



White cedar specialists

Ontario's Taylor Sawmill has cut itself a solid market slice by specializing in products made from white cedar--and making use of all of the wood fibre, right down to the slabs and sawdust.

By Marek Krasuski

Growth has been a slow but steady process for lumberman Gail Taylor and his wife, Roslyn, and their company, Taylor Sawmill.

Operating on the north shore of Manitoulin Island in Northern Ontario, Taylor Sawmill is the beneficiary of unique geological features that contribute to the success of this small operation. When the Taylors purchased the site for their future mill in 1980, they became heir to a sprawling plate of flat limestone seabed formed millions of years ago.

The Taylors made a smart choice with the purchase of this property. Had they chosen a parcel in a more conventional location on granite bedrock typical of the northern landscape, it would have been necessary to pour huge amounts of capital into blasting, leveling, and fill with transported soil.

“Other mills have had to haul in hundreds of loads of fill and gravel,” he notes.

Taylor Sawmill is a small outfit employing about 10 people from neighbouring M'Chigeeng and other communities that dot this island. Though it may be small, the company is resilient, weathering the highs and lows of a volatile industry with a steely resolve--and business acumen.

“Over 90 per cent of our product is value added, so we are not as affected by the downturns in the industry,” explains Taylor.

Siding, trim and moulding, paneling, decking and flooring have been the company's traditional mainstay products. Again, Manitoulin Island's unique geological gifts provide a competitive edge. Their products are made principally from white cedar harvested by local contractors on the island. The quality of fibre is superior to cedar species on the mainland, according to the veteran sawmiller.

“I attribute the better grade cedar to the limestone. Manitoulin Island is an extension of the Niagara Escarpment, but as soon as you get off the island, the terrain is all granite.”

Off-island cedar, he says, tends to be hollow and lack the higher grade of fibre so typical of Manitoulin cedar.

Four years ago, Taylor increased his product mix, adding a line of accessories ideally suited for this species' rich presentation value, as well as for the regional wilderness recreation market.

Thousands of cottages dot the shoreline of Manitoulin, and the lakes and waterways around Sudbury, Parry Sound and Huntsville, all of which are recreational playgrounds for prosperous Torontonians. And Taylor Sawmill's trademark Island Cedar saunas, “bunkies,” sheds, and gazebos are a hot sell both for cottagers and homeowners in need of extra space.



As the name implies, bunkies are prefab, modular, sleep camp structures built with white cedar or pine 2 x 6 log siding. Tongue and groove joints, cut at the mill, present a horizontal v-joint appearance to the interior. Red or green steel roofs, cedar doors, and 4 x 8 foot cedar decks are attractive and functional features. The bunkies are equipped with fold-down Murphy beds which are easily retracted during the day when the space is used as living area. The 8 x12 foot unit is a convenient size that falls under the radar of building code assessments.

“All of these buildings are under the size that would require a building permit, and they are not assessed for tax purposes either,” Taylor explains.

Taylor Sawmill will transport these prefabricated module units within a 200 kilometre radius of the mill, hauling them with a three-quarter tonne truck with roll-off trailer.

The mill relies on a circular Kara saw equipped with a live log deck which Taylor credits for excellent performance and reliability. “This isn’t a high production machine, but it is steady,” he notes. The simple design has fewer working components which translates into lower maintenance. Production runs at 5,000 board feet per day of small cedar logs.

Taylor also credits the Baker band resaw they have for its reliability and versatility, as well as for maximizing every board foot of fibre. Once the Kara circular saw squares logs into multi-sized cants, they are fed into the Baker for further processing and savings.

“The circular saw takes out a quarter inch kerf, but the Baker resaw cuts a narrower .035-inch kerf. With each smaller cedar log, we gain at least one board by using the band resaw,” he says.

Though Manitoulin Island is home to several sawmills, Taylor faces little direct competition. The high volume of value added products, the willingness to sell to both distributors and end users, and the ability to fill special orders together provide competitive advantages over other area mills.

In one example, the mill recently filled a special order for the Sudbury nickel giant, Xtrata, milling 6000 hardwood square blocks ranging in thickness from from 2 to 8 inches. Each block was bored with a one-inch hole to be used underground for hanging piping. In another case, the mill went the extra mile to satisfy one discriminating customer who requested a sauna that emulated a particular design popular in Finland. Taylor was able to make a template and the moulder knives to match the European lumber profile in white cedar.

In yet another case, the mill crafted a special cove siding to preserve the authenticity of historic buildings.

Hardwood, pine and cedar trim and moulding, tongue and groove, paneling and many siding styles are fed through a Weinig Unimat 500 moulder. Taylor purchased the German-made machine back in 2005. The Unimat comes equipped with the Weinig memory system capable of precise, fast and repeatable production runs with exacting precision and minimal set-up time. Once a profile is produced and its measurements stored, the Weinig can effortlessly recall a specific profile.

“We can do anything from flooring to paneling and any kind of trim and moulding. This unit has a touch screen computer with a memory for about 1,500 set-ups,” Taylor notes.



In an age of razor thin profits and fickle markets, this family-operated enterprise maximizes the use of as much fibre as possible from the mainly mature trees that are selectively harvested by several regional loggers. A mountain of cedar slabs rises from an otherwise flat terrain on this site. In previous eras when wood stocks were plentiful, this inventory would have been considered waste. Today, these cedar boards are precious material that will be ground into highly desirable landscaping mulch. Cedar mulch is especially desirable for its ability to retain moisture and its decay-resistant properties.

When the mill is in production, cedar slabs are put on to a conveyor placed 90 degrees to the infeed of an SB24E Rotochopper and trickle fed into the unit, while the waste coming off the mill is also ground. The processed mulch is then loaded onto trucks and delivered to landscape suppliers. Approximately one truckload of mulch is produced each day, with a total inventory of 600 truckloads poised for further processing. Taylor credits the Rotochopper for its relatively low maintenance.

“All we have to do is change the teeth on the grinder occasionally--basically it’s been trouble-free. We can produce mulch in a finished grind in just one pass, which is somewhat unique for these grinders,” he says.

In similar value-added processing, the Manitoulin sawmill installed a shavings baler which accumulates 900 bales every two weeks and is shipped to another local entrepreneur with a unique market niche.

“Our sawdust is shipped to the owner of a fish farm who has created an organic fertilizer by mixing fish waste with sawdust--that produces a rich, odorless, organic fertilizer.” Garden market retailers ravenously buy up stocks for their environmentally conscious customers.

Most of Taylor’s finished wood is dried in a Nyle 500 kiln capable of drying up to 12,000 board feet at a time. It may be small capacity by industry standards, but is adequate for this small, specialty products mill.

One and two inch exterior wood siding is also popular for homes and cottages, despite the maintenance involved compared to other weather-resistant exterior finishes. “People are prepared to invest in the maintenance required by adding another coat of stain every few years,” to preserve an aesthetically pleasing finish.

Little is left to chance or to the larger, prevailing winds of market forces for Gail and Roslyn Taylor. From their first move to Manitoulin Island in 1980, the Taylors demonstrated an ability to adapt. Initially, the itinerant entrepreneurs came to Northern Ontario with a \$300 tractor, a chain saw and \$50 cash.

“We came here originally intending to harvest and market logs and fence posts, not to mill lumber,” Gail recalls of the early days. When they realized the market was too small to earn a living, they purchased a sawmill, planer, moulder and kiln, slowly accumulating an inventory of machinery over time.

Responding to market realities has been an abiding strength which continues to this day and has ensured the ongoing viability of this community-based mill. Providing finished wood products, for example, is one approach the Taylors have embraced to mitigate the roller coaster cycles of the lumber industry.



Strategic marketing is another. They continually attend trade shows, and advertise on radio and other media, which attracts a number of customers daily wishing to purchase bunkies, saunas, fence posts, and other wood stocks from an impressive range of finished wood products.

With unwavering business savvy, the Taylors will continue to attract the interest of discriminating customers.