

THE NEXT GENERATION

Elmsdale Lumber succession continues family tradition

BY
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The forest products sector is unlike many other industries in Canada. You'll often hear from those active in the sector that sawdust is pumped into their veins at an early age. Growing up in the bush or around a mill is common for the younger generation of workers, who often were half-raised in their parents' pick-ups, spending time with them as they worked the mills or logged the forests – and their parents were often raised in a similar fashion. Simply put: the forest products sector is very much a family affair.

A prime example of this can be found at the Elmsdale Lumber Company (ELCO) in Elmsdale, N.S., where the company recently completed the successful succession of the fourth-generation, family-run mill to its current president, Mark

Wilber. Mark recently took over the role from his father, Robin, who ran the company from 1976 until April 5, 2025. Robin continues to hold an active role as Chairman of the company and is regularly on site to continue to share his decades of experience with his son.

THE BEGINNING

ELCO's roots date back to 1917 when Walter Wilber began producing lumber in Elmsdale to ship to the U.K. to supply Canada's key ally in the First World War.

His son, James Wilber, joined the family business at a young age, learning the family business. James ended up taking a job with Charlie McCulloch purchasing lumber from various small mills across the province to supply the U.K. during The Second World War. After the war ended, the Wilber family continued to purchase lumber from the many other small mills operating with a focus on supplying the U.K., as there was not a strong domestic demand in Atlantic Canada for the lumber being produced there.

"These small mills were run by mechanics, people who knew how to run a mill. But they had no sales expertise, and to get a contract in Britain, you had to go there, we didn't have internet," Robin explains. "Dad was a business guy who grew up in the lumber business. And so, he travelled to England and got good contracts, and then he had to buy lumber from a lot of these smaller mills."

Back then, a licensed grader was required to place a British stamp on the lumber.

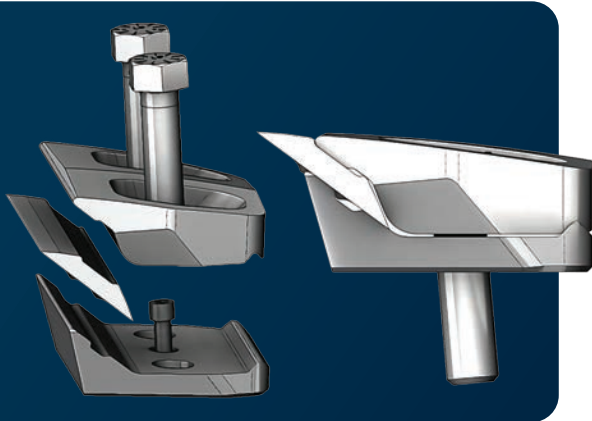
"You had to be trained on what the British requirements were. You had to go to the Maritime Lumber Bureau in Amherst to take a three-week course," Robin explains. "We had graders, so we would buy lumber from all kinds of mills and bring it into Elmsdale, grade it, and package it. The



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To solve a bottleneck in their planer mill, ELCO decided to purchase a new Gilbert S-Series planer earlier this year.

small sawmills didn't realize that the British wanted a nice, neat package with the straps

put on straight – it says something about your product. Dad knew that. He toured the mills

and saw what he was competing with and trained our guys to do it right. So, we became known as a U.K. mill.”

In 1950, James and his friend, Fred Miller, purchased the sawmill for \$25,000 from his father and incorporated Elmsdale Lumber Company. Miller ended up selling his 50-per-cent stake in ELCO to Luther Anderson in 1960, which was then purchased by Robin in 1976, making ELCO 100-per-cent owned by the Wilber family.

In 1990, ELCO produced 9.6 million board feet of lumber using two sawmills. Under Robin's leadership, the company grew to producing approximately 30 million board feet of lumber on a single shift, five days a week with 50 full-time employees.

Mark is ready to take the reins of the family business. He holds a lumber grading certificate from the Maritime Lumber Bureau and embraces the adoption of modern sawmill technologies to enhance

efficiencies. Mark is extremely active in Atlantic Canada's forest products sector offering his service to the Maritime Lumber Bureau as a member of the Quality Control Committee; the president of Forestry Safety Nova Scotia; and as a member of Forest Nova Scotia.

“Elmsdale Lumber is all I have ever done, and I've been around the mill since long before I was legal age to work. This is my passion; therefore, making the transition mostly seamless. I couldn't picture myself ever doing anything else, as I also have sawdust in my blood,” Mark says.

While he is settling into his new role as president, a fifth generation of the Wilber family is already active in the family business.

“My 19-year-old grandson is taking business administration at Nova Scotia Community College. He just started his second year, and he's been with us for four summers working in the mill,” Robin says. “We've moved him around as much as we could so he could get some experience. He's got a real interest in it, so that's a good thing. Maybe we've got number five coming – and I might live long enough to see it.”

MILL OPTIMIZATION

Over the mill's 108 years of operation, it has undergone many transformations. Over the past six years, ELCO's operations have undergone significant upgrades.

“We knew we needed to do some modernization. Stuff was getting old and worn out, and everything we were doing was manual,” Mark explains. “We had a lot of manual labour in the mill. Everything had to be manually positioned, even our two-face cants had to be

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manually positioned, lined up with lasers showing where the saws were going to cut.”

When putting together their plan for upgrading the mill, ELCO had three focuses: to modernize equipment to improve recovery; to replace worn out equipment; and reduce the manual labour required.

“We’ve successfully done all three,” Mark says.

The investments started with the replacement of the wooden building housing the mill, which was decided quickly out of necessity when the company was notified by their insurance company that it was no longer insuring sawmills anywhere around the world. In 2020, ELCO decided they needed to remove the old combustible building so they could find another company willing to insure them.

“At the same time, COVID happened and the lumber markets went wild. The money was rolling in so we very quickly started planning what we were going to do for equipment, booking production slots with machinery companies and told them what we needed. It was kind of a



ELCO recently invested in a new Hurst Boiler, which has reduced fuel usage and improved the control of heat to the dry kilns.

perfect storm that enabled us to do what we’ve done,” Mark says.

One of the first major projects undertaken in the past six years was the installation of a new board edger, curve saw and gang saw designed and built by McDonough Manufacturing, which had

purchased Fredericton, N.B.-based Valley Machine Works a few years earlier.

“We had a Valley machine combination board and gang edger in the mill from 1995 up to six years ago. We loved that design and way of sawing, so McDonough stayed with the type of equipment that Valley was doing, and we went with them for the board edger,” Mark explains.

While ELCO did get quotes from multiple suppliers, their previous positive experience with Valley equipment and McDonough’s close proximity to the mill for servicing, made them the right fit, he adds.

“Previous to that, we put in an optimized drop saw trimmer made by TS Manufacturing in Lindsay, Ontario, and a bin sorter, so we were ready for it. We put the board edger in, continued to run our old gang, got the board edger perfected, then we shut down last January for 32 days and completely tore out everything in the mill from the halfway point out. It was a blank slate. Then 32 days later, we were starting up our new gang saw. What a massive difference,” Mark says.

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(L to R): ELCO president Mark Wilber; fifth generation of the Wilber family working the mill, Ty Campbell; and Chairman Robin Wilber.

Once the new board and gang edger were running smoothly, ELCO quickly identified its next bottleneck. Prior to the new equipment being installed, staff were manually positioning the board edger resulting in a tremendous amount of 1'x3's and 1'x4's that weren't being captured, all ending up in chips. When the Northern Pulp mill in Abercrombie shut down, shipping the chips out was no longer an option.

"They were our biggest customer. They took all of our residuals – bark for their biomass energy facility and our sawdust. When they left, it was a huge hit to us. The selling price for our bi-products dropped to approximately a third of what Northern Pulp paid. For the volume we had, that was a massive hit," Mark says.

When the board edger came along, chip production went down, but they started recovering all the 1'x3's and 1'x4's. The mill's old planer required a significant amount of manual labour due to smaller pieces like 1'x3's and 1'x4's having difficulty getting processed, creating jams and bottlenecks in production.

"We had an older push-type planer,

where a piece in the planer had to be pushed through by the next piece coming in on the infeed, and the little pieces – 1'x3's and 1'x4's – would overlap and go into the machine and break. If we got 30,000 board feet of 1'x3' through our planer in a day, we were doing pretty good. With our maintenance staff over there tearing their hair out, it was down more than it was up. So, we had to buy a new planer and a new infeed for the planer mill," Mark explains.

To solve this new bottleneck, ELCO decided to purchase a new Gilbert S-Series planer fed by a new TS Manufacturing and DO2 infeed system. Gilbert and ELCO have enjoyed a strong partnership for many years.

"Five years ago, Gilbert enhanced Elmsdale's old planer by adding an automatic cutting-tool positioning system and an upgraded feed table to improve its safety and efficiency. These components were recovered and incorporated into the recent modernization project," says Sylvain Lefebvre, senior sales engineer for Gilbert.

ELCO's planer mill produces an impressive number of products ranging from

1'x3's to 6'x6's, including custom specialty items.

"What truly drives Elmsdale is flexibility, fast changeovers, and exceptional wood quality," Lefebvre says. "To meet those goals, they chose the Gilbert S-Series planer, featuring advanced automation, a high knife count, and precision control. The result: a flawless finish, optimized production, and safer operation — all backed by Gilbert's proven expertise."

The Gilbert system is almost entirely automated, which is a huge help since it has become increasingly difficult to find people willing to work positions requiring heavy physical labour.

It only took two weeks to remove the old planer and swap in the Gilbert S-Series planer. To prepare for the installation of the new planer, ELCO tore down the old room housing its planer operations while continuing business as usual.

For its drying operations, ELCO also recently upgraded its boiler system a few years ago installing a new Hurst Boiler as part of an upgrade to the company's kiln.

"The new boiler has reduced fuel usage and improved the control of heat to our dry kilns. Thus, improving the quality of our drying. It has also improved the lives of the boiler operators by way of the newer technology managing much of the work previously done by the operators," Mark says.

FIBRE SUPPLY

Fibre supply has been challenging for ELCO since the loss of the Northern Pulp mill in 2020. Many small woodlot owners are interested in having their timber harvested, but much of the wood is low grade that would normally be destined for the pulp mill.

"So, if I harvest their land now, 50 per cent of the wood on that land they're not going to get paid for. So now they're anxiously waiting for a new pulp mill to be built," Robin says, which would be a difficult feat as new pulp mills are in short supply across Canada. "It's hard to convince people to put their land into management and harvest it. We desperately need a pulp mill. It takes lower quality wood that's 50 per cent of the wood on the ground. That makes the harvesting worthwhile. It makes everything worthwhile."