

A pile of wood makes a traditional house

By RICHARD CHIN
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LA CRESCENT, Minn. (AP) — You see a pile of firewood. Alan Stankevitz sees a house.

At least, that's what you get, Stankevitz says, if you combine thousands of chunks of wood, tons of mortar made of cement, sand and shredded newspaper, and hundreds of hours of work. Stankevitz, 43, is proving it on

a plot of land near La Crescent, a small town in southeastern Minnesota near La Crosse, Wis. For the last five years, the suburban Chicago man has been commuting there in his quest to almost single-handedly build a house made of cordwood.

He's typically at it five days a week during the building season, sleeping most of the time in a 10-by-12-foot garden shed he installed on the site, and going home to Illinois only on the weekends.

He recently got all the exterior walls of the house done and the roof up, and now he can stay inside the structure while he's working on it. He reckons in another two years, he'll be done.

Cordwood construction — also called cordwood masonry, stackwall, log-end or stove wood construction — is a wall-building technique in which pieces of debarked cordwood are stacked like bricks with the ends facing out and cemented together with mortar.

The construction method has been used for decades in Europe and North America, although the origins are unknown, Stankevitz said.

"It could be someone had a stack of firewood and figured out if they stuck mud in between the wood, they could build a shelter," he said.

Cordwood fit Stankevitz's desire to use an economical, natural, renewable, readily available building material that would result in an energy-efficient, low-maintenance

house. And compared with building log walls, cordwood can easily be stacked by one person working alone.

"I wanted something I myself could build without too much external help," he said.

While cordwood construction may be technically easy, it's slow going and labor intensive, one reason why you'll probably never see a subdivision full of cordwood houses.

"When you start doing the cordwood walls, you think, 'I'll never finish this thing,'" Stankevitz said.

Stankevitz has the time to build a house one chunk of wood at a time because he quit his job in computers about 2½ years ago. His wife back home in Hoffman Estates, Ill., is still working at her job and paying the bills. They don't have kids, and that frees up time and resources for the project.

In their quest for their new homestead and a simpler life, the couple searched throughout the Midwest as far south as Missouri and as far north as Minnesota.

They were looking for a piece of property large enough for Stankevitz to try out a little small-scale farming once the house is done. They were also looking for south-sloping land, which would make the house more energy efficient. Some forest woods nearby would be handy as a heating fuel source. But the spot couldn't be too remote. The couple wanted to be near a moderate-sized town like La Crosse so that one of them could get a job with

health insurance benefits.

Through some "pure luck," they found a 70-acre site near La Crescent that seemed like the perfect match. Stankevitz started work by getting about 32 face cords of cedar and red pine moved to the land.

He framed the house with post and beam construction, and he completed the 8-inch-thick exterior walls last August. He estimated that the walls alone involved more than 1,000 hours of labor, 6,327 blocks of wood, 2,000 pounds of recycled newspaper, 131 mosquito bites, 89 deer fly bites, 13 bee stings and three wasp stings.

Stankevitz also has imbedded some colored glass bottles in the wall as a decorative touch that helps bring light into the building. "The Arizona ice tea bottles, those blue bottles, they make great bottles for this," he said.

It's not just the building materials that make the house unusual.

First of all, it has 16 sides. According to Stankevitz, a near-round house is more efficient to heat and reduces the amount of wall material needed to surround a given amount of interior space.

The two-story, two-bedroom structure is topped by a bright orange-red metal roof, which will be good for catching the rainwater Stankevitz wants to use for clothes washing.

"I hate to waste things," he said.

On top of the roof, there's a cupola that will house a fan to suck out hot air, reducing the need for air conditioning in the summer.

Flanking the house is an array of 10 4-by-10-foot solar collector panels that will warm fluid pumped under the floor of the house to help heat it.

There's a wood-burning stove, too, and Stankevitz has just started work on a set of interior cordwood walls that will be separated from the exterior walls by a 5-inch layer of foam insulation.

"It's just that much better than a single wall," he said, although he admits that some of his construction ideas are untested.

"This is the first time I've known of anyone spraying foam over a cordwood wall. It's a science project," he said.

Now, you know why the construction is taking so long.

"This is definitely the school of overkill," he said.

But "my labor's cheap compared to the cost of electricity or gas or other things," he said. "I know my energy consumption for heating the house is going to be next to nil."

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