



2008 Northeastern Forest Products Equipment Exposition

The forest products industry here in the Northeast is preparing for another one of the largest and best Expos in our region. With a bit more than three months to go, exhibit space is approaching a sell-out, and thousands of people have already registered for the Expo for free on-line at www.northernlogger.com. The Expo will be held at the Champlain Valley Exposition in Essex Junction, Vermont on May 9-10 and will feature over 200 exhibiting companies and more than 6,000 attendees. For more information about exhibiting or attending the 2008 Expo, visit us on-line at www.northernlogger.com or call NELA offices. Don't miss this opportunity.



for the 2008 seminar season, we are keeping you in mind. Now is the best time to let us know of the programs you would like to host or sponsor in the coming year. We are always interested in discussing your needs and in listening to your training wish list. Give us a call at 800-318-7561.

As always, we will work in cooperation with your regional associations and other training providers to ensure that educational opportunities are timely, pertinent to your professional and personal development, and meet your training requirements. Watch the Calendar of Events (yellow pages) in your Northern Logger and visit www.northernlogger.com for the most up-to-date information.

Spring seminar season heating up

Now that the slate of educational opportunities is complete for this year's Expo in Vermont (see insert) we are planning our schedule of regional training opportunities. As we plan

Casey Creamer

*Northern Logger Columnist & Saw Doctor
Seneca Saw Works, Inc.
Burdett, New York*

Casey Creamer, 56, grew up in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, right outside of Philadelphia. A car racing enthusiast, he and his friends made their way up to Watkins Glen, New York on a regular basis to attend the races at Watkins Glen International. Like many of his friends, he was taken with the beauty of the Finger Lakes Region and vowed to live there someday. Unlike most of them, he actually did, in 1977.

At first he eked out a living at a variety of agricultural jobs, such as working in a poultry breeding operation, but quickly became interested in a neighbor's small sawmill. They formed a partnership and ran the mill for awhile as a nights and weekends sort of operation. Eventually it became apparent that this venture was never going to get to the next level. But by then, in 1980, he had become interested in sawmills and saw maintenance and the rest, as they say, is history.

Creamer lives in Burdett, NY with his wife, Roz Guterman, a middle school reading teacher. The owner of Seneca Saw Works, Inc., a saw smithing and sawmill troubleshooting company based in Burdett, Creamer has been writing the monthly Sawmill Forum column in *The Northern Logger* since 1986.

Tell us about your career.

I had a number of jobs before becoming a saw doctor. I worked at various capacities in the automobile business and spent some time pin striping cars for car dealers.



What is it that you do as a Saw Doctor? Who are your customers?

My primary job as a saw doctor or saw smith is to work with inserted tooth circular saws and to perform an operation referred to as saw hammering. The short definition of saw hammering is that it's a means for leveling and tensioning a saw blade. Leveling refers to straightening and truing the body of the blade while tensioning refers to stretching particular areas of the blade a certain amount to compensate for or counteract the stretch that happens to the blade while cutting.

The bulk of my saw hammering is done on large diameter (48" to 60") head rig saws for saw mills. I also get to hammer various kinds of small diameter saws for everything from edgers and trimmers, to truss cutting saws. Sometimes I get to hammer some large diameter saws for the stone cutting industry.

As a saw doctor I often tackle sawmill troubleshooting and

The Northeastern Loggers' Association, Inc., P.O. Box 69, Old Forge, NY 13420; (315) 369-3078; <http://www.northernlogger.com>

mill alignment, and I teach and train would-be saw doctors.

Do you have anyone else working with you?

I have had employees in the past, but I find that my workforce and I get along best when it's just me. At the present time, I hold the title of head saw doctor and every other job title that is involved with the day to day operation of Seneca Saw Works, Inc.

How did you come to start writing for *The Northern Logger*?

When I first met Eric Johnson and former Northern Logger Publisher George Mitchell I tried talking them into doing an article about my company in the hopes that it would be good advertising, and it would help my small company grow. Actually a more accurate description might be that I bugged them every chance I got.

In the meantime, I noticed that there were a huge number of myths and a lot of misinformation in the field about sawmills and saw hammering. Every day I would hear something new. I was so amazed at how much wrong information there was about saw mills and how to make them run properly that I started collecting myths as I heard them.

Jim Peek, a New York State DEC Utilization and Marketing forester convinced me that I should start debunking some of these myths and misinformation. Jim was also the newsletter editor for the Lake Erie and Ontario Sawyers and Filers Association and I started writing some articles for him. At some point Eric got to read that newsletter and he must have seen some potential beneath the rough exterior of my writing. Seeing as I was getting nowhere with my efforts to get an article about my business in the Northern Logger, I talked to Eric about writing some articles for him.

I'm guessing Eric had been down this road before with other well-intentioned authors who might start out okay, but then would peter out over a period of time. He offered me a deal that I suspect he assumed was going to scare me away. He told me that I should write a bunch of articles in advance so that he could have several months' worth in hand. Only then would he look through them and see if they were worth printing.

Well, it didn't scare me away, but I really didn't know where to start. My friend Jim Peek came in real handy again—he made a suggestion that proved to be quite helpful. He suggested that I approach writing as if I were answering a question—just sit down and write out a question and then start answering it. He said I could always erase the question later.

So, that's what I did. I wrote out a question that would lead to a particular topic then I'd write out the answer, and I wrote enough question and answer articles up front that Eric was able to come up with a year's worth of articles that he edited and later published in the Northern Logger and Timber Processor.

Just so there's no misunderstanding—I'm not saying that the questions I used were fakes. Every question that has appeared in the Sawmill Forum for all of these years started out as a real question that someone asked in person, on the phone, or wrote in a letter. Well, some weren't exactly in the form of a question, but rather one of my customers would say something that I knew was fundamentally wrong or was a myth. So I would then turn that into a question and answer article that would debunk that particular myth. That question

and answer approach to writing my articles has served me well for all of these years.

What do you see as the biggest obstacle to making a good living in the forest products industry?

I suspect that the biggest obstacles would be common to almost any industry today. There are two big factors that I see that make it harder and harder for any small company to survive.

First, we've entered into a global economy which, by its very nature, has created a lot of changes in the marketplace and has impacted the available workforce. That's not to say that a global economy is necessarily a bad thing, but rather that it creates a lot of change. Some of those changes will certainly affect US companies in a negative way, especially the small companies that may not have the ability to keep up with rapid change.

Second, ever-changing technology is a wonderful thing to witness. But one of the results of this rapid change is that many manufacturing methods become obsolete way before their time. This instant obsolescence makes for upheaval in the market place that can adversely affect a small forest products business that again doesn't have the resources or ability to quickly adapt. Think of how many products or complete industries we have seen go by the wayside in the last 5 years, because they didn't have the ability to adapt to change.

What do you see as a successful sawyer's most important attributes?

This of course depends on whether he or she is sawing blocking, grade lumber, softwood, ties or whatever. As with any profession, I think attitude is the most important thing an employee can possess. Specific to being a sawyer, the needed attributes are patience, good hand-eye coordination, more patience, and a willingness to turn out a good product in an efficient manner.

How have things changed in the sawmill business since you first started as a saw doctor?

Like any other industry, the technology we use is ever-changing. This desire for improved technology comes from our constant need for increased efficiency to create increased profits, or at least to maintain a reasonable profit level.

The part that affects me in a positive way is that the more need there is for increased efficiency means the more need there is for increased accuracy in sawing. It's that need for increased accuracy that has driven many customers in my direction over the years in the hope that my methods of saw maintenance will be able to support their newfound accuracy and efficiency requirements.

On the negative side, that same quest for increased efficiency has led many of my customers towards changing from circular saws to band saws. In some applications such as a resaw, the band saw is the way to go for most mills. In a headsaw application I am not convinced that switching to a band saw is the best choice. I have always said that the most efficient thing is to get the cant off of the carriage and into a resaw as soon as possible. In that model, a thinner kerf at the head rig doesn't gain you much if it is only saving slabwood. Of course some need to make a few more cuts on the head rig because the cant won't fit through their resaw. In that case I suggest getting a bigger resaw

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NELA PROFILE

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and keeping the circular head saw which can stand much more abuse and requires much less maintenance than a band saw.

But many have made the switch and they seem to be prospering, so who am I to say they're wrong?

What value do you think readers receive from your column specifically, and from the Northern Logger magazine in general?

Specifically, what they get from my column is very simple. For the most part they are reading something in print that they probably already knew, but might not have known how to articulate. And they get verification that what they already knew was in fact correct. It has to be correct because Casey Creamer says so. That's their take, not mine. There is something about reading something in print that gives an idea more credibility.

What I think they get from the whole magazine is a real trade publication that they can call their own. Now there are other trade publications out there for our industry, but here is what sets the Northern Logger apart from the rest. All of the articles in this magazine are real articles written by real authors—they are not advertisements masquerading as articles. And of course I think the editing is top notch in this magazine. I think it is always more pleasant to read a well edited article than one that wasn't. I have seen magazines for other industries that were so poorly edited; they were just awful to read. When it is edited properly, you don't notice anything about the writing or the editing. And I have always liked the ethics that go into the editing of this particular magazine.

How do you spend your free time?

It took me a number of years and one long hospital stay to learn how important it is to create free time. My wife and I like to climb the High Peaks in the Adirondacks and we also do some cycling when we can.

I guess you might say that I am a car nut, because what I like to do the most is car racing. I race cars on the ice in the winter and I even enter one ice race for vintage cars. During warmer months I do some go-kart racing and also do some endurance racing.

If for some reason you couldn't do what you're doing now, how would you like to make a living?

That's quite a question. I guess the answer might depend on why I couldn't continue to do what I do now. It turns out that I really enjoy most aspects of what I do for a living now. I enjoy the teaching part of it, so I suppose that's always an option and I also enjoy the sales end of it, which after all isn't really much different from teaching. But I do have one big prerequisite with either of those careers. I only want to sell a product that I believe in and that I think is absolutely the right product for a given potential customer. By the same token, I would only want to teach something I believe in. So becoming part of the standard school system probably wouldn't work any better for me than taking a job selling some form of insurance to people who really don't need it. To me selling isn't about having to make a certain amount of sales to make a living. It's about turning someone on to a product that is really right for them.

That stance will make it pretty unlikely for me to be able to make a living selling or teaching, but such is life. Otherwise it is always nice if you can turn one of your hobbies into something that can make you a living if you can do it without taking the fun out of it.

How could our government make it easier to make a decent living in the forest products industry?

I hate to say this, but in any industry, the best thing the government can do to help small business is to stop helping small business.

First, let's remember that the federal government defines small business as a company having fewer than 100 employees. While the biggest companies certainly have many more than 100 employees, do you really consider a company with 90 employees to be a small company? I don't. So how can they help a small business if they don't even know what one is or looks like? It also means that when they say they have something in particular to help small business it is really geared towards a company with 80 to 90 employees. How many of our readers have companies that size? And whatever they try to do to help us seems to come with so many hoops that we have to jump through it just becomes impractical to try to take advantage of that particular program. I do know that some of my customers have been helped tremendously by government programs designed to help economic development, but I also know of many more that put themselves out of business while in the process of trying to jump through those hoops.

If we truly have a free market economy, then the government shouldn't be helping to prop up any industry or business. Just let the chips fall where they may. Of course in the global economy, foreign competition is often heavily subsidized by government, so that does make it hard for anyone else to compete.

It's a tough subject and I really don't have the proper answers.

Would you recommend a career in the forest products business to a young person just starting out? How about a career as a saw doctor?

The first thing I recommend to any young person starting out is to get the right attitude. Be open and willing to learn. This is business, not school. Don't expect anyone to go out of their way to teach you. You have to go out of your way to learn from whoever seems to possess the knowledge. Learn a good work ethic while you are at it

A good work ethic and a willingness to learn and the urge to do a job well, is a rare commodity today. And if you possess that ability, the smart people will notice and you will succeed.

As for the forest products industry, well it is as susceptible to obsolescence as any industry is today, so why not. In fact some of the more technologically dependant industries are even more susceptible to obsolescence than we are.

What is the best piece of advice you've ever gotten?

I have spent a lifetime listening to both good and bad advice from anyone and everyone. I can't say that any one piece was the be all and end all. I just listen and try to get what I can.

If you could invite any three people, living or dead, to join you for a cup of coffee and some conversation – who would they be?

I'd invite Formula 1 World Champion Michael Schumacher, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, and billionaire Warren Buffett. You could also add Ben Franklin to the list. I know that makes four, but who says I have to play completely by the rules?

Congratulations, you just hit the lottery for \$57 million. How is your life going to change?

I'd get faster cars to race in more races.