

SAWMILL FORUM

CASEY
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The more things change the more they stay the same. A true story.

A long-time customer of mine sold his automatic circular mill to someone who moved it to their own location and was in the process of setting it up when they called me. I knew right off the bat that they must be new to this business because they had the notion that they should ship their saws out to me to be hammered and returned to them before they started up the mill for the first time.

The longstanding tradition that I have seen has been to buy a mill, set it up, and then try to run it. When it doesn't run properly, which is often the case with a new set up, they then decide it is time to get all of the saws hammered right away, because that will solve all of their problems.

But I was initially impressed with this company's novel and proper approach in that they thought it would be so much better to start with at least one known quantity: the saws being ready to go. I had high hopes for this new account.

Now we get to the part where history starts repeating itself.

Of course this new installation didn't run right. I explained to this customer, like any other, that he could hire me to fly down there and do an onsite troubleshooting session for a fee, or he would be welcome to try to sort things out over the phone with me for free. The reality is that for the most part, sawmill troubleshooting is just collecting a bunch of measurements and then sorting out that data to figure out what the problems are. So if someone on the other end of the phone can collect the data for me, I can often get the job done over the phone for free. The exception to that rule would be when I can't get accurate information over the phone due to a customer's lack of tools or inability to take accurate measurements.

Of course the person I was dealing with over the phone was, I think, relaying everything to whoever was really in charge of making this thing work. But I could tell he was taking good notes, so there shouldn't be much lost in the translation. And

he seemed to understand my explanations.

As the process evolved, it was apparent to me that they had several well intentioned local old timers filling their heads with many of the old myths and wives' tales that originally prompted me to start writing this column many years ago.

So my contact, who we will call "Bob," would ask me things like: "Is it true that the saw is supposed to be dished and then miraculously stand up when it comes up to speed?" One time when I was asking the usual "how accurately are the teeth sharpened" question, Bob informed me that one of those well intentioned old timers told them that as a sawyer he used to be able to make the saw run any way he wanted just by sharpening the teeth in whatever direction he wanted. Of course I immediately suggested he throw him off the property, and I think one of the words I used started with an F.

Sure there are things you can do to coax a little more time out of a saw so that you can make it to break time where you will have a chance to fix it properly. And in the old days, production requirements, downtime costs and profit margins were vastly different than they are today.

Anyway, what I was dealing with was Bob, who was sort of the middleman in the conversation. And then he had to deal with the manager, and all of the people they brought in to prognosticate all sorts of stuff. And there was a sawyer who apparently didn't really have enough experience to get this operation off the ground properly.

Of course we had to go through the whole lead thing and how lead was never supposed to be used to fine tune a mill, but rather you should set it to somewhere between a thirty second and a sixteenth and forget about it. The only reason to check it again would be to see if something moved that shouldn't have.

In fact, they even had the manufacturer of this particular mill make a trip out there to pronounce their installation to be proper. You should remember this little tidbit for when you get to the end of this article.



Any outside operation should have adequate sun shade.

As you all know, during the process of trying to make a mill run that doesn't want to run properly, it is perfectly reasonable that by now they have put all three saws into the condition where they now need to be re-hammered. And--again to my surprise--Bob seemed to realize and expect that.

So the decision was made that they would ship all three saws back to me and then after I ship them back, they would fly me down there for an onsite troubleshooting session. It was pretty good thinking, because again we would be starting with a known quantity when I got there. And even more important, when I see exactly what they have done to the saws, I might even get enough info from that to tell them exactly where their problem is and possibly avoid the expense of flying me down there. It sounded like a good plan.

Some would be surprised just how much I can tell about a mill when I see what condition the saws are in. Especially if I knew what condition they were in before they started.

Then a couple a days later I got an email from Bob explaining that his boss decided that they would send the three saws off to someone a lot closer to them and see what happens from there. And they would not need me to fly there either.

So I immediately phoned Bob and explained that while I don't need the extra saws to hammer or one more mill to troubleshoot, a much more important consideration is that sending the saws to someone else would now introduce a completely new variable into the mix, and whatever ground they had gained in dealing with me, would soon be lost.

I will say that I didn't know who they were sending the saws to, so I can't comment on that person's capabilities. There are a few hammermen I know of who hammer saws to look exactly like mine. But only a small few. Are we the only ones who know how to hammer a saw? Certainly not. There a many ways to skin a saw, and some seem to work

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better than others for some mills. And somehow, many variations of that method still seem to work for some mills, while not so well for others. If they had sent these saws to one of those few who I regard as doing it exactly the same as me, I would have been okay with the deal because they also could have looked at the saws knowing what they would have looked like when I did them. And they would have been able to gather the same info and draw the same conclusions about what these saws had seen. But now we have a completely unknown quantity going into the mix. All that does is confuse things to the point where you are going around in circles.

And if this particular hammerman actually does it exactly the same as me, he wouldn't have the benefit of knowing what the saws looked like when they went out before, because he doesn't know me or my work. Therefore what he sees in the saws has much less meaning. Although I can sometimes tell the difference between what the last hammerman left in the saw and what the mill did to the saw, it is a less exacting process at that point.

Here comes the fun part: Somewhere in that conversation with Bob, as he was running a few more myths by me for verification, he said, "by the way, is it true that having the mill outside with direct sunlight on the blade can be a bit of a problem?"

I immediately said that it was a good thing they didn't fly me all the way down there, only to arrive to see the mill sitting on a concrete slab outside, with the sun shining on the blade. I explained that I would have immediately handed them a bill for onsite troubleshooting and returned to the airport. That's really not true. Once I recovered from the shock of such a sight, I would have taken the trouble to complete the troubleshooting. Once you find the one glaring thing that is the obvious cause of the problem, you really should continue the complete troubleshooting process if nothing more than to find out what else is misadjusted in an effort to compensate for the original problem.

I certainly spent some time on the phone explaining to Bob that until he figured out a way to get enough cover to keep the sun away from the blade, all of the rest really doesn't matter. I also explained that just solving this glaring (no pun intended) problem doesn't guarantee that everything else is correct.

Imagine that the mill manufacturer's rep was out there and pronounced the installation to be proper. Did he not notice there was no building? I suppose I should give the manufacturer the benefit of the doubt and hope that their guy naturally assumed that now that the mill was installed properly they would be immediately erecting a building before trying to operate it.

You know what they say about assuming.

Questions about sawmills and their operation should be sent to Forum, The Northern Logger, P.O. Box 69, Old Forge, NY 13420, FAX #315-369-3736.

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