"quick," "willing," "prompt" and "ready" in Italian. And those four words pretty much sum up Jamie Coleman, and this family-owned and operated business. He and his parents Robert and Sandy have been quick, willing, prompt and ready to respond to a unique niche in the timber business, namely a need for low-moisture, high-quality, furniture-grade hardwood in an overseas market. It's not just Italy they're selling to, it's China too.

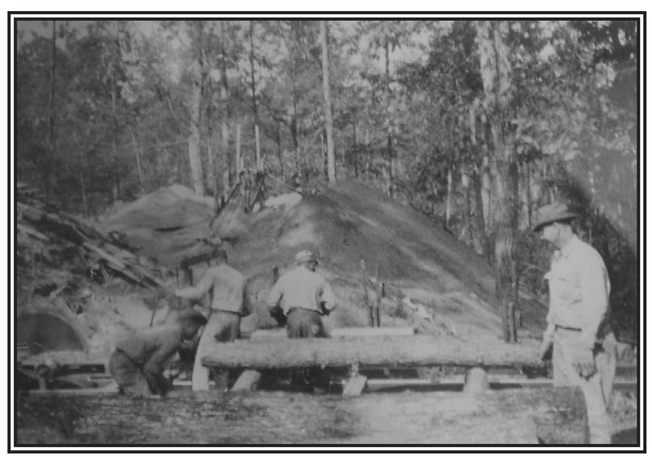
"Our major markets have been furniture and furniture-related: hardwood floors, molding," explains Jamie's dad, Robert S. Coleman from a cozy leather chair in his second floor office on Everona Road. The trend in the timber business, as in most businesses, is to specialize. "In the manufacturing business you can't be a general practitioner because you'll be not too good at anything if you try to be everything." He pauses a beat to make a point. "We've tried to move with the times…as furniture manufacturing has moved out of the country, we've had to change our markets."

And he has had to change his sources too. In fact, this, the largest lumber mill in Orange County, doesn't tap many Orange County sources anymore. Their territory stretches out in a 125-mile radius from the local base. Robert Coleman, who buys the standing timber ("There's not a back road in a dozen or so counties that I haven't been on,") currently has contract loggers working in Rappahannock and King George counties. He's even gone as far as the outskirts of Williamsburg to find product.

It used to be all local. Back in the 1940s, his father, Robert Coleman, Sr., started with a portable saw mill. Back in those days, there were dozens of these outfits scattered about the countryside. They'd set up in a tract of timber, fell and saw, and move on. "Everything was made out of wood then," says Robert. "Wood was your major (building material), much more so than steel. Plastic wasn't heard of. Everything was solid wood at that time, other than rock or brick."

The problem with portable mills was they were wasteful, and sometimes they were dangerous.

Above, the R.S. Coleman Lumber Company has been located on this tract since 1960. The buildings in the top half of the photo house the saw mill. The buildings in the bottom half include the sawdust fired boiler, drying kiln, and storage sheds for the finished product. Note that trees buffer the entire operation. Below, taken back in the 1940s, this photo shows Robert Coleman senior (right) supervising workers at a portable saw mill out in the woods. Note the pile of sawdust in the background.
Contributed photo



Robert Coleman, Sr. changed over to a stationary mill in 1960. "We were going through a recession at that time, and there wasn't any money to be made," explains Robert, who had already been working out in the timber tracts since high school. "So we moved the mill home."

And that's where it's been ever since, steadily improving efficiency and yield from 3 million board feet per year in the 1960s to 11 million board feet and 30 employees today. "To enable you to get the higher yields, everything has to be stationary; everything's got to be pretty precise," explains Robert. The bonus is, there's no waste. *(See Everything But the Oink, inside)*

Robert's son, Jamie has followed in his dad's footsteps, starting out when he was at OCHS and during summers when he attended Longwood College on a wrestling scholarship. In 1996 Jamie graduated with a degree, not in forestry but in business management. Good thing too because, while his father buys the timber, Jamie runs the saw mill operation and markets the product from Venice to Shanghai. "We sell a lot into the China market, which in return makes a lot of furniture or furniture components that are shipped back to America and assembled," he explains.

The wood that goes to Italy, however, stays there. The fact that Italian furniture makers seek out R.S. Coleman Lumber Company's product is a glowing testimonial to not just the quality of the raw product, but to the finished lumber that comes out of the drying kilns in Unionville.

On the marketing end, Jamie has had to tread carefully. "Dealing with the Italians is a tricky thing," he says with a good-natured grin. "When the dollar is low and the euro is high, they're getting a heck of a bargain. So you'd think you'd be getting a lot more money for it. But it doesn't work that way with them. Let the roles reverse where the euro is weak to the dollar, they'll let you know 'oh we can't pay you because it's so weak.' But we can't throw that back to them. They don't look at it two ways; it's a one-way street for them."

Still, he adds, he has cultivated a good business relationship with the lumber broker in Italy. "It's very interesting to talk and deal with the Italians because they live a totally different lifestyle than we do as Americans. They're real blunt and don't care what they say. They're different."

Jamie is about to find out just how different they are. Within the next two months he will fly to Venice, Italy and meet this lumber broker face to face, and he will be introduced to some of the broker's customers in person.

And by the looks of it, Jamie will be quick, willing, ready and prompt for the experience...in a word, "Pronto."

PRONTO:

Quick, Willing, Prompt and Ready

Jamie Coleman knows one word of Italian: "Pronto." It means "Hello." That's what his lumber broker, somewhere near Venice, says when he answers the phone: "Pronto." However, as soon as the broker realizes it's Jamie on the line, they switch to English. Like we said, Jamie only knows one word of Italian.

So why is Jamie Coleman of Unionville calling this guy in Italy? The answer, in a nutshell, is to talk business. It would seem that the R.S. Coleman family enterprise has something that the Italian wants: wood, more specifically poplar wood, and around here, the poplar wood is the best in the world. "The Central Virginia area towards Maryland has the best poplar in the world for its color," explains Jamie. And that color is basically light beige, almost white.

"The Italians are very good at staining lumber to make it look like a different species," he continues. That's why they like the poplar wood from Virginia; it's not as green as what you find further south. And that means they can stain this relatively light, easy-to-work, straight-grained and fast-growing hardwood to look like just about any other hardwood, such as cherry or walnut, for example. And then they make beautiful furniture from it…and interior doors…and window moldings…and baseboard.

Pronto also means

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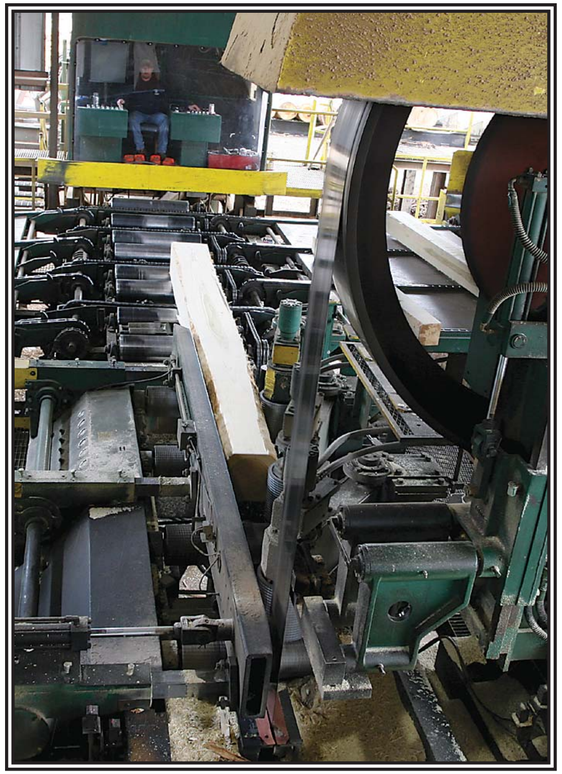
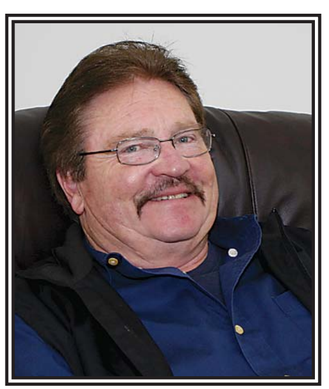


Above, after the head rig turns a round log into a square one, it is shunted to the line bar re-saw in the foreground, which transforms it into planks. Note the saw operator in the booth at the top of the photo. Below, R.S. Coleman Lumber is a family affair. Sandy Coleman works in the sawmill office, Robert buys the timber tracts, and their son Jamie runs the sawmill operation and markets the wood. Note the hardwood mulch pile in the background.
Photos by Susie Audibert



INSIDER

By Phil Audibert

April 3, 2008

Orange County Review INSIDER, April 3, 2008

Bad Rap

Some years ago, Robert S. Coleman did a job for a landowner that involved clear-cutting a 300-foot swath in the front to make way for a four-lane highway and selectively cutting the back part of the property. As far as the front of the property was concerned, "It looked like a bomb hit it practically."

But the highway was coming anyway. So, the landowner needed to get what he could for it. He was pleased with the job Robert did and even recommended him to his neighbor. But as soon as the neighbor's wife saw the clear cut, she refused to allow him to cut a single tree. "You're not going to cut mine,' she reportedly said; 'it looks awful.' And I could tell her anything I wanted to; it wouldn't make any difference," he says shaking his head resignedly.

It's hard to put a positive spin on a clear cut, even if it is inevitable. It does look like a bomb hit, and that's just the way it is. "The industry has had a bad rap because of communications with the public," says Robert, who would like to see that "bad rap" changed.

"The forest industry is one of the few industries that's really doing a renewable green product. It's a renewable product that doesn't take a lot of energy to make. It's not like plastic or steel." He suggests that Al Gore "be a spokesman for the wood industry instead of an adversary. People go by and see steel studs in a house or in a commercial building and say, 'that's good, we're not cutting a tree.' But look what it takes to make that steel." Besides, he adds, "a tree will grow back. We've got more trees in Virginia today than we had in say, the '30s."

The quickest turnaround time Robert has ever seen on a stand of timber is 12 years, "if it's in fast growing good soil and it's cut properly and if it's multi-aged stands." On the opposite end of the spectrum, he's seen some tracts that take 50 and 60 years to grow back. "There are a lot of misconceptions. There are some pieces of timber that should be clear-cut, because every tree is the same age." But, he hastens to point out, they're not all the same size.

"Trees are like people. It's like little people and big people. You can go in and take out the big trees and those little ones aren't going to get any bigger. So in those particular cases, if you want to do the right thing for the forestry, you cut the whole thing and let it come back and regenerate on its own."

On Sunday nights on the History Channel, there's a program called Ax Men, done by the same people who produced Ice Road Truckers. Ax Men is about logging in the Pacific Northwest. "A lot of that is pretty much staged and it's made to look bad…it's sensationalism, and it's dangerous," snorts Robert indignantly. "They tried to portray it as trashy as they could." And, as he sees it, that's doing nothing to improve the logging industry image.

On a recent episode, these loggers were racing against an approaching coastal storm that was packing hurricane force winds. "Who is going out to log in high winds?" queries Robert. "If you've got a day with high winds, loggers in this area aren't going out to cut trees. They're not going to do it." Besides, he challenges, "If the industry was like that, how many of them would get insurance? How long would it keep on operating?"

At the R.S. Lumber Company, the work is noisy, hot in summer, cold in winter, and you better be paying full attention around all that moving machinery. But the yard is neat as a pin and the mill is shut down every Friday for maintenance and repair. A surveillance system has been installed throughout, not just for security reasons, but "for insurance reasons, for work habits, to know what's going on, and it improves efficiency a little bit; people know they're being watched," says Robert.

Robert surveys the astoundingly clean, neat and safe yard and mill. "We haven't had any accidents, any lost time accidents hardly since I don't know when," he says proudly. "A logging operation or whatever has got to run a relatively safe operation. You can't stay in business getting people hurt and having a dangerous operation."

1 The process of turning logs into furniture starts here in the yard.

Photos by Susie Audibert

2 A loader picks them up and delivers them to the de-barker.

3 The de-barker does its job and sends the bark to the mulch pile.

Everything but the oink

You've heard the expression that at a hog killing you use "everything but the oink." At the R.S. Coleman Lumber Company mill in Unionville, it's the same thing; nothing goes to waste.

Coleman Lumber deals primarily in poplar and oak, with some maple, cherry, hickory and ash thrown in. If we were to follow a poplar tree from Virginia to an Italian furniture maker, we would need to start out in the woods someplace. And that's Robert S. Coleman's specialty: using a scientific formula to size up timber and make a competitive bid or offer to the landowner that will still leave some margin of profit for the company when the finished product leaves Norfolk on a container ship.

There are many different motivations for landowners to sell timber: some need cash, some plan to turn the tract into housing (called a "real estate cut"), some want to clear land for pasture, some want to selectively cut so that smaller trees will be left to grow further and be cut years from now, some want to clear cut and replant from scratch, and some landowners need an education. Robert prefers to deal with the educated ones. "It's easier to deal with someone who knows what they have."

If it is a selective cut, contract loggers will come in and carefully fell only marked trees, usually 16 to 18 inches in diameter breast high (measured 4-1/2 feet from ground level because tree butts are usually fatter at the base before tapering to the main shaft). Obviously selective cutting is more expensive and time consuming than clear cutting, which can be done almost entirely with machines. (See Insider, June 1, 2006)

The loggers then truck the felled trees to the Unionville yard where they are measured, graded and sorted by species into neat racks. A giant articulated loader grabs logs from the yard and feeds them to the de-barker. The bark is shunted off to a rapidly growing mulch pile.

This mulch is special stuff, and homeowners and landscaping companies are lining up for it, particularly now that winter has broken. The reason it is special is that it is pure hardwood bark; no pine, no chipped branches, no twigs, no ground-up stumps or roots, just bark.

The only problem with a mulch pile is it needs to be moved around; otherwise it builds up heat. "It will start making methane gas, and if you have a spark out here with methane gas all of a sudden the whole pile will light up," says Robert, who experienced just that on Father's Day three years ago. He and Jamie and the fire department stayed up most of the night moving, spreading and dousing small piles of smoldering mulch. So much for Father's Day.

Anyway, back to our poplar log. It is sent to a computerized 40-foot-long giant band saw called a head rig that takes a round log and turns it into a square one, "basically squaring it up, getting four good sides, and then kick it over to that line bar re-saw, where it keeps going in a circle," says Jamie. "Going in a circle," means the log is repeatedly sawn into planks that are shunted off to be sorted and graded. Often times what's left is a 3-1/2 X 6 inch "cant" of green heartwood that ironically, the Italians don't want. These sturdy timbers will be used to make pallets. Funny, usually heartwood is the most desirable part of the tree.

The saw blades are a story of their own. These giant 40-foot long, one-foot wide closed loop band saws are changed out every four hours to be sharpened and maintained. That's Frankie Feldman's job. After sharpening the saws, he puts them on a computerized leveling machine that makes the blades flat to 1/1000th of an inch. Flat blades make for clean cuts. He says a typical saw blade will last two years and will wear down two inches!

Frankie points to his biggest enemy…metal embedded in the wood: nails, spikes, barbed wire, metal fence posts, even deer stands. He produces a hand-forged spike that used to be part of a horse-drawn A-frame tooth harrow that claimed the life of one of the blades.

Back to the Rube Goldberg-like complex of conveyer belts, flippers, slides, rolling chains and whirring saws that is the production line at R.S. Coleman Lumber… underneath it all is another entire system that deals with the waste. Bark is shunted to the mulch pile. Round-sided slabs from the head saw are chipped, screened and blown into waiting trailers, and the saw dust goes to species-specific piles.

The chips in the waiting trailers are destined for the pulp mill, and because they are hardwood, they will likely become high-quality slick paper. Newsprint, such as what you are holding and reading right now, is made from pine. The sawdust has its own special purpose; it fuels the boilers that heat the drying kilns. The preferred species is oak. The rest is sold to area farmers for bedding. So, it really is "everything but the oink."

Back again to our poplar log; it has been "rough" sawn into planks of varying thicknesses and lengths. Thickness is measured in quarters of an inch. Four quarter is one inch; eight quarter is two inches, and so on. And, by the way, these planks are truly two inches thick, not like finished lumber which has been planed down about a quarter inch. Even though it still calls itself a two by four, it's not. But you already knew that.

Anyway, this rough-sawn lumber is stacked on thin sticks to allow for air circulation and set out to dry, both in the open and in sheds with fans for as much as two weeks. Then it is sent to the kilns, where as much moisture as possible is wrung out, so that when it exits from this 160-degree environment three days later, it contains only 6 percent moisture.

That's dry. Finished kiln-dried building material-that two by four we were talking about-still contains as much as 20 percent moisture. The idea behind having such dry wood is that it won't move…as in shrink or expand, which can be a problem for a furniture joiner. Coleman father and son both point out that lumber dried to 6 percent moisture will actually gain moisture if stored outside in a shed in Virginia depending on the season and humidity.

The final step is the blue paint. Just before the dried, racked, stacked and banded planks that are destined to become somebody's chair in Milan or somebody's molding in Rome or someone else's bedside table in East Lansing; just before they are put in the container that will be trucked to Norfolk, and loaded onto a slow boat to China or another one to Venice, the ends of the planks are painted blue. Why? We have no idea. "There's no reason," says Jamie, shrugging cluelessly; "the Italians want it for appearance."

Hey, if blue ends are what they want, blue ends are what they get.

4 As a worker operates a laser-sighted saw, unused slabs are dumped below to a conveyor belt that will take them to a chipper. The chips eventually will be shipped to a pulp mill to become paper.

5 Forty feet long and one foot wide, the giant closed loop saw blades are changed every four hours minimum. Production slows down when they saw particularly hard wood such as hickory or ash.

6 With ends painted blue, this stack of lumber will soon be loaded into a container, trucked to Norfolk and loaded aboard a ship bound for Italy or China.