

SAWMILL FORUM

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Trends and cycles that I have seen

I remember when the small portable band mills came out. Personally I didn't think much of them, but they sure did start selling like hotcakes. Instantly, it seemed that there was an incredible number of people manufacturing them, and most of them were jammed with orders. I have to admit that I didn't really get the attraction. And they seemed quite expensive relative to their somewhat modest capabilities.

I guess the attraction was that you could haul one home with a pickup truck and right away get to sawing logs into lumber. That is what the manufacturing world might call instant gratification. I was amazed that people were willing to pay so much for them when in some cases those same people already had an old hand-set circular mill and would never dream of spending for a new saw blade to

put on their old mill. But the price of one of these small portable bands didn't seem to bother them a bit. And they loved how inexpensive the blades were as compared to a circular saw without ever considering how few boards you could produce before having to throw one of those "inexpensive" blades away.

I know they were also attracted to how much more lumber you could get out of a log with that thin kerf. But at the time, it occurred to me that if you got an extra board per log, but you only sawed three logs per day, that was only three so-called free boards. I know many of them saw more than three logs per day, but at the time that was my rationale.

As these small portable band mills quickly increased in popularity, the market for the old hand-set circular mills just about completely died. That bothered me because those old sawmills were real industrial equipment that was very well designed, no matter how antiquated they were. For the most part, all they lacked was someone who would be willing to put a little money into restoring them to good operating condition. In many cases you could invest one quarter of the price of a new portable band mill and have a piece of old equipment that could easily produce four times as much lumber.

But it was so much easier to just haul home one of those little band mills, spend an hour setting it up and you were making lumber. I know many people had some success with these mills and even large production operations



Just when you thought the hand-set/circular sawmill era was over.....

found ways to utilize them in their operations by either reclaiming a board from slab wood or squaring a few cants to supplement their production.

As you know, the Amish and Mennonites have always been involved in the lumber industry--some with modest small hand-set mills, while others have gone the way of high production automated setups. And many young Amish and Mennonites who were looking to start their careers, opted for those small portable band mills. It was a great way to start out. Although the initial price tag was fairly high as compared to an older hand set mill, all they had to do was send someone over with a pickup truck to haul the new mill home for them and in a matter of a few hours they were in business sawing lumber. They were now sawyers, just like their fathers and their grandfathers.

The latest trend that I am seeing is that many of these young Amish and Mennonite folks decided that they like the idea of being sawmillers and they are now graduating to circular mills. Some, depending on the rules of their community, are sticking with the older hand-set mills, while others are buying up some of the slightly old automatic HMC, Corley, Cleerman and of course, the old Frick automatic mills.

I am really glad to see these old hand set mills being rebuilt and saved from the scrap yard. They were great old machines that still have a lot of life left in them for those who are willing to invest a little money and a lot of hard labor. I am also glad to see some of the old abandoned automatic mills being resurrected. Of course, many are finding that just when they thought they knew how to run a mill when working with the small band mills, they now have a whole new learning curve ahead of them with these old circular mills.

They learned that sharpening accuracy was important to the narrow bands, but now they are learning that it is even more important on a 56" circular saw. They learned how much precision they needed on the bandwheels, and now they are gradually discovering how much precision is needed on their circular saw collars. It has been interesting for me to watch this evolution unfold. Each time they show up here to get their first saw hammered, I get a chance to explain lots of new things to them such as what lead is for and the importance of the collars and the sharpening accuracy, etc.

It seems like the life of the circular mill is coming full circle and starting all over again. I like that. It is good for my business and I think it's good for the economy in general. And by the time these young folks get the urge to graduate to using wide bands, I should be retired and not worrying about it.

Questions about sawmills and their operation should be sent to Forum, The Northern Logger, P.O. Box 69, Old Forge, NY 13420, FAX #315-369-3736.

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