

Davis hardwood mill logs profit for county



When Joe and Harold Davis decided to bring their saw mill back to Nottoway County where they grew up, complaints from Spainville residents surprised them.

The Davis family has been sawing wood for 60 years and they couldn't imagine anyone objecting to one of Southside's most steady and profitable industries. The R.W. Davis Lumber Co. had been located near Sutherland in Dinwiddie County.

Today, a year later, the Davis brothers feel vindicated. The \$750,000 mill is now an established Nottoway industry. And you would never know it exists, if not for the stream of logging trucks turning into the unmarked entrance on Route 153.

"You can't find a complaint anywhere," said Harold, 56, the older of the two brothers, who had come back into the family business after being a chemist for Dupont.

"You can go to Spainville store and never know we were here" added Joe, who began working for his father, the late Woodrow Davis, in 1964. With Joe's son, Sam, working, the Davis family tree has four generations in the mill.

It began with Winston Patterson, grandfather on their mother's side, who had a steam boiler mill in the 30s. "Back in those days he cut up slabs of wood and sold them on the street corner in Blackstone. It was a daily ritual," said Joe.

The only hardwood mill left in Nottoway, Dinwiddie and Chesterfield counties, the Davis mill reaches out in a 50-mile radius for hardwood to keep its saws going. The

yard never seems empty of logging trucks—sometimes four or five waiting in line. A month's supply of logs keep ahead of conveyor belts that turn the logs into wood for furniture, shipping crates, flooring, and, what's most lucrative: railroad ties.

"A lot of our good wood goes to Taylor-Ramsey for furniture," said Joe. "We use everything on a tree: bark goes to mulch plants, sawdust goes into fuel for utility companies, chips go to paper mills, and of course, all grades of lumber. There's not much left."

Since the Davises moved their mill to Nottoway, all their business has shifted from Petersburg to Blackstone. In addition to buying tracts of timber, the mill employs 35 people and provides a buyer for about 25-30 loggers. And there's business for local welders, auto parts, tire dealers, fuel companies. "And we're a big boost for the little Spainville Store," added Harold.

Harold brought out a picture of himself at age eight learning on a tractor at his father's mill. A huge pile of sawdust filled the woods behind him. The brothers shared memories of growing up with sawdust in the air and the sound of saws always in the background. They reflected on how far the mill industry has come.

"The amount of timber we cut in one week would last our father's mill two months," began Joe, who described how saw mills moved their saws to the trees being cut instead of bringing trees to the mill.

Joe was working with his father in Dinwiddie when they built the first stationary mill in 1966. He said it was the demand for wood chips for paper that made it profitable to buy large machinery that could debark the wood and cut chips.

While little has changed in saw mill technology in the last 50 years, the number of saw mills has been reduced drastically. "When we moved to Dinwiddie, there were five saw mills. Now there are none. They're all gone. Families have died out. People who run saw mills are usually born into it," said Joe.

Harold remembered his father describing nine family mills on the two-mile stretch of Route 609 where he lived.

Yet logging, despite the disappearance of the small mills, is the second largest industry in Virginia. Nottoway has two other mills, Nottoway Lumber and Taylor-Ramsey, which cut only pine.

"Look at those two saw mills in Blackstone. Have you ever known them to lay off? I'd say it's the most stable industry in the county," said Joe.

Here's the irony: How could an industry that consumes truck loads of timber every day not saw itself out of business?

"I remember my grandfather saying in the 50s that he didn't have anymore acres to cut. Now we've got just as good or better timber and more of it. We've got trees for the rest of the year to cut, and I'm not scratching for it." Said Joe, who attributed this good fortune to better forest management.

And the hardwood supply is so extensive that the Forest Service can't justify replanting hardwood. "It's growing faster than it's being cut, yet, it doesn't look like that around here," noted Harold.

When hardwood, usually 4—50 years-old is cut, it's replanted in pine, which brings a bigger profit because you get more trees per acre.

"We don't mind reaching out for good grade hardwood," said Joe.

Looking into the future, Joe said they'll be going farther and farther out from Blackstone for hardwood tracts. They have been through 1,000 acres in Chesterfield in the last few years and none of that will come back because of development.

Yet, Forest Service charts show the amount of timber available to be increasing.