

BY CASEY CREAMER

Proper Troubleshooting

Every now and then someone asking for troubleshooting help starts out with the statement that they have checked everything. Earlier in my sawmill troubleshooting career I would assume that meant that I had to look for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Something really odd that could be easily missed. I would rack my brain trying to think of silly little things that anyone could overlook that could be responsible for whatever symptoms they were reporting. I would even run into the situation where they not only supposedly checked everything, but they had several experts in to check things out, and nobody could make this sawmill run properly.

I found out that those so-called experts who were in fact quite knowledgeable in the field, were not paid troubleshooters, but instead just machinery salesmen. Let me say that they had good intentions and plenty of practical experience, which could be very helpful. But they did not go

through the mill with a troubleshooting checklist and truly conduct a proper troubleshooting session because that is not their everyday perspective. Remember that troubleshooting a sawmill properly requires a complete process. These salespeople were perfectly willing to help out a good or prospective customer for free, but they might not have been coming at the project from the right vantage point. There is no doubt they were truly trying to be helpful. But in reality, the best advice they could have given would have been to hire a sawmill troubleshooter to get the whole job done right.

More important, when someone confidently tells me that they have checked “everything,” I know this is going to be an easy one. It is going to turn out to be one of those things that are usually the first thing to check, like the sharpening, or the condition of the collars, or something like that. The way it usually works is that I get there with the goal of following my

checklist and systematically checking everything on my list. I say everything on my list because the other trap that some can fall into when trying to troubleshoot a mill is that, as soon as they find the first thing out of adjustment that seems to go along with the stated symptoms, they figure the job is done. On the contrary, the job has just begun.

Finding the one most likely culprit is important, but it is just as important to continue checking and gathering data. When one thing is worn or out of adjustment, it is quite common in a sawmill to be able to find additional items that are either out of adjustment and contributing to the problem or misadjusted as a means to treat the symptoms and try to compensate for the problem instead of finding and correcting the original issue. If you don't complete the circle, so to speak, you may fix one real problem and find that the symptoms change or are still there, but the mill still won't run properly. Or it runs a little better, so you think you have succeeded, but in a few days you start to realize that you still have a problem.

Some of the mills I have to troubleshoot can be brand new mills. The only difference between troubleshooting a new mill and one that has been up and running for a long time is that you don't have to look at what else changed when the problem started because that new mill hadn't run right yet. With an established mill, it is very important to factor in what might have changed exactly when they started having this problem. Was there a big weather change, and now they are into partially frozen logs? Was there a species change from red oak to frozen hickory? Did they start using a different sharpener or a different brand of bits? This sort of info can give you some good clues on your way to solving the mystery. But with a new mill we don't have that luxury. And just because it's new and doesn't

A new spreader on a new mill that wasn't running properly. Notice the wear pattern of the paint on the spreader.





have any wear yet, that doesn't mean everything measures like it is supposed to or that it was set up properly. You still have to go through your checklist and make sure the collars are good and the new saw on the new mill was hammered properly and sharpened correctly.

In the picture you will see a new spreader on a new mill that wasn't running properly. Notice the wear pattern of the paint on the spreader. What does that tell you about the alignment of the spreader or lack thereof? Just one of those easy and obvious problems that are easy to correct, as long as someone remembers to actually check just about everything instead of just thinking they had. It turned out that there was a slight problem with the saw that, in and of itself, might not have been much of a problem. But when you add that to the slightly misadjusted spreader and the slightly miss-sharpened teeth, you end up with a new mill that just won't run properly.

Troubleshooting any sawmill is really a simple process as long as you realize that to do it properly, you must let the whole process play out by doing a very systematic check of all of the different components that could be prone to wear or mis-adjustment or alignment issues. After gathering all of the data, all you have to do is analyze that data in relation to the stated symptoms to come up with the proper series of solutions.

Interested to learn more from Casey Creamer? You can watch our video on how Casey hammers circular saws on The Northern Logger YouTube page. Just search for "The Northern Logger" on YouTube and click the video entitled "How to Hammer a Circular Saw with Casey Creamer." Please send future questions about sawmills and their operation to Casey Creamer, saw doctor and president of Seneca Saw Works, Inc., PO Box 681, Burdett, NY 14818, (607) 546-5887. You can also reach out by email: casey@senecasaw.com.

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