



Slow but steady sawmill growth

B.C.'s Bruce Andrews had an intriguing start to being a sawmiller—he traded a boat for a Wood-Mizer mill—but his export driven cedar business has steadily grown, to the point that he is now looking at installing some lumber drying equipment.

By Jim Stirling

Take baby steps and pay as you go. Bruce Andrews has practiced that business maxim to help grow Lake Drive Lumber Ltd., his export-driven specialty sawmill business in Terrace, in northwestern British Columbia.

The mill's focus is on converting western red cedar into high quality custom products for North American and offshore buyers. Lake Drive Lumber also serves the Terrace-Prince Rupert region with cedar products. And the company practices good old small business versatility by cutting white wood species to match particular customer specifications. For example, filling a recent order to build portable bridge sections for a regional mining exploration company.

"We'd be dead in the water if we were competing with the big guys making 2 x 4 and 2 x 6," explains Andrews of his niche in the wood product market.

His entry into the specialty sawmill business was definitely by the back door, by necessity variety. "I spent about 14 years working in the bush around Terrace, hook tending grapple yarders. Logging was good then, busy 11 months a year," he recalls.

Gradually, the working season was whittled down to nine months a year, then seven months before shrinking further to three or four months a year as regional mills failed and many logging contractors were forced to pull up stakes and move on. "I was laid off and just sat around for several months."

Then he made a move that was to kick start his career change. "I traded a boat for a portable Wood-Mizer sawmill," he relates. "It sat in the garage for a while and then I set it up here in Terrace, on leased land in 2004 and started cutting timber." But it became clear the business needed something to boost the potential for manufacturing specialty red cedar products.

Fishing was Andrews' inspired solution. Terrace is on the doorstep of some of North America's best salmon river fishing and the saltchuck is close by at Prince Rupert, Kitimat and Stewart. "I flew up seven lumber buyers from the States and B.C. for an all-expenses paid fishing trip, ocean and freshwater," grins Andrews. The weather—and the fish—cooperated in fine style. "They had a great time. Now they're business partners AND friends."

The same LT40 Super Wood-Mizer portable mill is still going strong, modified by adding an extended length infeed, allowing it to cut wood to 45 foot lengths. The capability has similarly extended the market. "We get lots of orders for longer lengths," says Andrews, citing the recent delivery of a 43 foot long red cedar beam for a buyer in Texas where it fills a decorative rather than structural function. Other local small sawmillers benefit from Lake Drive's market reach when Andrews puts work their way for a fee. A recent order for cedar 4 x 6s for New Zealand is an example.



“Collectively, we can cut it fast,” explains Andrews. “It’s working well and the customers get what they want when they want it.”

Lake Drive typically acquires its cedar, preferably when the price is down, through BC Timber sales.”A contractor bids on a sale and we’ll take the whole package of western red cedar, usually 2,000 to 3,000 cubic metres,” he says. “With the lower grades, we’ll trim down to 1 x 2 if necessary.”

Andrews says he also tries to develop good working relationships with local First Nations groups, which hold significant harvesting rights in the Terrace region. And, like the biggest of sawmills, Lake Drive Lumber strives to fully utilize its residuals: it chips slabs, makes dynamite sticks from waste products and sawdust is sold to cattle farmers.

Other equipment Andrews uses to extract the maximum value and versatility from his wood supply includes a Wood-Mizer twin blade edger, chop table and four sided planer. The latter machine, a Baker M412, produces quality work, says Andrews. It has the capability to produce a variety of products including tongue and groove up to 12 inches wide, double profile siding with different shaped ‘noses’, casings and baseboards to fill a range of red wood markets.

Leanne Turner runs Shadow Valley Enterprises at Lake Drive Lumber’s location. Pride of place there is a Wood-Mizer HR120 which had 54 hours on it when Logging & Sawmilling Journal visited. It re-manufactures pieces that don’t make grade and complements Lake Drive’s efforts to fully fill customers’ orders. The operation’s ability to produce items like siding, decking and hand rails has been well received regionally. Andy Penner of home builder Silver Pine Contracting is one of the satisfied customers. “We’ve incorporated a lot of Bruce’s beautiful work in our homes,” he says.

In the summer of 2011, Lake Drive Lumber employed a crew of five people. “For me, that’s what it’s about, trying to keep local guys working.” Next improvement to expand the operation’s capabilities is the ability to produce kiln dried products. Andrews says he’s looking at products like Nyle dehumidifying kits. “We expand the operation bit by bit as we can,” he explains. It’s all about those baby steps and paying as you go.