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T O M O R R O W ' S B I Z T O D A Y

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## AGAINST THE GRAIN

Farmington firm's  
business practices  
are as innovative as  
its rescued products

**Bennett J. Loudon**  
Staff writer

Pioneer Millworks has salvaged jarrah wood from businesses in Australia and boards from a Chicago meatpacking plant.

Workers regularly dismantle wine barrels made with redwood, cypress and Douglas fir from Finger Lakes wineries (customers say the pleasant aroma lingers in the rooms where the revitalized wood is used for flooring or paneling).

In fact, the Ontario County company salvages wood from virtually anywhere, from gymnasium floors to old barns. Some of the material dates to the early days of the republic.

Most of this salvaged wood otherwise would end up in a landfill or be left to rot. Instead, it's getting a new life in showcase



### WHAT YOU'LL LEARN ABOUT THIS BUSINESS

Pioneer Millworks is the second company to be featured in our Passport to Innovation series. It's noteworthy because:

- » It takes old items destined for landfills and turns them into beautiful objects.
- » Virtually every aspect of the business is managed in a sustainable manner.
- » It takes conscious steps to create a positive atmosphere for employees.

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Pioneer Millworks employees Jesse Towner, front, and Alex Monachino dismantle a large wine tank. JAMIE GERMANO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

## ABOUT PIONEER MILLWORKS

Jonathan Orpin started Pioneer Millworks in 1989 after a building he owned collapsed and a client asked to use the timbers found in the rubble.

Pioneer, the sister company to New Energy Works, also owned by Orpin, moved to a 13-acre site in Farmington in 1999. Over the years, the company has reclaimed more than 22.6 million board feet of wood from vats, shipping containers and old buildings.

Five years ago, Orpin moved to Portland, Ore., where he established a West Coast operation and is now working on business deals with distributors in Japan.

**Other key players:** Jered Slusser, senior sales representative; Michele Caryl, acquisitions manager; Jennifer Young, general manager.

**Location:** 1180 Commercial Drive, Farmington, Ontario County.

**Employees:** 105.

**How it measures success:** "My attitude about business is it's not about creating wealth for ownership. It's about a triple bottom line of financial earnings, community building, and Earth stewardship and all three of those are equally important. From Day One we have held to all three of those," Orpin said.

**Pioneer in one word:** "Creativity."



## MEET THE PASSPORT TEAM

Technology and innovation reporter **Bennett J. Loudon** has more than a quarter-century of experience at the *Democrat and Chronicle* covering a wide range of communities and topics. He was assigned to the in-

## Pioneer

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homes, upscale restaurants and hip office spaces here and around the country.

If that were all it did, Pioneer would be noteworthy. But the company's business philosophy is just as intriguing. All of the company's electricity is either purchased from wind power sources or generated from solar panels. Scrap wood left over from the cutting and shaping process is used to fire two kilns and produce heat for the facility. About 95 tons of wood dust is collected by Pioneer's vacuum system every year and sold for agricultural bedding and fuel.

The idea of sustainability extends to employees, as well. Owner Jonathan Orpin is so concerned about the workplace atmosphere that he requires all workers to take a 45-minute break at noon every day.

"What I found is that people were working really hard and working right through lunch, and I appreciate that absolutely. But the reality is it's also good to just stop for a minute and not be at everyone's call and not have to answer the phone," he said. "My co-workers actually get a lunch, or get to walk around the block, or go to the bank. They stop and I just find that that's a healthier atmosphere," he said.

Even more surprising is Orpin's attitude that, yes, he's trying to make money with his business — but not too much.

"We're fine, we're healthy, but no big venture capital firm is going to swoop down and want us for the cash we throw off, that's for sure," he said.

Even during the Great Recession, Orpin didn't cut wages or benefits or lay off workers. In fact, he even expanded a little with some new equipment purchases.

"My attitude is my job in the company is to get my employees' kids to college and their job is to make wood products or to draw a gorgeous structure or to hammer a good nail. We all have jobs. That all sounds fancy, but it really is the truth," he said.

Jered Slusser, Pioneer's head of sales, says Orpin's business philosophy has changed his thinking.

"We kind of approach everything with the thought that you have to think beyond what your own needs are and think about what other people's needs are. It teaches you to be less selfish, honestly, and that means toward the people on the team you work with, toward your family, also toward the environment, toward the community," Slusser said.

### Timber that built America

Pioneer's nine-acre lumber yard is filled with more than 800,000 board feet of salvaged wood of all varieties — including horse fences, closed factory buildings, prisons, barns, and shipping crates from overseas that

"I just happen to be a fan of using something that has some historical significance or just something that has a legacy ..."

**CHARLIE FITZSIMMONS**  
Customer, who is a restaurateur

are often made with sought-after species such as teak and rosewood.

Each week, Pioneer gets another two truckloads — 12,000 to 16,000 board feet each — of reclaimed wood. Over the years, Pioneer has rescued more than 22.6 million board feet of wood, some of it extremely old.

"This is really the timber that built America," said Jennifer Young, Pioneer's general manager.

Pioneer's reclaimed wood is not cheap, largely because salvaging and processing it is so labor intensive.

Everything first must be checked for nails or any other metal parts that could damage cutting tools and possibly injure workers. Working outside, year-round, sometimes in a tent-like enclosure when the conditions are most severe, a crew of Pioneer employees salvages 30 to 40 tons of metal annually, Young said.

Inside the 29,000-square-foot shop, some large timbers, as big as 14 by 16 inches, are sent to a four-sided planer. Depending on the source and species, wood spends two to seven days in one of Pioneer's two kilns, to reduce moisture and kill pests. All wood goes to a kiln for at least 24 hours at more than 140 degrees. The kilns are big enough to handle 10,000 board feet weekly.

The wood is later processed on a series of machines to smooth the surface and cut it into smaller pieces.

"What we've found is we've had to really professionalize this very back-of-the-pickup country thought process that is normally the process of recycling wood," Orpin said. "We had to turn it into a much more corporate thought process so that we could meet the needs of demanding large national corporations and we could hit deadlines like we say we would."

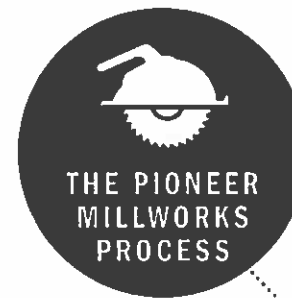
### The most amazing buildings

Orpin, 57, grew up in Rochester, graduated from McQuaid Jesuit High School and attended the State University College at Geneseo, but never finished.

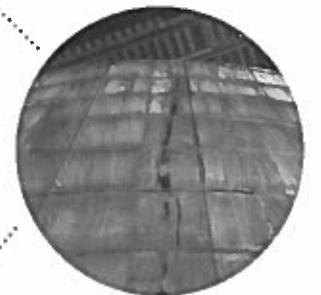
In the early 1980s he started New Energy Works, which at first focused on installing insulation and solar panels, but later shifted to timber frame construction.

He bought a building for his construction business in Shortsville, Ontario County, in 1987, and about a year later, a heavy spring snow collapsed part of the roof.

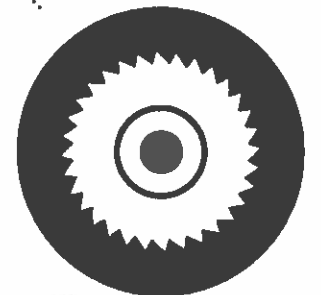
While sifting through the wreckage to get to his trucks and other equipment, "we found these large old tim-



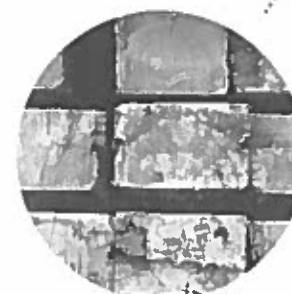
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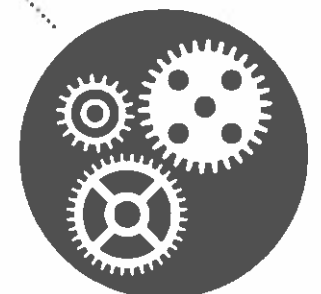
CHECK FOR NAILS AND OTHER METALS



CUT EVENLY INTO BOARDS BY PLANER



SEND TO KILN TO REDUCE MOISTURE AND KILL PESTS



A SERIES OF MACHINES SMOOTHS THE SURFACE



# Pioneer

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bers. We just put them aside. We didn't know much about them," he recalled.

At that time, Orpin had been hired to build a cottage on Honeoye Lake for a couple from England and they asked if they could use the timbers.

"They had come by for maybe a design meeting or something and saw that we had a debacle on our hands. They said, 'Can't we use those for our building?' And I said, 'Gosh, I don't know. Why would you want to use old things when you can use new things?'"

"They said, 'In England all the most amazing buildings are built with timbers that came from some previous structure.'"

"And that's how we figured it out," Orpin said.

"We went down to RadioShack and bought a \$39 metal detector and started pulling nails and borrowed a band saw and sawed new timbers out of those and became in love with both the story, the stability, and frankly, the environmental aspects of recycled wood," Orpin said.

From the remains of that structure, Orpin built Pioneer into a prosperous international, innovative and environmentally responsible venture that employs more than 100 workers.

## Branching out

In 1999, Pioneer moved to the current 13-acre site at 1180 Commercial Drive, off Route 96.

Part of the building used to be the Raceway Lanes bowling alley. Not surprisingly, Pioneer turned the bowling lanes into tables for the employee dining area. The main office is a showcase of beautifully grained woodwork, both in the structure and the furnishings.

Orpin employs a total of about 105 workers on two coasts. In New York, about 60 work for New Energy Works and 30 work for Pioneer; 15 work at a Pioneer facility near Portland, Ore., where Orpin has lived for about five years. In 2011, his Oregon home was named New Home of the Year by *Fine Homebuilding* magazine.

"Out here I'm very hands on," he said. "I'm meeting with clients regularly. I'm helping with the design process. I'm sorting wood. It's not uncommon for me to hop in the pickup truck and go deliver a floor."

The West Coast operation was started to be near clients in that region and to be closer to new and reclaimed raw material available there. He also has begun to explore the Pacific Rim as a new marketplace.

"Japan is a very, very good market



This Fairport home, built with Pioneer products, is conventional stick-built on the outside with a timber frame inside. MATT WITTMAYER



Jonathan Orpin

right now for our products," said Orpin, who traveled there in October.

Most of the business in Japan is expected to be with recycled wood, but some timber frame building is expected. Orpin said 11 distributors in Japan are interested in Pioneer products.

New Energy works on about 50 projects a year. Usually they are the timber framing subcontractor, but they do about three or four a year as the general contractor. New Energy uses some new wood products and some reclaimed wood from Pioneer.

"A lot of synergy goes between the two companies. A few of our timber frames are recycled timbers. Many of the flooring and cabinetry woods and stair woods that go into our homes are from Pioneer Millworks," Orpin said.

Pioneer has established relationships nationwide with companies in the demolition and salvage businesses who are constantly contacting them with opportunities to add to their inventory.

Because development in the United States historically progressed mainly from east to west, the oldest buildings are in the east, making that region the most common source for Pioneer products.

**"We have always, every single day, had to be creative to figure out ways to connect the dots between a vision of some design professional and a source of wood that doesn't exactly hit that vision, but that can give us a starting point. We are creative problem solving and creative solution finders every day."**

**JONATHAN ORPIN**  
Pioneer Millworks CEO

The mills and factories of the industrialized northeast, especially New England, and areas near railroads and rivers are especially common sources of wood.

When builders, designers and architects need a specific species of wood, Pioneer can check its computer inventory. Sometimes customers walk through the yard to get a firsthand look and choose what they want.

One such customer is restaurateur Charlie Fitzsimmons, who has used Pioneer Millworks products at all four of his restaurants in the Rochester area — The

Restaurant at The Armory (TRATA), Jojo, Black & Blue, and the Village Bakery and Cafe.

TRATA, for example, has three types of wood provided by Pioneer. In the entryway is reclaimed oak barrel staves from a Finger Lakes winery. Reclaimed barn siding from Pennsylvania and Ohio is used throughout. And the restaurant's large tables are made with Douglas fir timbers salvaged from the Welland Canal in Canada.

"I just happen to be a fan of using something that has some historical significance or just something that has a legacy, something that just wasn't fabricated or put together by these big manufacturers," said Fitzsimmons.

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## ABOUT THIS SERIES

Passport to Innovation is a monthly ROCNext series that gives D&C readers an exclusive, insider look of some of the area's most innovative companies.

The next operation to be featured is the Xerox Research Center in Webster. If you would like to participate in a tour of the center on Nov. 21, tell us why at <http://on.rocne.ws/PassApply>