



## Sawmiller Sets Sights Beyond Nova Scotia

**What started out as a small sawmilling operation in Nova Scotia has since grown, and is now turning out product for the broader Canadian market—with sights set on the U.S., European and Asian markets.**

*By George Fullerton*

Sawmill success stories can sometimes have unusual beginnings.

Joe Van de Wiel was looking for a hobby to occupy his retirement years after he sold the dairy cows and milk quota from his farm operation outside Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

The quest for an engaging retirement project resulted in Van de Wiel purchasing a Wood-Mizer portable sawmill, and hiring himself out, sawing lumber for people in his community.

But instead of being a retiring and entertaining sideline, the Wood-Mizer mill became a busy, late in life career.

Van de Wiel began buying hardwood logs and turning the rough lumber into high quality hardwood flooring—and eventually he created River's Bend Wood Products which today produces a number of interior wood trim products and high quality hardwood flooring.

River's Bend Wood Products is now managed by Van de Wiel's sons, John and Paul, and they have expanded the operation to employ 12 full time employees. They have an expansion project underway that will again increase their business activity, and double their current employment level.

Van de Wiel's plan in 1990 when he initially purchased the Wood-Mizer sawmill was to travel to woodlots and farm yards around his community, to saw small amounts of logs for the landowners. As he became more involved in producing lumber, Van de Wiel became aware of small volumes of high quality hardwood sawlogs that were being produced along with the traditional softwood logs.

Although hardwoods make up a significant portion of the forest mix in eastern Nova Scotia, the forest industry has traditionally focused on softwood lumber and pulpwood. While traditional lumber mills have produced and marketed some hardwood lumber, their focus has generally been on producing softwood lumber for domestic and export markets.

Because hardwood lumber has a specific and specialized market, Van de Wiel saw an opportunity to manufacture that small volume of good hardwood logs into high quality lumber and hardwood products, which for the most part, were being imported into Nova Scotia.

Van de Wiel began buying small amounts of hardwood logs and making contacts to sell the green lumber. This small hardwood lumber sideline quickly grew to the point where the portable sawmill became the centre point of a milling operation that took up residence in the Van de Wiel Family's old dairy barn.



As the milling operation grew, the family added dry kiln and hardwood machining equipment that allowed them to produce hardwood flooring. The initial sales for their hardwood flooring were from the barn door, and into building supply outlets in eastern Nova Scotia.

By 2000, it became evident that the milling and manufacturing plant had outgrown the dairy barn and in 2002 the Van de Wiels moved the operation to a new building on a parcel of land east of Antigonish, just off the TransCanada Highway. One of the key attractions of the new site was access to triple phase power, which allowed the Van de Wiels to again expand the operation with upgraded and more efficient equipment.

Following a devastating fire that destroyed the operation in 2006, the Van de Wiels rebuilt, constructing a new 10,000 square foot building that incorporates dry lumber storage, the flooring manufacturing operation, finished product storage, as well as an extensive showroom, retail and business offices.

The retail storefront handles direct hardwood flooring sales, as well as stair and railing systems and other fine home trim components. The retail operation also carries products for installation and finishing hardwood floors, from underlays to finishing products. The Van de Wiels also rent hardwood flooring installation equipment, which makes their shop truly a one stop flooring store.

A LT40HDD40 Super Hydraulic Wood-Mizer portable band sawmill is the heart of the current operation, annually sawing about 20,000 board feet of northern hardwoods—primarily hard maple, yellow birch, red oak and ash, as well as a small amount of soft maple and white birch.

Joe van de Weil explained that their current milling operation accounts for about 10 percent of the lumber that is manufactured in the River's Bend flooring manufacturing operation. For the balance of their hardwood lumber requirements, they purchase both green and dry from other mills in Nova Scotia (20 percent of total requirements) and the balance from mills in New Brunswick and Quebec.

The flooring manufacturing operation begins with green lumber drying in a 20,000 board foot Nyle dry kiln. Once lumber moisture content has been brought down to the targeted specs, the bundles of lumber are moved into the dry storage area in the main building.

Flooring manufacturing starts with boards being ripped to width on a Cantec rip saw. The next step sees a Conception chop saw operation cutting boards to eliminate serious defects and knots. Following the chop saw operation, the hardwood blanks are fed into a Cantec six head moulder which machines tongue and groove, and profiles the hardwood blanks. The final machining step is an MPG end matcher.

Paul van de Weil explained that while there is ever improving scanning and programming logic technologies to manufacture lumber, River's Bend relies on motivated and well trained employees to operate machines and make decisions that ensure they turn out consistently top quality product.

“We are fortunate to have a dedicated and energetic group of employees,” says Paul. “They realize that their work ethic and critical decisions about their work makes our business a success.”



Paul went on to explain that he and his brother John work actively on the manufacturing line, on a daily basis.

“Ordinarily, either John or myself, and often both of us, are working on the production line. When we are training a new employee, or training an existing employee for a different part of the operation, we work right beside them. We work closely with them until they can handle the particular task quickly, safely and accurately. We continually emphasize safety and we make a particular effort to keep our work spaces tidy.”

River’s Bend also relies on trained employees to visually grade finished flooring. Paul pointed out that graders may sort up to six grades of flooring coming off a particular run.

Graded flooring is strapped and packaged in boxes and placed in storage. Part of River’s Bend production is sold through their own storefront, and the balance is shipped to distribution centres or directly to retail shops. Since pre-finished flooring is commanding more of the hardwood flooring market, the Van de Weils have developed a business relationship with flooring manufacturer, Preverco, and ship specifically profiled flooring to their plant outside Quebec City for pre-finish application.

The finished flooring is either shipped back to River’s Bend retail outlet or shipped directly to customers.

The front end of the River’s Bend operation is dominated by a spacious showroom, and sales and administrative offices. Paul and John’s sister, Lisa, works as office manager and also helps handle walk-in sales business. The floor of the twenty-five foot by fifty foot showroom floor and upper level office area is comprised of some twenty three individual flooring samples, each illustrating various species and grades of flooring that River’s Bend manufactures.

“Having a sample of a specific type of flooring gives the customer a far greater perspective of the flooring product than simply looking at a couple of pieces pulled out of a box. Seeing the sample on the floor lets the customer better visualize how the flooring will fit with their room and furnishings,” explained Lisa.

Lisa also manages supplies of underlay and finishing products both for the professional installers and the do-it-yourself installers.

Paul explained that while their business with Preverco has been positive, they had recently made a successful bid on a used pre-finishing line and had firm plans to add an additional 10,000 square feet to their current facilities to house the operation.

“We heard that the equipment was coming up for tender and we gave them our bid and pretty soon we got word we were successful. Pre-finish adds an entirely new process to our operation and there will be a steep learning curve for all of us.

“We have a very good relationship with Preverco and they will be available to help us out with assembly and start-up issues,” Paul adds. “We also have had great support and encouragement with the finish supplier, so we are confident that things will work out well for us. The pre-finish operation will see our employment level double, which gives a nice boost to the local economy”.



While the Atlantic Provinces make up the bulk of River's Bend markets, they also have a growing market presence in Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta.

“In addition to marketing activity in Canada, we are also directing some effort toward the United States, Asia and Europe,” said Paul. “We have developed a very high quality product and northern hardwood flooring has so many positive attributes that keep it in high demand. Part of our future marketing strategy will include establishing stronger participation at trade shows. With good promotion our products can serve consumer demand anywhere in the world.”