

Unique sawmill a local business success

Tremendous growth since 1973 start

BY DON BUTCHER

The economic news recently has been disheartening. Industries closing or laying off, long lines at the unemployment offices and just generally tough times all over have made it a bad time to be in business.

Or so the conventional wisdom goes. Not all businessmen agree; businessmen like Keith Hodgins.

"We made it a policy to get in when things are bad and be ready when things pick up... maybe some day we'll get hurt, but so far it's worked out good."

Working out good for Keith and his brothers Ron and Merv means a 20,000 sq. ft. expanded plant that opened last summer, means a portable unit in the bush in 1973 now has 53 on the payroll; and means a growing business to be "reasonably busy", as Merv put it, despite the poor economy.

In what seems incongruous to the Bruce County countryside, with its grazing beef and dairy cattle and its field of corn and hay, the brothers are partners in a sawmill, RKM Wood Products Ltd., along county road 20 in Bruce township, that uses local lumber as its raw material.

Hard work, specialization and innovation seem to be the keys to RKM's success. The company produces only one product, precut lumber of different lengths for pallets and crates. Pallets are those wooden platforms used in loading and transportation, often called skids.

Innovation means producing this precut lumber with a process unique in Ontario, using machinery specially designed by the brothers for the job.

"We designed pretty well all our own machinery to suit our needs," Merv says.

"We're the only people in Ontario doing what we're doing... It's a completely new concept in sawing," he adds.

The firm's technique starts with low grade lumber, bought from farmers' back lots or wherever within 100 km of the plant. It has its own bush crews cut the trees, and transports the whole tree to the plant on its specially designed trailers.

Once there, virtually all of the

tree is used, including the narrow logs of the trees that would have been left in the bush by other firms. What RKM is doing differently from the other firms is to get a board or two out of material the other companies can't.

The traditional way to saw is to cut a board from a log, then bring the rest of the log back and cut another board with the same saw.

What the Hodgins have done instead is to set up a number of saws in series, so the wood doesn't backrack, and moves literally in one end of the plant and out the other.

The few parts of the tree that can't be made into lumber are turned into other products, Keith Hodgins explains. If the leftover pieces are big enough, they're sold as firewood; if not, they're ground into wood chips. The sawdust is sold to local farmers as bedding.

The only part of the tree that isn't used is the bark. That may change, as the firm is looking at ways of burning it for heat in the winter. Right now the mill isn't heated, the machinery freezes at night, and the employees find it, and themselves, hard to start in the morning.

Like in any other business, things don't always run smoothly, and annoyances like the frozen machinery happen now and again.

"We've got growing pains, and we're a long run from being finished... things don't always run so smooth," Merv says.

Some of the problems come from the equipment. Virtually all of the machinery in the new building was designed by the brothers themselves and custom-made in Lindsay. With new machinery, "it's not a tried-and-true product. Sometimes things don't work out as planned, and we have to redesign it," Keith Hodgins says.

They figure out what they need, look around to see how other companies are doing similar work, then either come up with a new design or a modification that seems to work.

Other machinery is being created or modified in RKM's own workshop. For example, the size of the wood chips now being produced from the waste is too big, so additional blades are being added to the chipper.

Logs are cut into the lengths

One of the biggest projects in the shop is the construction of the firm's own trailer. Conventional log-hauling trailers aren't totally suitable because the logs coming out of the bush are different lengths and sizes, unlike traditional loads.

The new RKM trailer will have special unloading capabilities, to save time and effort. The whole tree are stockpiled in a yard, then loaded onto a platform where a chain draws them to a rotary saw.

"We draw in the tree length. That is unusual around here, but common up north," Keith says over the whine of the saw.

The saw operator cuts them into the length needed that day, and sends them to the debarking drum.

The two huge drums sit on their sides, rotating around. The logs rub the bark off each other. It then fall through holes onto a conveyor belt, which takes the bark to a truck for disposal.

The debarking drum "is quite common in the pulp and paper mills, but we're the only sawmill

needed for a particular job before

using it, as far as we know. We don't know why (other don't); it works well for us," Keith says.

"The only problem is butt damage, where the ends of the logs hit the steel drum. We're looking at rubber inside the drum to reduce that," like some pulp mills have, he adds.

From the debarking drum, the logs are cut once with a traditional vertical saw, then cut to different thicknesses with band saws mounted horizontally. The widths are adjusted every day, depending on the particular type and size of pallet needed.

Once cut and stacked, the lumber is delivered to the factory of another company to be assembled.

Keith Hodgins is quick to point out RKM tries to be an equal opportunity employer.

"We have six to eight women working for us, right on the mill floor, which is unusual. On the saws, they're just as good as men; in some cases, better," he says.

At the time this reporter visited

going into the plant for processing.

the plant, RKM was working on an order that would be exported to the United States. That would not have been possible before last January, Merv Hodgins says, and is the reason RKM continues to be busy.

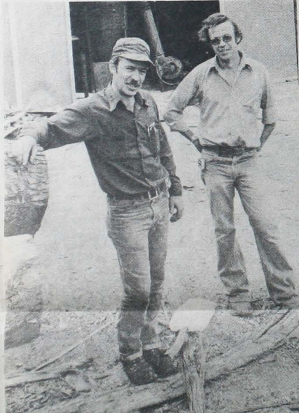
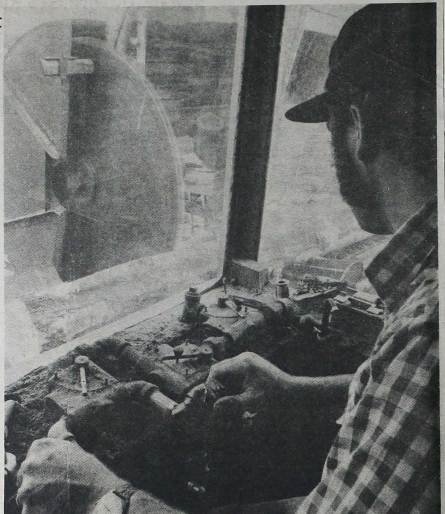
Last year's plant expansion and January's new machinery allows RKM to compete with U.S. material, and it can replace U.S. imports into this country.

Negotiations are also underway for an export order to Europe, though the deal hasn't been set.

When asked about the secret to their success, both Merv and Keith laugh and say there is no secret. They're just able to turn material someone else would throw away into a useful piece of lumber.

Time and time again, during the tour of the mill, Keith Hodgins would point to a mishap part of the log and say, "we'll get a board or two out of that one."

Those one or two boards have added up into a large, successful sawmill for the Hodgins brothers, and a boost to the local economy.



Brothers Merv and Keith Hodgins and their sawmill operation on county road 20 in Bruce township.

Third brother Ron, the R in RKM Wood Products, was not on the site at the time of the photo.

Inside the mill, women work alongside men lining up boards for cutting and stacking. Most of the

boards are moved along conveyors, in one end of the plant and out at one of two points, depending on the

size of the board and the order being filled.

