

TOWNSEND LUMBER: IT'S ALL IN THE FAMILY

BY JEFFREY CARTER



The Townsend family's lumber business has come a long way since they began operating a portable sawmill in the agricultural heartland of Ontario nearly 50 years ago, according to David Townsend, the second generation at the mill.

The business has grown, especially since David took over. While having gained experience from his father, he essentially started from scratch outside the town of Tillsonburg, just north of Lake Erie.

"The sawmill was moved here in 1985. This was just a corn field then. There wasn't even hydro here," David said.

Much has changed. There are now 14 buildings on the site, a fleet of more than 50 vehicles including transport and logging trucks and more than 250 employees. David also keeps roughly 2.5 million board feet of lumber in dry storage at any given time and 1 million square feet of dry kiln capacity.

The 18 kilns include six Brunner-Hildebrand kilns and six state-of-the-art Nardi kilns from the Better Built Dry Kiln Co. in Villa Hills, Ky. The operation relies on natural gas as an energy source.

Two sawmills are operating at the 170-acre Tillsonburg site, with a third sawmill at Kitchener.

"We are the biggest Hardwood

sawmill operation with dry kilns in Ontario," David said. "We ship products all over Canada, the United States and the world."

In a typical year, the family-operated business draws upon woodlots within the 100-mile radius of its main location at Tillsonburg to produce 20 million board feet of lumber. A smaller amount – roughly 6 million board feet – is purchased from other area

sales manager.

Breeze Dried™ kiln sticks provide better air penetration, according to David. This eliminates the need to use chemicals to prevent bacterial and enzyme stain. David and Overbaugh have been marketing the sticks to hundreds of Hardwood sawmills, mostly east of the Mississippi.

Trim, mouldings and Hardwood flooring, which are wholesaled or

retailed, are managed under the Breeze Wood Forest Products division. The division has a retail outlet at the Tillsonburg location and a second, Bass Lake Lumber Inc., near Orillia in Ontario's cottage country north of Toronto.

Townsend Lumber's latest diversification

is the production of pre-finished Hardwood flooring. David's cousin, Gage Townsend, a former tobacco farmer with a gift for things mechanical, manages the operation, which employs an 18-person full-time staff.

The finishing operation is located five minutes from the Tillsonburg sawmill in a large industrial building that Townsend Lumber took over. Unfinished flooring, which used to be farmed out for finishing, has been handled in-house in recent years.

The line, which uses ultra-violet

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David Townsend, second generation

sawmills, or is imported.

More than 20 different species of lumber are processed at Townsend Lumber, with value being added to each.

Townsend Lumber produces a range of industrial products, including railroad ties and lumber that is made into pallets, industrial boxes, rail car components and many other products. Much of it is cut to size. Mackenzie Troyer is the industrial sales manager.

The company markets the patented Breeze Dried™ kiln sticks and bolsters – by the millions – to lumber operations across North America. Gordon Overbaugh is the Breeze Dried™

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David Townsend, far right, the second-generation owner of Townsend Lumber Inc. in Tillsonburg, Ont., has involved his family in the operations of the business, including his wife, Brenda, and daughter, Laura



Margaret Wall assembles pre-finished flooring at the 170-acre facility.



Two-hundred and fifty employees work at the location just north of Lake Erie.



Amber Dean feeds lumber into a rip saw, which is one of the steps involved in manufacturing Townsend Lumber's patented Breeze Dried™ sticks that are used to separate lumber for air-drying.



David Townsend said that these bundles of 4/4 Ash boards would likely be shipped to Europe, where they will be manufactured into furniture.



Townsend, standing in front of one of the bandsaws, said the operation strives to give their customers the best value and quality.



Logs are sorted as soon as they arrive at the Townsend Lumber site.

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concerning manufacturing our flooring. We know that producing quality flooring costs us more, but we feel better knowing we make a quality product instead of just a high production item."

As long as that remains the focus at both Oakcrest's lumber and flooring facilities, these two operations should continue to thrive for many years to come.

There is a broad selection of proper woodlot management, something that is crucial to the supply

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light for the curing process, was designed in Germany. Several coats are involved, from the initial stain to the aluminum oxide top-coat for abrasion resistance.

"It's very high-tech," Gage said. "In just three-and-a-half minutes, it's ready to lay. I ended up helping the engineers from Germany to put this line in. It took about



Townsend sits in the sawyer's cab that controls one of the company's many bandsaws.

three months to get the bugs out of it."

David Townsend's experience with the finishing line reflects his approach to his own business. He has found, for instance, that it is important to focus on the task at hand.

"We've learned this from the past," he said. "Do what you do, and do it right before moving on to another project."

As he moves forward, there is more than a little support for

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TOWNSEND - Continued

more revenue you'll get out of your woodlot," David said.

At the very least, landowners must abide by the tree-cutting bylaw for their municipality, he said. Typical tree-cutting bylaws in the southwestern corner of Ontario amount to a minimum standard that ensures woodlots remain viable.

A growing number of farmers with woodlots are recognizing the value of proper management, David said. In fact, some now wish that less of their land had been put to the plow. A recent Ontario study of one woodlot with an abundance of Hard Maple trees showed it had higher long-term income from timber sales as compared to a rotation of corn, soybeans and wheat.

David has confidence in the log-

ging crews that his company contracts. He prefers to buy timber directly from landowners through a purchasing agent representing the company. The agent generally accompanies the crews in the woodlot. The approach provides everyone involved with a greater sense of assurance that a good job will be done.

The harvest of trees usually occurs in the fall or winter to minimize damage to logs, remaining trees and the woodlot in general. Maintaining the value from the harvest – and enhancing it – is a theme that runs throughout the operation.

For example, inexperienced operators in the sawmill can destroy the value of a log in just seconds with the wrong cut. That explains why employees responsible for the operation of the band saw are among the highest paid at Townsend Lumber.

While his grandfather sold logs, David's father, the late Robert Townsend, along with Bert Abbott Sr., who operated Townsend & Abbott Lumber, really began Townsend Lumber as it operates today. They initially worked with portable sawmills before establishing a permanent location not far from where Townsend Lumber is currently located. Today, the business has total annual sales in the millions.

Townsend Lumber is a member of the National Hardwood Lumber Assoc., the Penn-York Lumbermen's Club, the Canadian Lumbermen's Assoc., the National Wood Flooring Assoc. and many other organizations. His company is represented at trade shows, conventions and other lumber industry functions throughout North America.

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Ratté said. "We think long term."

Paul Thabet is director of sawmills and oversees green lumber for Cambium.

"With a volume of over 1.7 million board feet every month, Cambium Inc. is definitely a major player in the industry," Thabet said.

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