

NHLA – “Hardwood Matters”

Future Filers

While these columns usually relate to mechanical issues this one hopes to promote a different kind of discussion. We are suffering something of a crisis (like we need another one!) in many parts of the sawmill business with finding competent saw filers to keep mills running. This is a surprising situation in view of the consolidations and mill closings in the industry at present, but the problem cannot be denied.

Clearly one of the root causes of this problem has been brewing for a long time, namely that as an industry we are not putting any emphasis or money into training saw filers. Three decades ago Michigan Tech had a filer training program at the Ford Forestry Center in L’anse, MI; Haywood Community College in Clyde, NC had a filing school, and Sabine Valley Vocational was training filers in Many, LA. Today all of these schools have abandoned their programs. Granted these programs did not put out filers that had all the answers, but they did have a solid foundation to build from and many of the filers that are regarded as the experts in the field today got their start in these programs.

One of the key things that these schools, particularly Michigan Tech and Haywood Community College, had in their favor was a bandmill on site. This allowed the students to begin learning about the complete process, how the mill and the saw work together. Understanding the intricacies of a bandmill, how the guide system, strain, alignment, etc. affect the performance of a saw is as fundamental to saw filing as swaging and shaping are.

Our Canadian neighbors are faring a bit better, as is much of the sawmilling world, in terms of access to filer training. In western Canada BCIT (British Columbia Institute of Technology) in Vancouver trains saw filers in a well structured program that works filers through stages on an apprenticeship basis working with their employers. The folks in the program start with a fitters ticket, apply that in their mill for a time, then move on to get a benchmans ticket, and so on. In eastern Canada there was a program operating at the Maritime Forest Rangers Academy (now the Maritime College of Forest Technology), but that program has gone by the wayside in recent years as well.

With the demise of the schools the alternative is often bringing in some outside help to teach a promising employee to look after the saws, but this can be a perilous solution. To be candid the outside resource often turns out not to have the breadth of background necessary to walk into a new environment and make a go of it. This often leads to bringing in a second expert, who as likely as not will contradict a good deal of what the first expert had to say. This is not necessarily an indictment of either one; it’s not uncommon to find that methods that work in one situation do not work well in another, simply different ways of skinning the cat.

It also brings us back to the relationship between the band saws and the bandmill. When you are training a filer in house almost inevitably the training is focused on making the “saw run”

from within the filing room – that’s just not good enough! A genuine saw filer must have the skills to keep the saws properly maintained but must be able to recognize when a problem is on the mill floor. When mills try to keep these functions separate it leads to constant finger pointing between filers and maintenance. Good managers make sure that filers and maintenance work together to keep the bandmill running properly and that they communicate.

The changing nature of filing room machinery works both for and against new filers. Certainly this machinery is becoming more complex, meaning that new filers have to be able to operate and troubleshoot automatic and CNC machines of various types, adding to the educational load. At the same time many of these machines actually help new filers get the job done by taking care of some of the tedious but ever so important tasks, like leveling saws. The new tools help but they do not take away any of what the filer has always had to know, they just make the process more automatic and more consistent.

Scarcer training resources and a more complex filing room do not paint a happy picture for the future. The crisis is not in the quality of the young folks moving into the trade, but in getting them the education they need to be effective. Regional saw filers associations help by providing an opportunity to ask and answer questions and network with other filers, but these associations clearly cannot do the whole job. A structured program for training filers is needed, but industry has been unwilling to support them in the past. What model makes sense? Should we just keep muddling through? Is it time to look at an approach like we use for training lumber graders, under the umbrella of the leading trade associations in both the hardwood and softwood industries?

Mills have real, justified concerns with the costs and time demands of getting personnel trained to look after their saws, only to lose them to the mill down the road for a few more dollars, but the answer cannot be in using less skilled people. To prosper we need a supply of well trained, well paid professional filers, how do we get there?

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