



[COVER]

## Diamonds and Rusty

### How The Logger turned himself into a hot commodity

by [Paula Routly](#) (11/02/05). There's hickory, cherry, butternut and curly maple in The Logger's newly constructed dream house in Stowe, but he didn't cut the timbers himself. Since his comedy act has become a booming business, Vermont's favorite stand-up guy can afford to pay other people to do his woodwork. Ditto the stone masonry, finish carpentry, interior painting and television installation. The house has four wall-mounted plasma screens, one of them in an upstairs bathroom. Like virtually every other room in the place, which is surrounded by porches, it has a stunning view of Stowe Mountain Resort. "How cool is that?" Rusty Dewees asks rhetorically, pointing out some of the other features in his jacked-up john: the propane fireplace, sunflower shower and state-of-the-art Jacuzzi. Alternative "facilities" in The Logger's home office reflect the entertainer's earthier side. One of the room's most striking features is a reconstructed outhouse, complete with woodpeckered barnboard Dewees bought from a farmer in East Fairfield. Inside there's a push-button flush toilet and a sink fashioned from a sap bucket. "Kohler fixtures," Dewees notes, sounding more Martha Stewart than Larry the Cable Guy. "Look at the sconce on that frickin' outhouse," he enthuses.

In home decorating, as in his comedy act, Dewees works Vermont's cultural contrasts to his advantage. While his working-class "Logger" character makes scatological jokes at the expense of urban transplants, Dewees, who was born in Philadelphia, will one day probably sell this luxurious home to a flatlander for well over a million bucks. Some real Vermonters may question his provenance, and the authenticity of his accent, but Dewees has won over thousands of people with his wisecracking, working-class schtick. He's also sold them videos, DVDs, calendars, duct-tape wallets, T-shirts and, more recently, thongs. Next year, he plans to publish a book of his newspaper columns. All that moneymaking merch gets his name out there. Ditto the paid and pro bono radio ads, for *Vermont Life*, the Red Cross, Powershift, Denecker Chevrolet and the Vermont Children's Trust Fund. Acting as his own agent, producer, presenter, director, publicist and fulfillment service, 44-

year-old Dewees, a former concrete worker, has proved he's no dumb woodchuck. Shrewd, disciplined and seemingly tireless, he's grown a cussin' character of his own creation into a powerful brand that nets him six figures a year. At heart, Dewees is not unlike the Christmas tree salesman in one of his jokes. Minutes before closing time on Christmas Eve, an impatient "SUV-car-drivin'" flatlander casts his eye on a certain conifer. He asks, "How long has this tree been cut?" The Vermonter responds with an estimate of the tree's height. After three tries, the exasperated flatlander grabs the tree, throws a \$20 bill at the salesman and hollers: "You've gotta be the stupidest idiot I've ever met." Dewees looks off and declares with a goofy grin, "I may be the stupidest idiot you ever met, but I just got 20 bucks off from ya for a five-dollar tree that's been settin' here since Thanksgivin'." Dewees never set out to be an "ac-tor," as he pronounces it with *faux* snootiness. The son of a Greyhound bus driver, he proudly describes himself as an entertainer. "I'm the guy who never goes thinking, *I gotta get into this Brecht or whatever the hell he is.*" He admires Dean Martin and David Letterman.

The Dewees family moved to Stowe when Rusty was 7. At school, he excelled in basketball -- a talent that earned him an athletic scholarship at Champlain College. But he also performed in shows -- first in high school and, later, with community theater groups. He was working as a gas-station attendant when someone urged him to audition for Vermont Repertory Theater. He'd never heard of Sam Shepard, but landed the lead in the playwright's haunting *Buried Child*. Subsequent roles in *True West*, *Of Mice and Men* and *Uncle Vanya* tipped off critics to his talent before the role that defined him for Vermont audiences and, ultimately, launched "The Logger." Fleshing out the French-Canadian logger in David Budbill's *Judevine* helped Dewees develop a sense of comic timing. It gave him a chance to put his considerable mimicry talents to work, drawing on television commercials he recalled from childhood to hone the character's accent. But the experience -- and reactions to his portrayal -- also opened his eyes to the show's business potential. Prior to "The Logger," *Judevine* probably held the attendance record for a Vermont-grown theater event. "It taught me that people will come to that type of show," Dewees says matter-of-factly. "It taught me that people will allow you to swear and be real." Twelve years passed before Dewees market-tested his own version of a charismatic lumberjack, at a 1997 Waterbury performance of "The Groundhog Opry." He went on to First Night Burlington, where he filled five shows to overflowing. It was obvious he was on to something. Ironically, Dewees was living in New York City at the time, trying to make it as a professional actor. He landed a number of roles in national commercials, as well as soaps, TV dramas and sitcoms, and small but visible parts in movies such as *Black Dog* and *Newport*

*South*. Filmmaker Jay Craven lured him back -- twice -- for bigger parts in *Where the Rivers Flow North* and *A Stranger in the Kingdom*. But it was Dewees' day job -- at Doyle Galleries, where he worked for 11 years -- that really prepared him for the one-man cash cow that awaited him back in Vermont. As the proprietor's right-hand man, he got a free course in commerce. "Bill Doyle taught me mostly everything I know about business: Call back, bring the food, it's not yesterday, it's tomorrow," Dewees rattles off. "I learned from him that you need everybody. If I'm walking down the street and some guy says, 'Hey, do that frickin' thing you do.' Guess what? I'll do it." Dewees didn't get where he is -- on a Kohler throne -- by being a prima donna. He's developed, promoted and diversified a product that people are willing to pay for: himself. He's not too proud, for example, to spend five hours a day selling his schwag in Essex Junction for the duration of the Champlain Valley Fair. "You knew you were branded when you started to see people come and say, 'I have that. I have it all.' And they'd still buy more." "My job is this creative thing, and it's very, very organic. But that's only part of it," Dewees explains. "The other part is the frickin' strict, fundamental rules of business and capitalism. You're mixing 'em and watching 'em work. I love that." Myriad factors determine whether a stage act is financially successful, from the ticket price and the weather on the night of the show, to name recognition and marketing. Most artists are more than willing to turn that risky side of the business over to someone else, although nightclubs often split "the door" with a band so its members are more motivated to cooperate with local media. But when the Flynn "presents" a show, the artist's fee is guaranteed. The performer's only responsibility is to show up. Dewees doesn't go that route. From the first "Logger" tour in 1998, he's booked the halls, placed all the advertising, and worked the media, then walked on stage and performed the show -- in most cases, solo. He welcomes the risk, because by gambling he takes home a larger portion of the winnings. Almost from the get-go, Dewees was packing opera houses all over the state. He quickly figured out an even more efficient method of maximizing his reach: multiple nights in geographically strategic venues such as the Lebanon Opera House and BFA St. Albans. In Chittenden County, he plays Burlington High School, which rents for a whole lot less than the Flynn. Last time he performed in the Queen City, in 2003, Dewees "presented" himself for eight shows there. Although he won't give specific figures, it's easy to do the math: He drew about 6000 people at \$18 per ticket to gross \$108,000 -- not including the souvenirs sold at intermission and after the show. After rent, media and extra talent expenses, that's all profit. His video and DVD sales have been equally astonishing. Over three years, Dewees put out two videos -- "The Logger" and its sequel -- that to date have sold 70,000 copies at \$20 a piece.

That's a grand total of \$1,400,000. Even after accounting for duplication and production costs, and retail commissions, that's a helluva lot of duct tape. But numbers only tell part of "the business education of Rusty Dewees" story. He realized early on, for example, that he needed a media partner to stretch his advertising dollars. Instinctively, he approached the region's number-one country station, WOKO, whose listeners probably best match his audience's demographic. The station not only sponsored and talked up his tours, it found him a regular weekly spot on the morning show. For six years running, "Rusty Dewees, The Logger" has called in every Thursday at 7:40 a.m. "Some people think he works here, and that's excellent for me," says Dan Dubon-net, president of Hall Communications. "He's been at our country festival for the past few years. The line to meet him and to get him to sign everything from a pregnant belly to a CD is as long as it is for the big country stars."

Ever the entrepreneur, Dewees has successfully parlayed his celebrity into a trademark that other businesses want to buy into. *Vermont Life* was the first company to hire him to voice radio spots, which he rewrote and "Rustified" to be consistent with his image. To the amazement of the marketing team, his version didn't include anything along the lines of "fuckin' *Vermont Life*." Dewees quickly demonstrated he could be diplomatic, organized and professional; he knew exactly how far to push it. "The basic thing is, I kinda know how my thing is effective," he notes.

When Powershift approached him, he laid down the same conditions regarding artistic control for the Internet-service provider. After some debate, his high-energy "deer-jackin', spam-jackin'" approach passed the censors. With Powershift, Dewees added another caveat: he gets to approve the advertising schedule. When he's repping multiple companies, he has to think about overexposure. The company pays him for every spot that runs. Dewees only accepts commercial ad work if it's compatible with his comic character. And he wants credit for the creative concept. He explains, "Any time anybody sees me on the street and says, 'I love your Powershift ads,' the first thing I say to them is, 'I wrote those.' Because that's where the freaking talent is. Some of 'em go, 'Really?' Others go, 'I figured that.' I had to struggle with that when I first started . . . I said to myself, *Nobody's going to believe that I do this. They're not going to believe it cuz of looking at me.* Honest to God, I had that all through high school. I was not good, not smart -- I'm still not." Dewees plays the "dumb" card a lot, either as a result of residual insecurity from high school or to divert attention from his brainy business savvy. Even he notes the inconsistency. "I'm dumb as a fox. You know what I mean?" The guy never stops "thinkin'", whether it's about dates for next year's shows, a possible ad deal with Subway, satisfying his sponsors, or editing his third DVD, due out this spring. "He's smart enough to realize he

needed to have a website and a phone number and somebody handling his business," says Dubonnet, who along with WDEV owner Ken Squier has become one of Dewees' unofficial business advisers. Bookkeeper Barb LaCasse is The Logger's sole employee. "He can't handle all of it," Dubonnet observes. "He'd be driving around like an idiot." Dewees, who used to race stock cars at Thunder Road, does drive around a lot -- 40,000 miles a year, in fact; he even brushes his teeth behind the wheel. But he's no idiot. His SUV Trailblazer was part of a deal with Denecker Chevrolet. Dewees got cash and a year's worth of lease payments in exchange for his television commercials. But he could very well end up swapping his current cushy ride for a new one. The Logger just signed on South Barre's Formula Ford to sponsor his forthcoming DVD. It was Dewees who came up with the idea to pose for this story with a "for sale" sign. He art-directed the shot. "When people tell me they really liked my picture on the cover of *Seven Days*," he says, "I'll say, 'That was *my* idea.'" It takes a lot of hustling to become a household name in Vermont. Like Fred Tuttle before him, the 6-foot-4 "Logger" has done just that. It's hard to imagine there's anyone left in the state who hasn't seen Dewees' lean, long-limbed jokester bashing flatlanders in a thick Vermont brogue. The character has become something of a Green Mountain icon.

But will it translate out of state? Dewees aims to find out. To some degree that means leaving behind "The Logger" character with which Dewees has become almost synonymous. In anticipation of exporting, he developed a lot of new jokes this summer at Smuggler's Notch, where he had a gig entertaining tourists every Tuesday night. Not surprisingly, the new material is less Vermonty and more generic redneck. Dewees seems to be moving away from theatrical storytelling in favor of scatological stand-up that directly engages the audience. If it works on people from Florida and New Jersey, he figures, it will work at comedy clubs in New York. It sure gets a rise out of the Ladies of the Eastern Star in Morrisville -- Dewees' first appearance on a recent Saturday is a "freebie" for the lady Masons. The mostly middle-aged women wear long gowns and, according to ritual, sit along the two walls facing each other. Nonetheless, the scene is totally down-home. Dewees went to high school with the woman who introduces him. One tuxedoed guy in the audience recalls seeing Dewees in a high school production of *Finian's Rainbow*. Dewees opts to change his shirt up near the "altar," inspiring a few girlish gasps. Then he starts the actual show by playing a couple of hymns -- he took up the guitar two years ago when his dad, once a high-ranking Mason, went into a nursing home. After the religious tunes, things quickly turn irreverent. Dewees launches into a series of jokes that careen in subject matter from prostate exams to men in sandals -- he re-envisioned Jesus in steel-toed boots. The crowd eats it up -- even the

white-haired old ladies. To say he-man Dewees has a powerful effect on women -- of all ages -- is an understatement. They're equally responsive to an image from one of his outdated calendars, in which he's naked save for a well-placed Charlie Brown Christmas tree. One woman's extra-loud howl catches his attention and he embarrasses her good. "Hey, don't laugh. That was prickly." He warms the place up, all right, before leaving the group with a song -- "It's Christmastime Again in Woodchuckbury" -- a positive impression of a local boy who made good, and, of course, his web address. Dewees is expecting a tougher crowd tonight in Manchester, New Hampshire. Nobody knows him -- or "The Logger" -- there. That's why he's driving six hours to open for a hypnotist at the Palace Theater, where Dewees is booked the following Friday. The Palace people called him when they heard how well he did up in Lebanon -- he successfully presented himself there for five nights, in both 2003 and 2004. For the Manchester show, in a deal he now regrets, he agreed to a 50-50 revenue split after advertising expenses, estimated to be about \$3000. At last count, the box office had sold only 61 tickets. Rather than face the depressing prospect of performing free for a paltry crowd, Dewees is counting on 20 minutes tonight to drum up ticket sales for next week -- enough to make it worth his while. He's also bought some last-minute supplementary media in the Manchester market, acting on the theory that no one promotes his act as well as he does. Dewees was ripped to find himself pictured with two other comedians in the print ad placed by the theater. "Randy!" the publicist greets him when he arrives, two hours before the show, for a sound check. Dewees takes the dis in stride; he's focused on his goal: connecting with enough people tonight to sell 400 seats by next week. He leaves no potential ticket buyer uninformed, from the ushers to the waitress down the street. The show itself is a lot like the one for the Ladies of the Eastern Star show -- only without the hymns. Dewees looks good under the lights and in full costume: torn jeans, wool hat, duct-taped work boots and black T-shirt -- the better to show off his well-muscled arms. As physical as he is funny, he moves about the stage like a spring about to explode. The audience warms to him quickly, moving through that awkward, embarrassed stage to whooping it up at the expense of homeless people and hippies. Dewees has a nice way of poking fun, though, and many of his jokes are open to interpretation. In a civil-union gag, for example, one Vermonter underscores another's homophobic hypocrisy by pointing out that he "humps his own heifers." The cow-fucker responds, "Yeah, but I don't want to *marry* 'em." Dewees goes on: "I've taken grief for that joke, but if you actually listened to it, you really wouldn't know where I stand on that. I ain't anti-gay or anti-straight, so don't send me no emails." While everyone on both sides of the aisle is laughing at his clever stand on the

issue, he grumbles under his breath, "woodchuck homos." There's an intermission after his act, and Dewees plants himself in the lobby, show flyers in hand. Dozens of hypnotism fans who have just seen him for the first time congratulate him on a "great show." "Come to see me next week, man," Dewees recommends to each and every one of them. And a lot of them do. Six days later, he plays before a crowd of 412. Not one to miss a marketing opportunity, he polls the audience. Fewer than 10 percent of the people had ever heard of him before. Dewees made it happen in Manchester because he wants to play in Maine, and the man who runs the Palace has a connection in Portland. Dewees does, too, in a way, thanks to a pro bono show he's done there -- an annual event for the American Heart Association. In his mind, it's all related. Last year he drove through a blizzard to host the 25-minute benefit auction. "Now when I go to Portland, guess what?" explains Dewees. "I've been there. I call up the woman there and I say, 'Hey ma'am, would you tell all your Heart Association friends that I'm doing a show up there?'" Dewees performs for free all the time -- especially for organizations related to health, literacy and kids. But "I only do one-tenth of the stuff I'm asked to do," he says, noting he turns down a lot of parades, municipal celebrations and other politician-type events. Even when he's acting altruistically, Dewees is thinking strategically. When the Vermont National Guard asked him to come to the first big soldier send-off, for example, he declined, even though the troops are his audience. "I said to them, 'That's a family deal.'" Instead, he sent calendars and other merch to the deployed. "The wives, they come up to me on the street to say, 'That was so nice of you.'" He's currently negotiating with a Hartland school that plans to fund his daytime appearance by "presenting" him in an evening community show. Dewees agreed to a fixed fee, but wants organizers to charge his usual rate -- \$15 -- for tickets, and pocket the profit. What he won't allow is a donation-style admission price. "They cannot see the product for five dollars where someone else is paying 15. People the next town over will be saying, 'You know we saw it for five dollars in frickin' Hartland?'" For Dewees, charity begins at home. Contradiction? If so, it's one of many in this smart guy who plays dumb. He's also a self-styled rube who looks for his name in the pages of *Vermont Business People* and a flatlander who tries to pass for a fella born up the road. "He's a wonderful actor, but he doesn't want to be known as a theater person. I don't think it's in keeping with his working-class values. He's interested in making a pot of money as an entertainer," Budbill says. "You know that old saying? I'm from Vermont and I do what I want. That's Rusty."

Dewees does like to be paid for his work -- it confirms his commercial value as a creative entrepreneur -- but he does it for free at Woodridge Nursing Home, where his father died earlier this year. Bob Ringer, who

"discovered" Dewees at Vermont Rep, also passed away here. Now his 95-year-old Aunt Laura is a patient. Dewees shows up frequently -- with his guitar -- to serenade the residents, most of whom are elderly ladies. His arrival causes quite a stir, even in the dementia unit. One walker-assisted woman in a cat sweater comes right over and attaches herself to his forearm. He doesn't seem to mind that she is jumping up and down, squealing. All the workers are glad to see him, too. Dewees makes the rounds, playing for anybody who looks like they could use a song. He seeks out a blind man named Albert, who says he doesn't feel like getting up. Dewees presses him, and Albert finally tells what the trouble is. "I shit the bed," he confesses, refusing to look at Dewees. "Oh, Albert, I do that all the time," Dewees reassures him. Here he is less appreciated for his funny lines and fine physique than for the way he kneels down next to an old woman and sings sweetly, "You look so good in love." Helen, who the nurses say has been out of it for a week, smiles beatifically at Dewees for the duration of the tune. Aunt Laura sings along to "You Are My Sunshine" and then "Do Lord." On the way out, Dewees points to his father's old room. He'll spend Christmas Eve at Woodridge, he says, and enjoy every minute of it. Noting they're a "captive" audience, he explains, "I like entertaining people." In this case, there's nothing more in it for him. "It gives a lot of pleasure to people who don't normally get it." Ultimately, that's what moves him down the road to Manchester, or Manhattan. "Anybody who's a performer knows that high you get, that wired feeling," says Budbill. "Rusty gets it anywhere there's audience. It doesn't matter where it is -- in the Burlington High School gym or some nursing home."

He's still got a gas-pumper's perspective on his career, though. Compared to being a plumber or a concrete worker or a cafeteria cook, Dewees notes, "Acting has got to be the frickin' easiest thing in the world to do." He's had his share of aches and pains; a bad vertebra has forced him to take up stretching in lieu of snow machining, car racing, motorcycling and skiing. But if you have the talent, he insists, "Acting ain't hard. "I feel blessed that I have found something that I love to do. I'm not ever going to take it for granted. Never." And for now, at least, he's taking it to the bank.