



Gradual Growth for B.C. Sawmiller

Sawmilling operation Vancouver Urban Timberworks started out modestly, but it has gradually grown, and the company recently installed a new mill, a Wood-Mizer WM1000—the first WM1000 to operate in Canada—at their production facility in Squamish, north of Vancouver.

By Paul MacDonald

One of the newest sawmilling operations in B.C. all started with skateboarding.

The two 27-year-old owners of Vancouver Urban Timberworks, Eric Savics and Danny Hagge, first started hanging out, doing skateboarding in their teenage years.

Hagge explains that even back then, the woodworking bug had bit, while in school. “Even when I was in grade eight, I would be trading in all my breaks for woodworking classes—I had a huge interest in woodworking,” says Hagge. The interest seemed to be natural, especially since Hagge’s Dad had a boatbuilding shop for 25 years.

After high school, Hagge did carpentry for four years, and along the way, bought a Granberg twin-engine, diesel-powered Alaskan Chainsaw Mill, after a friend introduced him to the mill. “It was all supposed to be a hobby—it was never my intention to have a sawmilling business,” explains Hagge.

The start-up of Vancouver Urban Timberworks came in 2009, explained Eric Savics.

“That was really the first time I heard Danny talking about salvaging urban logs,” says Savics. “Danny pointed to a construction site where hardwood trees were being taken down, and told me that this was happening every day all around Vancouver—that really got my interest.

“The next thing I know, the driveway of the house we were in is stacked with slabs and lumber, from this urban wood. With the Alaskan Chainsaw, we were cutting wood non-stop, filling the yard of the house up—it looked like a lumber sales yard in this North Vancouver neighborhood.”

They decided to do a feasibility study, contacting arborists from Hope in the Fraser Valley to Pemberton, north of Whistler, to get the big picture story on what was being done with urban timber.

“We got some really interesting information,” said Savics. “Then we went to the forestry department at UBC and got some more information about what was coming down in terms of urban timber. Then we went to retailers and looked at what they were getting per board foot. At each step along the way, we were getting more excited about the potential.”



The two young men were truly on a mission. The last part of the fact finding part of the mission was to California, to visit California Urban Lumber, in the San Francisco Bay area.

“We were trying to see if there were other companies out there already, if there was a business model based on urban lumber we could look at,” says Hagge.

“We had pages of questions for them—they were really helpful and politely answered our questions. I think they were intrigued by two 20-year-old guys from Canada coming all that way to talk with them.”

California Urban Lumber is a long established custom sawmilling operation that utilizes urban timber, and has a good equipment and tool set-up. “We knew that we would be a long ways away from having a business of that size, but it was really the final inspiration we needed to move forward,” says Savics.

And move forward they did, and Vancouver Urban Timberworks was set up in a small shop in an industrial area of North Vancouver.

“When we were operating the mill from the house, we were getting sales from Craigslist. We had inquiries from furniture manufacturing people that wanted high quality, large slab, large diameter soft and hardwoods. They were asking about the moisture content of the wood, and we were selling wet slabs—and that prompted the move to the shop, too, because we needed a dry place to store the wood.”

They quickly had their 2,000 square foot shop full of dry timber from their first big kiln load, dried at kiln operation, FraserWood Industries, in Squamish, B.C.

“When we had a fully stocked shop of dry materials, that’s when the furniture inquiries really started coming in,” explained Savics. “A lot of customers were coming in and asking if we could build what they were looking for, like a big live edge board table.

“Danny and I looked at each other, and we said, well, let’s just do any project that comes in the door—let’s just try it. We weren’t hesitant—we jumped on it.”

So in addition to offering hardwood and softwood cut from urban timber, Vancouver Urban Timberworks also offers customers help with the design/build side, and have since done a broad range of furniture designs for customers.

Vancouver Urban Timberworks is working on setting up its own kiln operation, but the really big news for the company is the new sawmill it has set up at its satellite facility in Squamish, 65 kilometres north of Vancouver.

The Alaskan Chainsaw Mill, and a TimberKing 1600 portable bandsaw mill, had served them well, but it was



clearly time to ramp things up. They installed a Wood-Mizer WM1000—the first WM1000 to operate in Canada.

The Wood-Mizer WM1000 is designed specifically to saw large hardwood and softwood logs. Durable and said to be easy to use, the mill features a saw head with a massive throat opening that moves along a twin-rail frame.

The WM1000 breaks down large logs with a capacity center cut of 67”, and uses thin-kerf narrow band blades that measure 2” to 3” wide and provides more material recovery. Vancouver Urban Timberworks finds that using a 2” blade on their WM1000 works best for the wood they are handling.

The oversize blade wheels on the WM1000 reduce stress on the blade and the long blade length gives longer cutting time between sharpenings. With the WM1000, logs can be sawed into half, quarters, or cut into manageable cants for resawing. The operator safely controls all cutting functions while standing on a platform that moves with the head and includes computerized networks.

The WM1000 was a good fit for the move forward Vancouver Urban Timberworks wanted to achieve as a business. “We really needed to move on in terms of equipment—with the Alaskan Chainsaw Mill, we were running every single slab by hand,” says Hagge. “We looked around at other equipment, but we had really agreed years ago that the WM1000 was the logical next step for us as a business.”

But, of course, they had to build a track record as a successful operating company before they could get financing for this equipment.

“We had a good business plan, but regardless of that, we were still 20-something kids with no financial history, and no credit history for the business. So we needed to build our business first,” says Savics.

“Once we did that, we knew that to run an efficient business running wide material, we needed a proper sawmill. And we did not want to just buy something a bit better—we wanted to buy the best. When we saw the WM1000, we knew it was the saw for us.”

Wood-Mizer’s long history, and its record of supporting customers, were also convincing factors in their choice—as were the capabilities of the WM1000. “We need a mill that can cut on the smaller end, at 36 inches, to the wide end, 66 inches,” says Hagge.

Reflecting the solid business approach Hagge and Savics take, they travelled to a few places in the U.S. that are using the WM1000—and received good reports on its performance.

“Before the WM1000, it seems that a lot of companies were refurbishing really old saws and old carriage mills, with some interesting equipment fabrications being done,” says Hagge. Interesting is probably an understatement.



“So when the WM1000 came out, everyone in the slab industry was really excited—it is an affordable, quality, great production mill for a medium volume business.”

Since they’ve had the WM1000, they’ve been cutting a lot of customer wood, but they are working at achieving more of a balance, and looking to cut more of the urban wood they source, and building up their inventory.

The two partners report that the WM1000 has worked out very well. The experience they had running the smaller equipment mill made a difference. “It has helped, having that experience running the smaller bandsaw mill,” says Hagge. “That was a big help—the WM1000 is basically a much larger bandsaw mill.”

From the research they’ve done, they don’t expect the WM1000 to require much in the way of maintenance. “From what we’ve heard from other people running the equipment, such as Goby Walnut in Portland, Oregon, the saw is almost maintenance-free.”

Most of the time, the maintenance is focused on the bandsaw blades, which is so important, says Hagge. “If you maintain a sharp blade with a proper set, you’re going to cut straight.”

And they are getting straight and nicely finished wood products. In the past, they’ve often used their CNC equipment in North Vancouver to level material. “But with the cutting we’re doing now, the wood looks like it has come out of a planer,” says Savics.

“It’s all about a sharp blade and the set—if you have anything mixed up with your blade sharpening, you’ll get a wandering cut. And if you are cutting 60-plus inches, your blade has to be perfect,” says Hagge.

“It’s quite the art,” he added, noting they have set up their own sharpening and setting equipment. “The sharpening is easy—making sure we maintain a proper set is going to be a learning curve for us.”

Hagge takes care of the technical saw aspects, such as the sharpening and setting. The two partners balance each other remarkably well in the business.

“We’re both capable of doing the other person’s work, but we’re almost polar opposites in what we bring to the business,” says Savics. “We really know what our strengths are, and I think that’s why our business partnership is so strong.

“Danny is the hands-on, equipment guy,” adds Savics. “We’re lucky to have his skills and ingenuity because despite upkeep and maintenance, breakdowns still happen with sawmill equipment.”

Savics focuses more on the sales and service side, though he is also learning more about trees and the milling side. “We’re still learning every day on the best way to deal with our product, from log to lumber,” he says.



“When we first started out, we would pick up anything the tree service people would offer us. But now we understand urban wood better.”

For example, twists or a crotch in a tree can be a sure sign of trouble. “Half of it might turn out to be firewood or a slight crotch could result in rot through the whole centre of a log. We now know more about what to avoid.”

Hagge says the two partners offer complimentary business skills. “We used to run everything together,” he says. “But Eric always leaned towards wanting to deal with sales and customers. And I always liked the production work. We easily agreed on where we were strong and where we wanted to go.

“I like to see a log opened up, and turned into eight slabs,” says Hagge. “My idea of production is to see four logs cut a day, sticked, stacked and stickered and ready for the kiln.”

The whole area of drying such large slabs of wood has been an interesting challenge. “We’re not talking about drying 2 x 4s or large timbers and beams—the science of drying that type of wood has been figured out pretty well,” says Hagge. “We’re dealing with drying wide diameter hardwoods, and big thicknesses. Our drying process is so different.

“Softwood can be pretty straightforward—hardwoods are a whole another matter. With the hardwood cellular structure, the drying process is so intricate. Slow, slow drying is the only way to deal with hardwoods.”

Sometimes there might be some imperfections in the wood, but that is often welcomed by the woodworkers who are buying it, as they are producing artisan products, such as custom furniture. As far as they’re concerned, twists and cracks add character to the wood.

With the new sawmilling equipment in place and working well, Savics and Hagge are starting to think about the next step for the business, which would likely be setting up a larger woodworking shop and showroom in the Vancouver area, to complement the Squamish production facility. They’d also like to expand the online sales component of the business. “We always thought that people would want to physically see the material they are buying, but that is not necessarily so,” says Savics. “That could definitely open up a new revenue avenue for us.”

Their six years in business have not been without challenges. But their slow and steady approach has paid off.

“We have had hiccups, especially in terms of machinery,” says Savics. “But I think the reason the setbacks haven’t buried us is that we are quite deliberate and analytical in the moves we make. Everything we do has been backed by a ton of research, due diligence and a lot of conversations between us.”

And there have been a lot of conversations with people in the industry, who Savics and Hagge both note have been very generous with their time.



Along the way, they have had mentors such as Peter Dickson at drying operation FraserWood, who they have worked with, and who has spent many an hour with Hagge and Savics talking about the intricacies of drying. “Peter may not realize it, but he has been a huge mentor for us,” says Savics.

The support they have received, along with their efforts, will pay off, they believe. “All of our patience and hard work together is going to build this sawmill to be a pretty well-known custom sawmill in the Lower Mainland and B.C.,” says Hagge.