

Wood-Mizer Is All Grown Up

Pioneer in Thin-Kerf Horizontal Band Saws, Portable Mills Marks 20th 'Birthday'

Not many machinery companies are large enough and prosperous enough to rent facilities at the state fairgrounds for an anniversary party and hire entertainment for an evening like Larry Gatlin.

Wood-Mizer, whose company name has become synonymous with portable band sawmills, is in this category, however. After all, how many machinery companies have a museum dedicated to telling the story of its accomplishments?

Wood-Mizer hosted a 'birthday party' to celebrate its 20th anniversary earlier this summer. The event, which drew about 2,000 people, was held at the company's world headquarters in Indianapolis with a dinner and concert in the evening at the nearby Indiana State Fairgrounds.

And yes, the evening's music really was provided by Larry Gatlin, Family and Friends, and the company opened the Wood-Mizer Museum as part of its 20th anniversary celebration.

How far has Wood-Mizer come? From humble beginnings in Indiana, Wood-Mizer now proudly proclaims it is No. 1 in worldwide sawmill sales with over 30,000 of its portable sawmills in more than 100 countries. Wood-Mizer has



Wood-Mizer LT300 thin kerf head rig can saw both pallet and grade material.

manufacturing facilities in the U.S. and Europe. In North America alone, it has a network of 53 certified representatives to serve customers. The company's staff includes 38 engineers who are involved in design, manufacture and development.

Wood-Mizer was founded by Don Laskowski and Dan Tekulve. They formed a business in 1979 around a machine that could duplicate and form a three-dimensional object in wood or other materials. Dan built the machines

and Don marketed them. Together they developed a couple of other products before becoming more acquainted with the requirements of small woodcrafts and woodworking businesses. They sold their first Wood-Mizer portable band sawmill in 1982.

Businesses do not enjoy the level of success that a company like Wood-Mizer has experienced without talented managers. In Wood-Mizer's case, Don's contributions as president and chief executive did not go unnoticed. He was recognized by Inc. magazine in 1993 as one of its Entrepreneurs of the Year.

At the opening ceremony of the 20th anniversary event, Don thanked everyone who came and led the crowd in applauding Dan, whom he called "one of the best engineers I know." He also reminded the gathering of Wood-Mizer employees, customers and friends that "family is at the core of everything."

That commitment to family has exemplified Don's approach to both employees and customers: he has treated them like family. Wood-Mizer has made it a practice of paying competitive wages and providing excellent benefits for its employees. Its plants in Indiana have employee dining rooms where workers can enjoy a healthy breakfast or lunch at modest cost. For customers, the company's headquarters contains a com-



Wood-Mizer Multi-Head Resaw is available in one to six heads.



Sharpening a new blade at Wood-Mizer's plant in Indiana.

The result was a Wood-Mizer blade that could be re-sharpened and used repeatedly. As the company developed larger, more powerful sawmills that increased the demands for blade performance, Wood-Mizer took blade technology a step further, developing a process that increased the hardness of the teeth to that of tool steel. Steel was hardened to Wood-Mizer's specifications at the steel mill and then hardened again at Wood-Mizer's facilities after being manufactured into a blade: Wood-Mizer gave the name DoubleHard to its new line of blades.

Entrepreneurs are known for taking risks, of course, however calculated. In the early 1990s Don took Wood-Mizer in a new direction – industrial-level machinery for sawing logs and manufacturing lumber for the pallet industry. The company partnered with an Indiana sawmill and pallet company to develop a scragg mill system complete with a unique debarker, a multi-head band resaw system and material handling equipment. The scragg mill did not fully meet the expectations of the company, however; Wood-Mizer, in fairness to its

plete training center and theater for owners and operators of Wood-Mizer sawmills. Other services for customers include hands-on training in maintaining and sharpening blades, seminars and other training programs. The company has a toll-free line for ordering parts and six facilities throughout the U.S. that offer blade re-sharpening services.

The commitment to customers is reflected in the company's products themselves. Wood-Mizer, now led by Don's son Dan, president and chief operating officer, regularly devotes part of its operating budget to research and development for new and improved products. Its line of portable sawmills are known for their quality workmanship, reliability, durability, and strong warranties. In deed, its manufacturing operations resemble more an automotive assembly line than a typical machine manufacturing shop.

Wood-Mizer's product line includes a complete line of portable sawmills, from entry-level, manually-operated models to fully automated systems with complete hydraulics and high-tech features. The company's two founders were nothing less than pioneers in thin-kerf horizontal band saws, and the success of their portable sawmills spawned many entries to the market by other companies.

Blade technology has been an important part of Wood-Mizer's focus since

the beginning. As its sawmills quickly gained popularity, the company realized that better blades were required. It tested and evaluated blades that were available on the market, then decided to manufacture its own blade from a tougher steel.



Wood-Mizer president and CEO Dan Laskowski addresses 20th anniversary gathering.



Wood-Mizer founder Don Laskowski with Eugene Davis and wife, Cecile, who won an LT30 sawmill in drawing at anniversary event.

partner in the project, bought out the joint venture. (The partner later bought back all the Wood-Mizer equipment, replacing only the scragg mill, which Wood-Mizer did not develop further.)

Wood-Mizer continued to manufacture its Multi-Head band resaw, but Don discontinued the line of pallet equipment in 1995 to enable Wood-Mizer to concentrate fully on its core products of portable band sawmills, thin-kerf blades, and blade re-sharpening services.

In recent years Wood-Mizer has taken two important steps back into industrial markets. Due to customer demand, it began manufacturing its popular Multi-Head again in 2000. The company offers it in one-head to six-head systems and made a number of improvements to its resaw. An optional merry-go-round automates material handling and return of uncut cants to be resawn again.

In addition, Wood-Mizer introduced an industrial-level thin-kerf head rig last year. The Wood-Mizer LT300 is a step up from stationary versions of portable band mills, and the company views it as a safe, affordable alternative to circle sawmills. It was developed to fill a new niche in the sawmill industry — the niche between small, thin-kerf band mills and high-volume, industrial sawmill machinery. The Wood-Mizer LT300 can saw both grade and pallet lumber at industrial production levels. It

can enable pallet manufacturers and other businesses to develop a cost-effective, steady supply of lumber for their operations.

Wood-Mizer developed an improved, three-fold blade technology for the LT300. The blade is made of fine grade steels, the guides incorporate ceramics, and the LT300 uses specialized lubricants.

The LT300 has been well received in the marketplace, according to Wood-Mizer. The sawmill has been on the market a little over 18 months, and the company has sold units throughout the U.S., Canada, Mexico, South America and New Zealand. The LT300 has been sold to customers who upgraded from an existing Wood-Mizer sawmill, others who installed complete LT300 systems in new facilities, and some who replaced circle sawmills. Some customers replaced their entire sawmill equipment with a Wood-Mizer LT300 system. Wood-Mizer has some customers who purchased two of the sawmills and run all their lumber through one handling system.

Some customers use the LT300 to saw hardwood lumber for grade, railroad ties or dimensional parts for furniture. Others are sawing softwood for dimensional purposes, using the LT300 for primary breakdown and a multi-head system for secondary breakdown to manufacture

material for fencing, pallets and construction.

Wood-Mizer is also able to provide ‘one-stop’ shopping for other machinery and equipment, including log decks, board transfer decks and conveyors.

Wood-Mizer manufactures a number of other types of equipment and supplies, including a complete line of accessories for its portable sawmills. The company’s twin-blade edger allows rapid edging of flitches generated by a portable sawmill; it is available in three power packages and with an optional trailer package. Sawmill accessories include a lubricating system and lubricant, centralized controls, debarker, automated networks, auto clutch, bed extensions, equipment to allow milling of shingles and siding and resawing, blade sharpening and tooth setting equipment, and more. Wood-Mizer also distributes moulders and dry kilns.

The 20th anniversary event was a tribute to Wood-Mizer’s customers. Don decided it was only fitting that he give a proper “thank you” to them for making Wood-Mizer a success. The event featured a patriotic opening ceremony and a day full of activities. Every sawmill model in the Wood-Mizer line was up and running. Guests attended seminars and forums on how to increase the value of lumber, site layout, and making a lumber business grow to its full potential. Vendor booths added to the event’s trade show atmosphere. Wood-Mizer even sponsored a supervised carnival for children so parents could spend time at exhibits and tour the Wood-Mizer facility, including the new museum.

The event also reunited Wood-Mizer and its very first customer and portable sawmill. In the few years prior to the 20th anniversary celebration, Don offered to buy back the original portable sawmill from Joe Bistrovich of New York. Joe declined until Don offered him a new Wood-Mizer hydraulic mill. The first sawmill now is a centerpiece of the Wood-Mizer museum. Incidentally, Joe, now 88, made his first trip out of the Eastern time zone to attend Wood-Mizer’s 20th anniversary celebration.

For more information about Wood-Mizer or its products, call (800) 553-0182, fax (317) 273-7024, e-mail woodmizer@woodmizer.com, or visit the Web site at www.woodmizer.com. ■