



Mark Johnson worked last year to fix up the 150-year-old Borgeson Cabin at the Linnaeus Arboretum in St. Peter, Minn. Johnson's Kasota-based business, Artisan Restoration, specializes in rehabilitating old log cabins and barns. After the Cabin was toppled by a tornado in 1998, Johnson rebuilt it on a new foundation. (Submitted photo)

Spotlight on Small Biz: SBA honoree uses new tools to restore pioneer cabins

By: Todd Nelson | May 14, 2018 7:02 am | 0

Editor's note: Spotlight on Small Biz is an occasional feature about a company, entrepreneur, or business idea.

Mark Johnson, founder of Kasota, Minnesota-based Artisan Restoration, specializes in taking pioneer log cabins and timber frame barns from across the upper Midwest and transforming them into customized new homes.

Understanding bygone building techniques is essential for Johnson, who has rehabilitated structures dating to Minnesota's early years – including the 150-year-old Borgeson Cabin in St. Peter's Linnaeus Arboretum.

But it's Johnson's ability to adopt modern tools like digital marketing that has helped him build Artisan Restoration's business to capacity.

Johnson, 66, described "this digital age of marketing" as "quite frankly kind of new and confusing to me." But he received assistance from Minnesota State University-Mankato's Small Business Development Center, or SBDC, on his marketing and social media strategy, website content development, search engine optimization, digital sales and video production.

And in April, the U.S. Small Business Administration recognized Johnson as its 2018 Minnesota Encore Entrepreneur – an honor reserved for entrepreneurs who start their business after age 50.

Without the SBDC's help, he said, "being in a niche like I am, I knew it would be impossible to survive."

Ads placed on craigslist have helped him meet a number of customers. "What a great way to use modern technology to save and preserve these historic buildings," Johnson said.



A barn that Mark Johnson is working on a farm south of Hamburg, Minn., where he is replacing an old silo roof to replace the wooden cupola. The U.S. Small Business Administration recognized Johnson in April as its 2018 Minnesota Encore Entrepreneur. (Submitted photo)



With demand strong and a full slate of projects, Johnson has been focusing on recruiting members to join | The work requires frequent travel, nights in hotels and, on a typical project, four straight 10-hour workday.

“It’s not for everyone, Johnson said. “We’ve done some recruiting on Facebook and other social media [and] got some new people that we’re training right now.”

Johnson is continuing to search for what he’d really like to find — someone who can eventually take over t business. He’d like to transition into a manager and mentor role, rather than continue as foreman on the jc

“I guess it’s time I start thinking about retirement,” Johnson said. “Is that what they call it?”

Before founding Artisan Restoration in 2012, Johnson spent three decades as a homebuilder and remodeler contractor. At Artisan Restoration, he also offers consulting services, acting as a master builder and coach do-it-yourselfers who lack tools or experience with their home improvement projects.

Last summer, Johnson and his crew fully restored the Borgeson Cabin at Gustavus Adolphus College, his se project involving that structure. He rebuilt the cabin on a new foundation after it was toppled by the 1998 that devastated the St. Peter area.

Linnaeus Arboretum director Scott Moeller said the Borgeson Cabin would have had a limited lifespan with Johnson’s attention. The college purchased the cabin in 1986, relocating it from near Norseland to the Gus campus.

“The walls were buckling out a bit,” Moeller said. “The roof was pushing the walls. Joints at the corners we away. The structural integrity was in question.”

Moeller said Johnson’s proximity and experience with the cabin made him the logical choice for the project

“He did a great job with it,” Moeller said. “He definitely met our expectations.”

Johnson faced little competition in getting the Borgeson contract.

“There are people that will sandblast and stain your log home,” Johnson said. “But as far as providing a re-reclaimed home using as much reclaimed material as we do, I don’t know of anybody who does that.”

Long interested in energy-efficient home construction, Johnson designed and built his first home out of a ti frame barn in 1976. He read books to learn how to build that house, where he still lives and out of which h operates Artisan Restoration. He got back into rebuilding old structures in 1998 when he bought a pioneer which he rehabbed and later sold.

Johnson said demand for his business stems from people’s desire for the feeling of living in a historic home

“It’s a feeling of nostalgia, of things from the past, when our lives were simpler and all our clothes fit into the bedroom,” Johnson said.

While things like search engine optimization are new to Johnson, he takes advantage of the latest tools and techniques in his work, marveling at the results his counterparts achieved in earlier times.

“You consider what they had for tools in the 1880s,” Johnson said. “A carpenter put all of his tools in a gurney or toolbox. I have a 20-foot trailer and that doesn’t carry all of my tools. The thought of going out into the cutting down a tree with an ax, hauling it back with your team of horses and carving it into a log to fit into cabin – that’s mind-boggling.”

Artisan Restoration

Business: Builds homes from pioneer log cabins and timber frame barns, restores log homes and offers construction consulting services

Headquarters: Kasota, Minnesota

Owner: Mark Johnson



Employees: Crew size varies

Founded: 2012

Website: artisanrestorationmn.com

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