

SAWMILLS - AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE TIMBER INDUSTRY

EBY'S SAWMILL

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Leo Eby's Sawmill was established in 1988 along Bean's Cove road in Clearville, Pennsylvania, a small Bedford County community just a stone's throw from the Allegany County Maryland line. The landscape is a patchwork of family owned farms that blend beautifully with the forest that ranges in all directions. The Eby family has resided in the close knit community for decades as have many of their neighbors, so the business blends community spirit with entrepreneurship.

In a fundamental way, Leo's business is not far removed from the century and a half trade that sawyers practiced when the region was first opened to harvesting. Yet, in other ways, Leo's is different. Computerized scales, bar codes, hand held computers, and other electronic systems that are essential in today's lumber market, separate his edition of the trade from its predecessors. One consistency in the business over the decades has been the forest which provides the resources that make mills a virtual beehive of activity as the process of delivering, grading, and sawing lumber keeps employees busy and customers satisfied.

Leo Eby, proprietor, states, "Our business primarily consists of purchasing hardwood logs from cutters and then processing them into lumber



Leo Eby

products. We keep about 95% of the logs at the mill to process into lumber, and the other 5% we sell as veneer. Our mill only deals in 'green' lumber; the wood goes from here to other lumber facilities that dry and mill it."

Most of the logs arriving at Bean's Cove have been harvested within a 100-mile radius. Unlike other mills, Leo's does not employ cutting crews or contract for their services on a routine basis. "We are primarily

a 'gate' sawmill, one of the few in the area. That means our timber resources are dropped off at our mill yard gate. It is strictly an open market; we have no contracts with vendors." This arrangement satisfies the market as all local species of trees arrive daily.

When vendors arrive at the log gate, Leo is responsible for organizing, grading, and establishing prices for the logs, a task that requires experience and sharp eyesight. The logs are arranged in rows in a log yard near the mill. Evaluation means that Leo is considering the quality of wood, especially those logs referred to as veneer. Such top quality logs can easily bring double the market value of lower graded timber. Leo continues, "There is no perfect log, and my eyes are trained to look for problems. If I make a mistake, it becomes my problem. So, I



Eight year old Weylon Miller sits next to a very large Sapele log shipped from Africa to Leo's sawmill, for a customer. Leo is cutting it into board footage for the client.

look for issues and use a three strike grading rule. If there is a potential problem with a log, a small issue, I may overlook it. I might even see another small problem and overlook it. But if I see a third problem on the same log, it is ruled out as veneer quality."

The imperfections, or "issues," Leo looks for are small pine knots, about one quarter of an inch in diameter. These were caused when a small branch died during the early life of the tree, and the surface gradually covered over the mark. Other typical problems are splits, mineral deposits that cause dark olive green streaks, a swoop or crooked bend in the log, a shake or unsoundness of grain, a deterioration process called 'spalding,' and off-center hearts or centers of the log. Grading must be consistent because "my bosses are my customers, and they depend on consistent products for their veneer furniture products." Expenses are also a consideration. "I just bought four walnut logs for \$9,000, so I have to be careful in grading."

Leo's evaluation continues until all logs have been examined in order to establish value for a vendor's logs. Additional keys to the grading process include the "bark pattern; it tells you everything about the tree." I'm also looking for 'cat faces.' These are small circular imperfections that may indicate greater problems within the log.

Once the logs are graded, they are moved to the sawmill where sawyers are responsible for processing the logs into customer products. Boards, oak timbers,

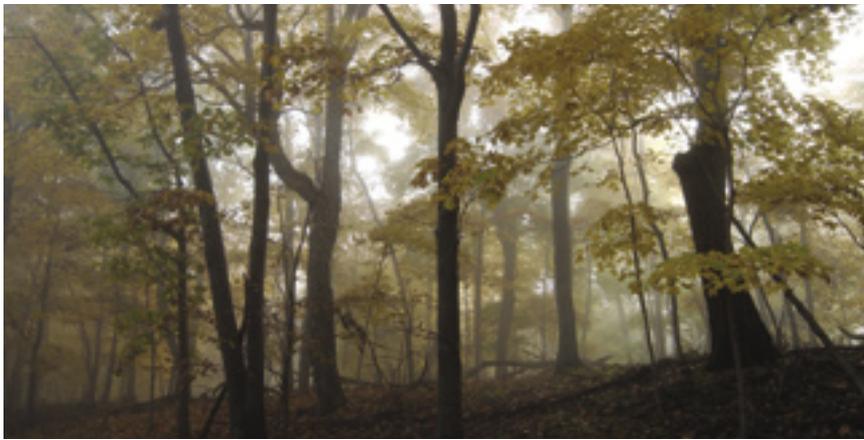
and planks all get closely monitored at the band saw. "We use band saws because we get more yields from them. The thickness of the blade can effect the lumber yields. A band saw cuts faster, too. We probably pick up 3-10 percentage points in yield with a band saw over a circular saw, and that is a lot because we process 8-10 million board feet of saw logs and veneer logs each year."

Eby's lumber is shipped to a variety of local and distant customers. "One of our main markets for veneer logs is in North Carolina." Occasionally lumber is also shipped to Clear Spring, Maryland, where it is dried for customers.

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Leo stands in front of a wall of Oak logs ready for the mill.



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Eby's Sawmill is a wholesale operation, dealing primarily in bulk shipments. A family owned retail facility is located off I-68, along Ali Ghan Road, where outdoor products are sold directly to consumers. Wood mulch is one of the best selling items at the store. "Most of our mulch is hardwood and bark. We also sell a strictly bark mulch." Decorative gravels, mushroom soil, top soil, retaining wall blocks, dyed mulch products, and pavers are also offered.

What arrives at Eby's also leaves Eby's in one form or another. "We sell everything we buy. There is a market for everything we have. Even saw dust is sold as bedding for dairy cattle, horses, and chickens."

Eby's business has grown because of increasing demand for superior hardwoods, because of quality hardwood vendors who supply the forest products, and because of Leo's reputation as a reliable supplier. Leo's admonition that customers are his boss has served him well.



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