



Sawmill success

Alberta's Camps Lumber is succeeding in sawmilling thanks to staying in close touch with their current customers--many of those customers being in the still busy oilpatch--and keeping an eye out for new opportunities.

By Tony Kryzanowski

The owners of Camps Lumber Ltd. understand that if the machinery between one's ears isn't working, no amount of quality wood or mechanical devices will ensure business success.

That's why this smaller, independently-owned and extremely versatile sawmill in Alberta is succeeding and prospering despite the current state of the Canadian forest industry.

Located west of Edmonton near the town of Wildwood, the company is owned by James and Laurie Camps and has been in business since 1991. The couple exemplify a strong "can do" attitude and team spirit. For example, while James runs the sawmill, Laurie is perfectly at home driving the log and picker truck to retrieve logs from the forest. She's also equally adept on the phone discussing orders with customers or marketing the company.

They keep their respective ears to the ground as to where there may be a demand for wood products, whether it's with building supply companies or the oilpatch.

They have a keen understanding of all aspects of their business, starting in the forest. That's where James and Laurie got their start, purchasing and harvesting community timber permits. Because the work was seasonal, and since James had experience working for a sawmill, they decided to purchase a sawmill because it provided them with more steady, year 'round income. But by design, they've been flexible in terms of what they produce.

"Over the past 18 years, we've changed products and customers as market conditions have changed," says Laurie. "Just being able to do different products, whatever is in demand, that's what has kept us alive. What we were doing 10 years ago isn't what we are doing now."

Up until about three years ago, the company enjoyed great success producing square timber packages for log homebuilders, exporting square timbers to the United States.

"It worked out well for the homebuilders because they could order exactly what they needed rather than bringing logs into their yard and milling the logs themselves," says Laurie. "For us, it worked out well, because we were going through such a large number of logs that we could pick out the ones that were best for what they needed."

However, once the Canadian dollar rose above 80 cents, it wasn't economical to continue supplying those customers--although Camps Lumber has not closed the door on that product line should the economics prove more favorable in future.

In the meantime, the company has invested in new moulding and re-saw equipment so that it can now use those same logs for building packages that the company can market itself. Having that capability is just another example of the growing product line that Camps Lumber has developed over the years.



During its history, Camps Lumber has developed and manufactured a highly diverse product line, from fence boards and pine veneer cants for B.C. mills to railway ties and square timber home packages.

While the company's product line has taken a number of twists and turns, what has helped them plan further into the future is a guaranteed fibre supply. When Alberta's community timber permit program was revamped in 2003, Camps Lumber was awarded an annual 3,300 cubic metre coniferous log allocation. While a secure log supply is a great benefit to the company, James and Laurie are careful how to use that log supply, making sure they achieve maximum recovery for maximum value. This has a direct impact on the company's bottom line.

Camps Lumber has configured and equipped its sawmill for flexibility and maximum utilization. The company's most popular products currently are rig mats, pipeline skids, industrial trailer blocking, planks, low boy decking, and more recently, they have diversified into siding and mouldings, with the purchase of some value adding equipment, primarily to capture more value from its smaller pieces.

"We've been sawing rough timbers all along, but over the years what we produce has all depended on what the markets were looking for at the time," Laurie says. "We've set the mill up so that we can do up to 34' logs and we were selling up to 20" x 20" timbers."

The oilpatch is consuming about 80 per cent of the wood products that Camps Lumber manufactures at the present time, consisting primarily of rig mats and pipeline skids.

"It's good that the oilpatch has picked up the slack," says Laurie. "Otherwise, I think we'd be experiencing some of the same problems with moving product as the bigger sawmills. But we've been swamped with orders for oilfield wood, whether its rig mats or trailer blocking. That's been great because we've hardly been able to keep up at times."

The company's central location in terms of oilfield operations helps with marketing its products. Laurie also attempts to make contact with supervisors when new oilfield projects are announced, to ask if they require a quote for material. However, what has really helped the company keep its oilfield customers satisfied is its quality control program, ensuring that material will meet the structural requirements of the industry.

One positive aspect of working with oilfield customers is that Camps Lumber is able to sell them green lumber, as the structural integrity of the wood is their major concern. There is no need to air dry this wood down to a specific moisture content, so product doesn't need to be stored in inventory for any extended period of time.

The company's next largest customer base is those in need of window and door mouldings. In 2005, Camps Lumber invested in a Griggio band re-saw, a Logosol moulder and a Wadkins multi-rip saw.

They followed that up with purchasing a Pinheiro moulder in 2008.

The Logosol moulder has worked out particularly well for converting smaller dimension lumber into products like baseboards, window trim, flooring, siding and wainscoting. While not a high production machine, the moulder works particularly well to fill smaller orders because the company finds that it's easy to change over the moulder's profile knives.

"The Pinheiro moulder has a reputation for handling rough, heavy timbers," says Laurie. "We've gotten a lot of interest from our customers for 2" X 6' and 2" X 8' log siding, as well as planed beams. So we are just in the process of setting that up right now."



Camps Lumber contracts out all of its forest harvesting, managing the production of both tree length and processed logs. Last year, they produced about 50 per cent cut-to-length material and this resulted in a noticeable financial dividend.

“That worked out really well with saving money on the hauling and the timber dues because you’re not bringing any waste into the yard that you are paying dues on when it goes over the weigh scale,” Laurie says. It also resulted in a cleaner mill yard.

However, Laurie anticipates that they will continue to bring in about 50 per cent tree length material to fill custom orders. James cuts this timber using a Hood 15000 slasher.

They harvest all species and manufacture the highest value products from each log. This includes products from higher value aspen and poplar logs, with the lower grade material sold to the Weyerhaeuser oriented strandboard plant in Edson.

Typically, logs harvested during one season will be manufactured into wood products that year, except in the case of logs destined for square timber wood products, where customers ask for wood dried to below 20 per cent moisture content.

The company has both a Dresser 510 and 520B loader to transport logs, timbers and lumber in the mill yard. Primary breakdown takes place on the Coutts headrig, and Laurie says they made a conscious choice to operate their 6” Coutts edger remotely from the headrig.

“Our edger is remote from the mill so that we can handle short, long or oversized wood without the edger being in the way,” she says. “We’ve kept it pretty wide open because we want to be free to saw the longer timbers.”

After processing on the headrig, the lumber or cants enter a green chain where they are hand piled. Typically 4x6 and 6x6 cants are what the headrig manufactures, and as this is the size required for several oilpatch products, these are often simply cut to the required lengths by a chop saw, packaged, then shipped to customers. Other cants are directed to the edger for further breakdown to 2” and 1” material and then dry piled. The dry 2” material is most often sold as farm or oilfield lumber, while the dry 1” material is directed toward the Logosol moulder located inside an enclosed shop, and processed depending on customer orders.

While it may seem like a small item, Laurie says one of the smartest investments they’ve made recently was purchasing a delivery truck. It has helped them to deliver orders directly to customers, sometimes the next day if it is an item in inventory. This has helped maintain their reputation for good customer service.

Some would say that Camps Lumber has been lucky that the oilpatch has kept the company in high production, but it takes more than luck to operate a successful independent sawmill, with the key aspects being a diversified product line and attention to customer service.