

Colborne High School until 1962. When the Colborne High School closed, he taught in Brighton 1962 until 1967 and then at Cobourg Collegiate Institute East from 1967 until his retirement in 1989.

His love of wood remained as a hobby interest throughout his teaching career.

"There used to be a lumber yard in Colborne. I worked for Joe Black in the summertime when I wasn't teaching," says Norm. The carriage house on their Division Street home property was always a hive of woodworking projects, tools and lumber.

By 1990, Cathy and Norm decided to open a lumber operation as a business. Quickly outgrowing the carriage house, they leased part of the entire building and surrounding they now occupy.

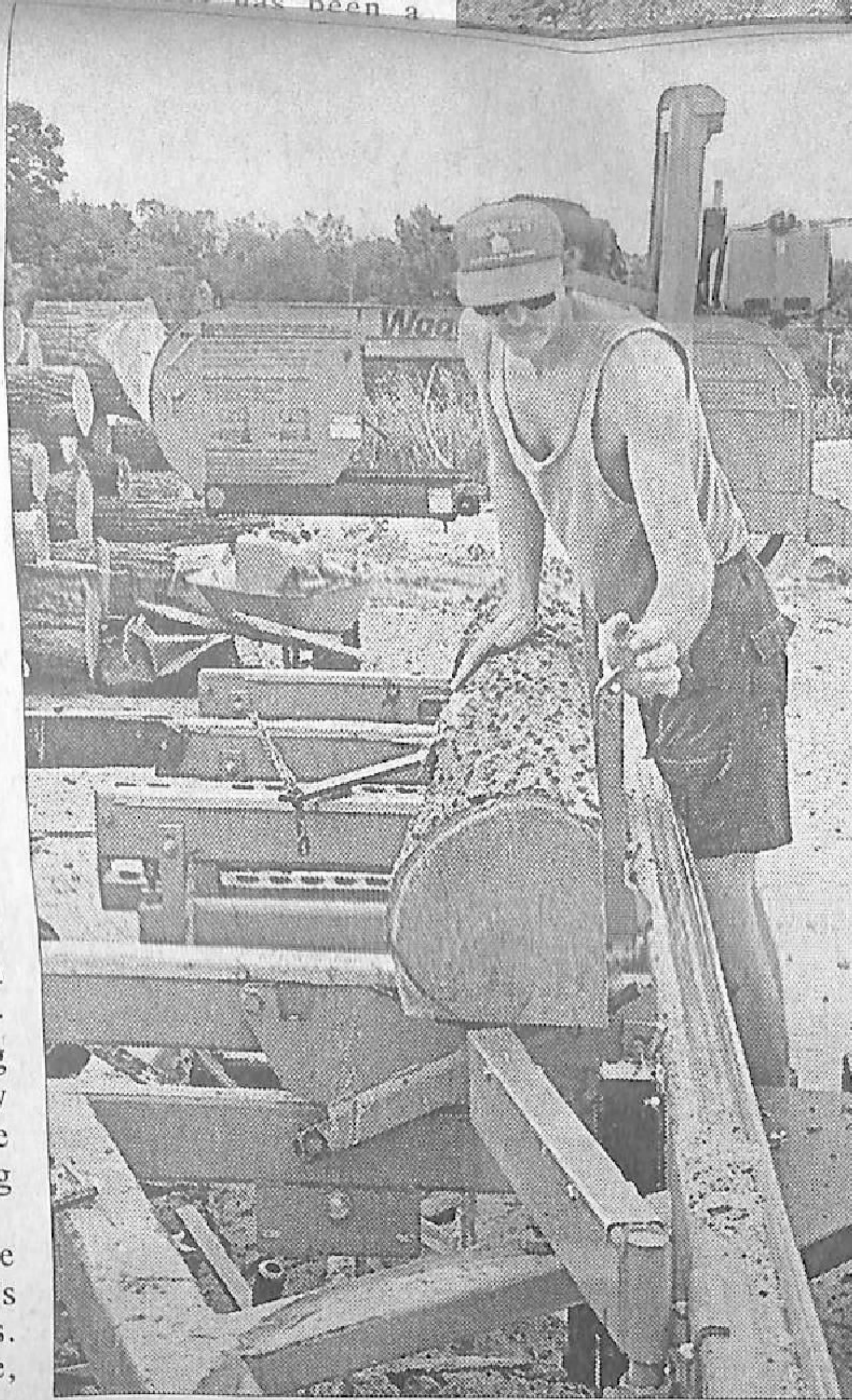
"I had what is now the shop area and the crafter's corner," Norm recalls. "Everything was in here, including the lumber."

They started out dealing with only two kinds of wood, oak and pine. Today, they have 21 different woods in stock, arrayed in labeled shelves, stacked carefully to prevent warping, sorted according to grade and potential use.

"Almost all of my wood is from Northumberland County," Norm is proud to claim. "Most of it comes from loggers I have come to know over time. It used to be I would inspect the logs or go to them. Norm, most just call me on the phone to tell me what they've got and they know what I want and I know I can depend on them."

In the first years, stocking 6,000 board feet seemed a large enterprise. Today, it is usual to have 60,000 board feet of the 21 different woods on hand.

"We will do everything for people, other than sanding or making windows," Norm laughs, the voice of nearly five decades of experience. "For example, if people just want us to plane a log, we will do that, or custom cut their lumber, even prefabricate cupboards



Story and photos by Mandy Martin

bonus for customers who come from as far away as Maryland in search of specialty woods, or for lumber requirements.

The raw logs come into the yard where they are sorted by size and variety. The firm has just moved to colour-coding the lumber varieties for the ease of reference. The skill of the band saw operator is critical to the operation. Keeping the heart of the log to the centre (never used in furniture building), the logs are trimmed, then cut in specific widths with an eye to minimizing any of the naturally-occurring "blemishes" such as knots.

The boards are stacked with specially placed spacers to prevent warping. Air drying to remove most of the moisture takes place outdoors. From there, the lumber moves into the heated and air circulated kilns.

"A computer-controlled kiln can cost \$50,000 and up," says Norm. "I built our

Above: At the end of another busy day at Specialty Lumber, left to right Trisha Davey and daughter Lacey, 2, Cathy and Norm O'Neill stand before a new shipment of logs for processing.

Left: Shane O'Neill carefully calculates getting the best cuts of wood from the bandsaw operation.

Below: Norm uses the moisture meter to test the moisture content of a board. Bins for 21 different types of wood are behind him.

Bottom right: The workshop area of the Specialty Lumber operation once contained the business that has expanded to include the entire building and yard of the old industrial plant in Colborne.

Bottom left: The Crafter's Corner offers assorted blocks and cuts of woods for use by carvers, woodburners and painters.



own using these old refrigeration units. When they eventually rust out, I go get another one and build the shelves and ventilation system myself. They're forced oil heated."

Once dried to between six and eight per cent moisture content, the lumber is moved inside for storage and display in labeled bins.

"Nothing is wasted," Cathy explains. "The bark from the logs is stacked off to one side for use as firewood. The sawdust is bagged up and local horse farmers and poultry farmers use it in their stables."

And the "short cuts" of boards, culled for knots or edges of bark, are kept. What the O'Neills have discovered is that what furniture builders and carpenters don't want, artisans and craftspeople are mad about.

One end of the inside storeroom displays unusual boards and shapes - "char-

