campground during the summer, were skyrocketing.

"People began trying to find a resort they liked and negotiating a year-round fee to leave their RVs on that site on a more permanent basis," Plumb said. "As a result, since they were no longer towing their RVs regularly, the limits on what an RV could look like began changing."

RVs are regulated by federal policies, according to Plumb, and the cabins conform. They cannot, for instance, measure more than 400 square feet in floor space. In his new building, Plumb and his staff can work on the construction of two cabins at a time and each typically takes six to seven weeks to build.

The cabins are built on a heavy duty chassis which has four axles and eight wheels. "We buy the chassis," he said, "then do all the rest of the construction. And, he stressed, "this is not a mobile home on wheels. It is stick-built construction and is custom built to the purchaser's specifications."

Make no mistake, the cabins are small. But people are genuinely surprised when they enter one for the first time. Typically there is one bedroom with built-in dressers and closet and room for a queen-size bed. A full bath can accommodate a jetted tub or large shower stall, a stacked washer and dryer, plus a custom vanity and mirror. The kitchen is generally fairly compact, but will

include a full refrigerator, four-burner stove with oven, microwave and full sink.

The rest of the interior is taken up with a living/dining room, which usually has a sliding glass door that opens to a screened-in porch. (The porch is optional.)

The cabins have numerous windows and are very well insulated. "They have an R21 envelope," Plumb said, "and are very comfortable right here in the Adirondacks with our low winter temperatures." Additionally, the roofs are pitched and can handle the Adirondack snow load.

If someone wants a bit more room, they can opt for a small loft — a small low-ceilinged area with windows that open — that can be used as an extra sleeping area or storage space. "It's not a big enough area for adults," Plumb said, "but kids just love them!"

Owners frequently add decking after the cabin is installed on a property.

The cabins come with simple connections to water, sewer and electrical service. Just as an RV owner pulls into a site and hooks up, so a cabin owner will connect in the same way.

Built with white pine lumber milled at Ward Lumber Company, Plumb stressed that there is no paneling within the cabins. As a result, there is no formaldehyde, no paneling glue, or other potentially toxic materials.

"The customer gets to choose the flooring — carpeting, vinyl or laminate — and the colors of the stains used inside and out," Plumb said, "as well as the appliances. In fact, we find that most customers choose high-end models."

One of the nicest parts about having a cabin built, Plumb suggested, is that it's all done in a controlled atmosphere. "Since we build them inside," he said "nothing is exposed to the elements." Another positive resulting from that is "our customers frequently stop in and watch their unit being built. It's fun for them."

And what does an Adirondack White Pine Cabin cost? "The minimum is about \$55,000," Plumb said, "but depending on what the customer wants to include, they can run up to \$65,000." Part of the customer's overhead, he noted, is the mileage cost of moving the unit to its permanent site.

Plumb said that, in the last ten years, there has been a 46 percent increase

in sales of this type of unit. More than 10,000 are produced in the United States each year and it's estimated that well over 100,000 units are currently in campgrounds in the United States and Canada.

Who buys them? It's a wide open market. Some people put them on private property. "I have one in my backyard," Plumb laughed. "My 89-year-old mother-in-law lives in it and loves it. It's perfect for an elderly parent as an alternative to senior housing. They can maintain their independence, but still be close to family."

Some people want a little retreat or second home. "One family I know," Plumb said, "has three, one in Boonville, one in South Dakota, and one in Arizona, all in campgrounds. They have three homes in three parts of the country, but only have about \$160,000 invested and don't pay any property taxes!"

Plumb built and sold one cabin with an interior customized to serve as a small commercial bakery. "They can be unique business properties," he said.



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Others use them for rental properties. Private owners have ordered two for the Lake Placid area to replace deteriorating rental cabins.

Who else? "Disney World actually uses this type of unit on part of their property," Plumb said. "Every four or five years, they auction them off and buy brand new ones. It's good business. They don't have to do major renovations and the resale market is strong."

Plumb said, "One strong selling point is that they are, after all, mobile. They give an owner the flexibility to relocate. If someone buys ten to rent and then the market drops off in that area, they can be packed up, moved to a new location and set up again!"

How does Plumb see the future? Very optimistically, as it turns out. "These have been very popular in the south and southwest," he said, "but the ones built there aren't appropriate for a cold and snowy area like ours. I think there is terrific market potential, both here and in Canada, for the better insulated ones we're building."

Plumb commented that he buys as many of his materials as possible from Adirondack-based businesses. "It's important to do business locally," he said.

Plumb is considering doubling his three person workforce in the near future. But, he was quick to add, "I've learned not to over-expand. So far, all of our units have been pre-sold. But I'd like to hook up with a resort or campground in this area where they, as developers, put in the cabins and sell them as a package. They would be great for snowbirds who spend a lot of the year in Florida, but would like to be here for the summer months."

In the meantime, Plumb enjoys going to work every day, especially when someone sees his cabins next to Route 3, pulls in and says, "Wow! I'd like to have a cabin like that!" ■



Carolee Smith
Strictly Business Editor

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