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Forest Products Success Stories

Published on: May. 27, 2010

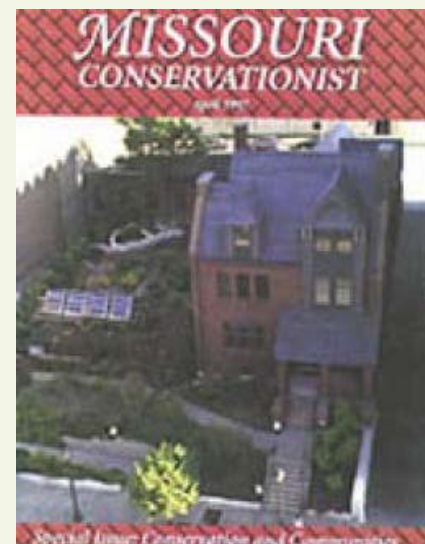
Written by Shelby Jones

Missouri communities are home to a number of companies that mill and process native timber.

Missouri's present wood industry has literally "grown up" since the Depression years of the 1930s. Virtually none of the big timber companies, or little ones for that matter, that came to Missouri to harvest trees about the turn of the century are represented here today. When the big pine was depleted, almost all the big companies relocated to other areas of the country.

Many of the smaller, family owned businesses that stayed to harvest and process the remaining hardwood timber, didn't last long either. Lumbering was an extremely hard life during the first 30 years of this century and most people who got a taste of it eventually found something easier.

During the war years of the 1940s, markets for wood products, both hardwood and softwood, flourished. The potential to make a good living, even if the work was hard, attracted energetic individuals to sawmilling and other forms of wood processing. These were native Missourians for the most part and, while exploitation of the local forests may have been tempting, these folks generally wanted to stay in the local area and raise their families.



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The "cut out and get out" philosophy of an earlier time was not predominant. This era was the beginning of many of our wood processing companies who still do business here today.

Of course, not all companies survived. For example, in 1946 there were over 2,500 sawmills in the state. Today there are about 400. Survival of the fittest is a natural law that applies to wood products companies, too. While many of the family-owned businesses have gotten bigger and process more wood than when they started, the usage has generally remained proportional to the forest resource within their reach.

In many areas of the state there is more forest acreage and volume of timber today than in the 1930s. In contrast to the extensive overcutting of timber at the turn of the century, sustainable use since that period has allowed the forests to rebuild and replenish. A dependable supply of raw material contributes to the success of every wood-using company in the state.

Here are accounts of a couple of successful wood products companies. They and scores of other wood processing industries have enjoyed a mutually beneficial partnership for the last 60 years with thousands of private forest owners.

Marvin F. "Tommy" Petzoldt formed K&P Timber Company in 1937

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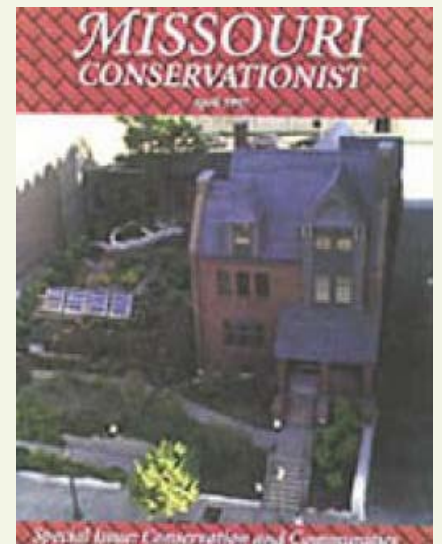
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with four other partners. He was familiar with the timber business from working with his father, who bought stave bolts for a stave mill in Jackson.

K&P Timber Company produced railroad ties and construction lumber with a portable sawmill until 1944, when the company established a permanent mill on the present site in Frohna, a small town in eastern Perry County. The East Perry Lumber Company has grown into one of the largest hardwood lumber manufacturers in the Midwest under the ownership of the Petzoldt family.

East Perry is well known for its high quality hardwood lumber, and they have also maintained close ties with customers in Europe and other regions of the world for many years. They added dry kilns to their processing capabilities in 1962, and in the early 1970s they pioneered the use of waste products into such products as cattle feed, fuel pellets, lab litter for research animals, horticultural mulch and chips for paper production.

Tommy's two sons worked in the business as they were growing up and now form the management team. Marvin Petzoldt currently serves as president and is primarily responsible for timberland management and resource procurement. Stan Petzoldt is chairman of the board and has responsibility for sales, mill production and inventory. Both are hands-on managers who deal directly with employees and production decisions daily.



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Stan Petzoldt of East Perry Lumber company credits some of his company's success to a good business climate in Missouri. He also says the state produces some of the finest oak available anywhere. "Hard work, hiring good workers and treating them fairly – that's a big factor," Petzoldt says. "It's important to stay focused," he adds. "We do what we do best – selling hardwood lumber – and we try to do it better all of the time."

East Perry has 80 full-time and 20 part-time employees who produce about 12 million board feet of hardwood lumber each year. Their economic impact in Perry County is significant. They sponsor many community events, such as ball teams and fund raising for local volunteer fire departments. Classes from four different universities are invited to study the company's forest management practices, wood processing technology and issues facing the industry.

Most of the logs processed by the company are harvested from privately owned land, so the logging crews use techniques and equipment that minimize impact on each site. For example, following harvesting, they build erosion control structures wherever

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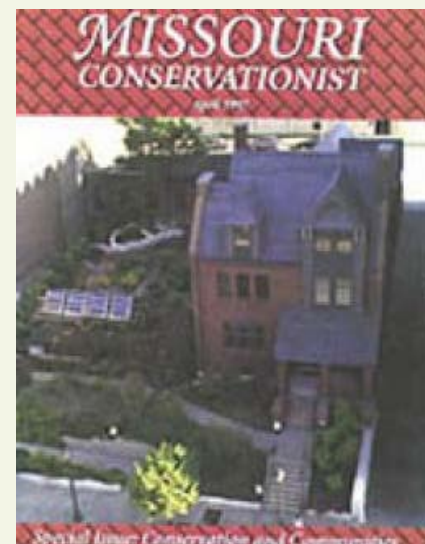
they are needed, and both skid trails and log decks are seeded with permanent vegetative cover for wildlife habitat and to improve overall appearance.

This spring a technologically advanced sawmill will replace the current mill to increase efficiency and production, as well as provide additional safety for employees. It is an investment in the future, which will no doubt include the fourth generation of the Petzoldt family.

In the 1920s, Jack Smith was a logger and tie hacker in southern Missouri. He eventually worked with Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps. He never owned a sawmill, but his connection with the Ozark forests was an influence on his son, Viandel V. Smith who, with Ralph Padgett, started a flooring mill in 1946 to take advantage of the home construction boom following World War II.

Smith bought out his partner in 1960 and continued to expand his hardwood flooring business at its current site on Highway 60 near Mountain View. He also started accumulating a land base, much of which is located adjacent to the upper Jacks Fork River. The flooring plant didn't include a sawmill, but bought cants and lumber from other sawmills in the area. (Cants are large timbers that can be resawn into boards.)

The flooring plant was somewhat unique in that it produced its own electricity with a wood-



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fueled boiler and steam generator. For efficiency it used a large band saw to resaw lumber and cants to the proper thickness for flooring stock. Bandsaws were not common in the Ozarks at that time. Wood was dried in kilns heated by burning the scrap from both the resaw and flooring operations. There was hardly any waste from the entire operation. Efficiency remains a top priority of the company today.

The third generation of Smiths officially took over the operation in 1975 when sons Van and Jon bought the business. Van currently serves as president and Jon is vice-president. They have continued to add new wood processing technology for efficiency, employee safety and minimal environmental impacts over the years. A modern wood waste fuel boiler system provides heat energy for drying 15–20 million board feet of lumber annually and, by means of a steam turbine, cogenerates much of the electrical energy needed to operate the flooring plant.

Van Smith says his company sells flooring from Long Island to Seattle. "We owe our success to the fact that a lot of people favor Missouri products. We grow the finest oak available. Our trees are slower growing and we have minerals in the soil that give the wood its color and uniqueness."

The company employs about 125 people to manufacture strip oak flooring from both red oak and white oak, generating over 10 million dollars for the local economy. They operate manufacturing facilities in both Winona and Mountain View, in addition to a retail store in Springfield. Their flooring is in homes and businesses throughout the country.

Smith Flooring is known for its support of the local communities. Jon Smith spoke with pride about their involvement in a program called Partners In Education. "We assist with fulfilling special needs of local schools, and the students help us in our community outreach efforts. For example, students have designed and distributed fire prevention posters and help with tree planting on public property," Jon says.

Smith Flooring also actively promotes good resource management. Their 14,000 acres of land has been in the American Tree Farm Program for nearly 35 years. Annually they plant about 30,000 trees and apply timber stand improvement practices where they are needed. Several bank stabilization projects were completed in cooperation with the Conservation Department on the upper Jacks Fork River.

The history and future of Ozark forests and rivers are important to Smith Flooring Company, and they wish to continue the rich legacy that provides their company its raw material and people. Jon was recently elected a Trustee of the Missouri Forest Heritage Center, a future visitor center and demonstration area near Winona.

"We are supporting the Center," Jon said, "because our company has been part of the forest heritage for 50 years, and we would like to help continue that story for another 50."

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