Is it possible for a restaurant to qualify as "historic" the day it opens? Probably not. But generations of family, community, and environmental history might just make Lumberjacks Steakhouse and Fine Seafood an exception.

Lumberjacks just opened its doors in August 2006 in downtown Ridgway, but it certainly looks historic. The building itself is perhaps a century old and has housed a restaurant for decades, but was given a new scrupulously crafted exterior—rough hewn boards of hemlock, sawed and installed by Amish craftsmen. It instantly evokes a rustic feel, like stepping into a 19th-century lumber camp, and even smells of fresh-cut wood.

The interior also went through a thorough six-month overhaul that left only the original hardwood floors and some woodwork. The hemlock walls (almost the entire building is crafted with local wood) are emblazoned with murals by local artists depicting the region's relationship with Big Timber. The art also aims to educate: "After intensive logging," reads the caption on one of several huge landscapes, "natural regrowth quickly took place, bringing a new forest of black cherry and other hardwoods making this area the hardwood capital of the world."
Other murals celebrate the colorful characters behind the local logging business and highlight the day-to-day life of cutting, rafting, and sawing timber. Artifacts contributed by the Elk County Historical Society—saws, axes, camp equipment—add to the authentic ambience. A model train circles the entire restaurant, complete with log loaders and haulers. According to T.O. Fitch of F&A Contracting, the local company that worked on the Lumberjacks project, a model-train expert ensured that the trains are pulled by historically accurate model engines.

Three picture portraits on the wall tell the interesting story of the owner's forebears. One features Fred Buehler, who moved to America from Switzerland in 1881 and opened a sawmill and shinglemill outside of Ridgway. Right next to him is a photo of Robert Buehler, who carried on the family business until his death in 1978. The third features Adolph Otto Buehler, a wood contractor who employed lumberjacks throughout the region—including numerous German prisoners of war who were housed in a nearby Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Camp during World War II. Larry Buehler, son of Robert, has long owned and operated a sawmill along the Clarion River in Ridgway, and it was he who opened Lumberjacks. It's a testament to his family's profession and the industry itself.

The restaurant is not the only project aimed at celebrating the region's lumber history. Ridgway has also gained fame as "The Chainsaw Carving Capital of the World." Hundreds of carvers from as far away as Japan, Germany, and Australia descend on the town every February for the "Chainsaw Carving Rendezvous." Ridgway's Main Street uses these intricate carvings as a kind of public art. In fact, the chainsaw carved lumberman adorning the front of Lumberjacks is by Rick Boni, founder of the Rendezvous.

Larry Buehler also was one of several regional advocates who petitioned to have a 14-county swath of north-west and north-central Pennsylvania designated as "The Lumber Heritage Region" in 2001, making it one of just 12 heritage regions in the state. The goal is to increase tourism, preserve the region's heritage, and educate the public. That might seem ambitious, and it is—until you compare it to the cuisine at Lumberjacks.

Craig Olay, 29, is executive chef and manager. He was born and raised in Ridgway, but is professionally trained, having worked with famed Chef Paul Prudhomme, and at Morton's Steakhouse of Chicago. He said that the highlights of his new menu include Angus steaks and fresh seafood—not frozen. This is not a burger stand. The dining room is dressed with white tablecloths and cloth napkins. The extensive menu includes a beet-and-goat-cheese salad (baked beets mixed with arugula, walnuts, croutons, and goat cheese in a shallot dressing), the "Paul Bunyan," a 32-oz. Porterhouse, and a pineapple-glazed Cornish hen. On a recent visit, I was impressed by the seared scallops in a creamy lobster reduction.

Olay says the restaurant has been a popular local draw, but that it also attracts people from afar. "We've been busy," he says, "really busy." Which is saying something. The downstairs dining room can accommodate 125, with another 30 fitting into the comfortable downstairs bar and 50 more in the upstairs sports bar, crafted from a large hemlock plank. A spectacular outdoor deck upstairs (open weather permitting) seats 100.

Lumberjacks Steakhouse and Fine Seafood is located at 102 Main Street, Ridgway, Pennsylvania, and online at www.lumberjackssteakhouse.com, but the only way to take it all in is to visit.

Sam MacDonald was born and raised in Ridgway, Pennsylvania. His first book, The Agony of an American Wilderness (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) explores the explosive battle surrounding logging in the Allegheny National Forest. He lives with his wife and twin boys in Pittsburgh, where he is teaching composition and pursuing his M.F.A. at the University of Pittsburgh.