



Making the chips fly

Leonard Robertson cutting boards at a sawmill in northern New Brunswick, where he's worked for more than 25 years—a living link to Atlantic Canada's long history with lumber.

Keeping the carriage clean and the teeth sharp with an old time sawyer

by Cary Rideout
photography by
Lorain Ebbett-Rideout

WIPING THE sawdust from his face, Leonard Robertson looks out to watch an endless sea of barley toss about in the wind. "I should be fishing today. Bet they're biting good back on the 'Hawk [the Shiktehawk stream]. Yeah, that sure would be nice. Maybe tomorrow." He turns back to the job at hand of running a small sawmill in northern New Brunswick. But this is not your typical industrial sawmill of the 21st century. This mill and the man who runs it are a living link to Atlantic Canada's long history with lumber.

The phrase self-taught can sometimes be a bit of a cliché but for Leonard it's as true as the straight lumber he mills. "I never did any sawmill work until the day I stepped in here. Walked up, looked it over and went to work. Boys, it was wild stuff

for a few days. Ruined a couple logs," Leonard admits, "But I kept at it. Got better over time and learned to get the logs turned right to get the most boards. I can turn out plenty of lumber now."

"Why junk something you can fix?"

The sound of a combustion engine in distress is like a siren call to Leonard, who has never tired of mechanical work. "Got into fixing engines pretty young. Just seemed to interest me, seeing how it worked, how the power was made and keeping things running smart. Big job looking over an engine. Motors all have their own reasons to be not working, but it's nice when you get it humming right. Open 'er up and hear things working right, that's what I like.



Leonard loves fixing engines: "Motors all have their own reasons not to be working but it's nice when you get it humming right."

Why junk something you can fix? Get it repaired run it another 10,000 miles why wouldn't you?" It's a green notion in this age of throwaway machinery and an idea rural folks have never abandoned.

As he talks Leonard uses a long peavey pole that he hooks under a huge fir and effortlessly rolls off the skids onto the carriage. "If it's got fuel and a spark plug I probably have torn it apart."

Setting the peavey aside Leonard uses a tape measure to check the smaller end of the log before clamping it in place on the carriage "See here? I can get five two-by-fours over 16 feet long. Full sized too, not the skinny ones you buy. Maybe get a couple boards too, we'll see."

Our sawmill heritage

This type of rotary sawmill once numbered in the hundreds across Atlantic Canada filling lumber orders big or small. The history of sawmills in Atlantic



Customers of this old-fashioned rotary sawmill often come to Leonard with specific requests. All the cutting is measured by eye and skill alone.

Canada can be traced back to the late 17th century when a mill was located on the Nashwaak River, near Fredericton, NB. By the middle of the 19th century sawmills were spinning in all four provinces with an 1845 census showing more than 645 in New Brunswick alone. Nova Scotia had numerous water-powered mills and many used a vertical blade drawn up and down. PEI sawmills date back to the 1790s. Newfoundland had

fewer sawmills but lumber production rose steadily all through the 1800s until the advent of the pulp and paper industry. Many were small operations but all provided building materials for export and the bustling pioneer farms that sprang up. Barns, houses, and fishing docks all had their own requirements and the local sawmill provided it. Communities sprang up in the sawmill's shadow with stores, schools and pride.



Leonard's son Anthony helps him stack lumber.

Today a sawdust burner stack is an object of scorn, but once it represented industry and most importantly steady employment. Wood was the lifeblood inland and the equal of the fish stock riches of the cold Atlantic.

All in a day's work

Leonard has sawdust in his blood and spent years cutting with a chainsaw all over New Brunswick. "We cut different back then, left the small stuff to grow bigger. Cold and wet I been in those old swamps in winter, snow down your neck. Sitting up on a freezing skidder seat, haulin' all day. Here I'm out of the wind. Do a dozen jobs, sharpen the teeth, haul sawdust, run the loader. No, it's a better job for sure. I must like it 'cause I been at it for over 25 years now." With obvious pride in his voice he says, "I can run all the edgings back through and get more boards. A big operation just tosses that rough stuff aside, too much bother. I like to get every piece I can. If someone was doing it for me I'd want them to do it the same."

Customers often come to Leonard with specific requests. "Fellow comes here, he wants so many two-by-eight board and so many two-by-four, or

boards to do walls plus the roofing. Tell me what you want, get me the logs and I can make 'er!"

Once the logs are clamped in place Leonard operates a hydraulic system which sends the carriage down the line to the spinning saw. Forty teeth send a spray of wood chips upward and the resulting cut lumber falls away to be removed. Leonard's son Anthony is working today stacking lumber. "Anthony's my main man," Leonard says smiling. Father and son work with little conversation, hands practiced from countless hours. All the cutting is done by eye and skill alone. "I've learned to keep all the sizes straight and the board feet calculated per thousand feet."

With a wry smile Leonard says a long day's yield of lumber would be a whisper of a bigger operation. "I can get a 20-footer on the carriage, but much bigger it's an awful struggle. Seventeen inches is about all I can saw through, so sometimes you have to turn it over and run it through again. Cut truckloads of lumber for buildings, barns, even potato houses. Bridge frames, walking trails, whatever. Cut a million stickers. You have to have separation between the boards so you run strips of wood so things dry right."

We walk outside and Leonard grabs a few two-by-fours. He lugs the lumber to a stack and gets it lined up correctly. "That look right Anthony?" Nodding in agreement, Anthony runs a thin piece of wood at three places on the pile. Both men survey the growing stacks of lumber, blinding white in the sun.

"A person gets shot at sometimes at this job. You get old hunks of fence staples or barb wire. Saw hits that and zing! Anywhere an old clothesline hung is the worst. Big old pulley and good-bye sharp teeth. No point in ducking, it's all over when you hear it flying. I get a few scares every year. Spiders too. They hide in cedar mostly great big hairy monsters like you wouldn't believe. They'll crawl out of a crack as the saw comes along. Big as your hand."

When he shuts off the engines for a break, I ask Leonard about his favourite wood to mill. "I love hemlock, nice to cut and works so straight," he says. "Cedar is good too. Mostly I mill spruce and fir with a bit of beech or maple, but very little. I hate tamarack, it's so awful twisted and crooked and a real job. I hate it, but I'll cut it."

The sawmill sits up high looking down on a broad valley of the Monquart Stream; Leonard often sees wildlife in the country below. "Seen some big bear, deer and moose all the time. Fall comes and there's a thousand Canadas [geese] out flying by. I'm on my own here and that's fine." Looking troubled for a moment, Leonard says, "No one's interested in this work now. Too hard for 'em and I haven't had anyone but you show up to ask questions. No one wants to learn this trade. Who's going to run these small sawmills in 10 years? No one's doing nothing for themselves today. Too busy, I guess."

Leonard returns to his station at the saw controls. As a huge spruce hits the saw a smile crosses his face, and a thousand old sawyers smile with him as the chips continue to fly. 🐿️