

SAWMILL FORUM

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Sawmill myths and misinformation

When I first started hammering saws, I quickly became aware that this industry was chock full of some incredible myths and old wives' tales, although it wasn't the wives who were spreading these tales but rather old sawyers.

Now don't get me wrong. There was plenty of great information to be had from these old sawyers, but the problem was that although there was lots of good information, mixed in with that was a little bit of really bad information.

I sometimes wondered, as my saw hammering business got off the ground, whether my job was to fix saws, or to dispel some of these old myths. Of course I quickly found out that fixing saws is just one part of any saw doctor's career. You can fix all the saws you want, but if they put them on a mill that has other troubles, or if they don't seem to be able to sharpen them properly, the best saws in the world will not perform properly.

And if my saws don't perform properly, my customers won't be successful. If your customers don't succeed, you won't either. As an aspiring saw doctor I certainly listened carefully to what some of the old timers had to say and I also paid attention to what my new customers told me that they were told by an old timer. The problem was that some of this stuff just didn't make any sense to me. I would ask them to explain how some of these things would be possible and I often heard something to the effect of I don't know, that is just the way we have always done it, or that is the way daddy always did it. As soon as I noticed how often I was starting to hear what sounded to me like a bunch of cockamamie myths, I started to write them down on a list I entitled "Myths and Misinformation of the Sawmill." And it was directly from that list that I started writing the "Sawmill Forum" in this magazine more than 30 years ago.

What amazes me is that after all of these years of preaching the gospel of how saws and sawmills should work, I still hear some of these same old myths from time to time. The one about how the saw is supposed to be dished to the log side and then when up to speed it miraculously stands up straight

has always been a beaut. I still have to ask the perpetrators of this one why it needs to be dished if the ultimate goal is for it to stand up straight anyway? If you think that centrifugal force is going to straighten it up, wouldn't that same centrifugal force keep it straight if it was straight to start with? And when I ask them why it needs to be dished they sometimes tell me it's so that the body of the saw clears the log without rubbing. But wait, you just told me it was going to stand up straight because of centrifugal force—thus eliminating the dish.

I also like the one about the purpose of lead in the saw is to counteract its natural tendency to run out of the log. And some of those folks will also tell me that we put lead in the saw so that the body of the saw clears the log without rubbing. Hasn't anyone heard of kerf? Kerf is what prevents the saw from rubbing the log.

And just recently I was reminded by someone of the old myth that if all of your shanks are worn out, you can avoid having to get your saw hammered by either replacing every other one and running the saw that way for a few more months, or replacing every third shank, each time you change a set of bits. The reality is that every time you put a new shank in a socket that had an old worn out shank in it, you have stretched the rim of the saw a certain amount. And the more shanks you replace, the more you stretch it.

If you replace them all at the same time, the change in tension will be quite obvious and you will want to have the saw hammered correctly so that it has the right amount of tension. If you change the shanks somewhat gradually over a period of let's say three bit changes, you will still have stretched the rim the same amount. The only difference is that because you replaced the shanks gradually, the amount of change each time will be more subtle and if you are the kind of sawyer who is willing to run a saw where some of the shanks are spilling sawdust and causing the saw to run off line, chances are that by the time you have replaced the whole set of shanks, you might not notice how poorly your saw is running. You have managed to save the price of getting your saws hammered as you struggle along with a saw that won't stand up to a proper feed rate.



This brings up another topic. I hammer saws for a wide variety of mills--from hobby mills to high production operations and everything in-between, so I get to see the full spectrum of how saws are treated.


Some sawyers seem to pride themselves on how long they can make one of my saws run. That's a good thing if the saw was hammered properly and the source of your pride is how well the mill is maintained and how well you can treat the saw, while still getting good production of accurate lumber. But when that pride is based on just running and running the saw until it just won't rotate anymore, I don't think you have done the mill any favors by not having to pay to get the saw hammered as often as it should have been.

It seems that every sawyer's idea of when the saw should be hammered is a bit different. Some of what I consider to be the most successful mills seem to send the saws out sooner rather than later. As soon as the saw is not behaving quite properly, instead of trying to force it to run and sacrificing production and/or quality of lumber, they take the saw off and get it fixed and put on another good one that is ready to go. If you do the math I think that although they pay to get their saws hammered a little more often, they get their money's worth by always having a saw on that is performing right up to the level it should be.

Now I will leave you with one of the best myths I have ever heard. Fortunately I only heard this one once about 33 years ago. Believe it or not I was told that a properly set up mill had to be done in a manner where the saw was facing true north so that the earth's gravitational pull would keep the saw in the cut instead of running out. You gotta love that one.


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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