

How many years have you been hammering saws?

People keep asking me that question. And I have to tell you that I didn't like the question forty years ago, and I don't like it any more today.

It doesn't matter whether you are a medical doctor or a saw doctor – in either case, you are probably not at the most competent point in your career during your first year of practice. But beyond that first year, all bets are off. As far as I am concerned, it is not how long you have been doing something that counts, but rather what you have learned along the way. Mileage does not necessarily translate into knowledge. Nor does it guarantee anything.

I understand the need to try to discern the trustworthiness and competency level of anyone you are about to do business with. That trust becomes even more important when you are about to let a person have their way with your favorite saw. The problem is that longevity is a poor thing to base that judgment on. The mere fact that anyone has been in business for a long time does not guarantee that they are trustworthy or even good at what they do. It only proves that they have been good at staying in business. Even then, is their success because they are good at what they do, or were there other circumstances that allowed them to stay in business?

Look at how long some fast food places have been making burgers. You may patronize them, but can you really tell me that you think they make a really good burger? If so, I submit that you haven't yet experienced what a real burger is supposed to taste like. And there are some who may have been satisfied with the way their saws had been hammered for years only because they hadn't yet experienced what a properly hammered saw really runs like on a properly set up mill.

When I first got started in this busi-

ness, I was really worried about the “how long have you been doing it?” question because I hadn't had the chance to build up a good or bad reputation yet. And in those days, sawmills were really reluctant to give any newbie a chance. I still remember one of my earliest customers and how reluctant he was to give me a chance. But he was also desperate to find someone who could put up his saws properly. He said that he had a saw that four different guys had unsuccessfully tried to fix. If I could make that saw run, he might let me work on one of his good saws.

Let me first say that it is my job to basically undo whatever your mill did to the saw last. That's a fairly predictable situation in that there are only so many things that can happen to a saw during the sawing process, and it doesn't take very long before you have seen all of those situations. But in this case, he wanted me to undo what four different people, who apparently were not very good at saw hammering, had done to that saw. Saws that were poorly hammered are generally the hardest saws to fix and definitely not what a young aspiring saw doctor wants to be tackling. Well, I spent four full eight-hour days working on that saw, and yes, when I was done, it ran okay. I don't think it ever ran great, but it was at least usable. Suffice it to say that I have been hammering all of his saws ever since.

He was probably right not to trust me with one of his good saws until I had proven myself, but still, that's a really tough way to get started in business. You can't prove yourself unless people are willing to give you a chance to prove yourself.

I know of people who figured out an okay way to hammer saws 50 years ago and have been happily doing it that way ever since. Is that 50 years' experience or really just one year's experience 50 times? Then there were those who either

weren't aiming for the right target, or just were not very good at hammering saws, yet they had been doing it successfully for 50 years. I say successfully because they were still in business, and they must have had some customers who were relatively satisfied with their work. But that 50 years' experience doesn't really make their saws look any better to me. Those saws are still dished towards the log side or don't have the right amount of tension in the right location, let alone the amount that they wobble.

The reason that I am still bothered by the question is that I don't want you to let me or anyone else hammer your saw just because we have been doing it for a long time. There are other ways to determine competency before you try out the product or service for yourself. Go around to some other mills. Look at their lumber piles. Do they stand straight, or do they lean like crazy? Even without looking at their lumber piles, you probably know which ones are good at what they do. Ask them who hammers their saws and how satisfied they are with them. And, of course, it is not just whether the saws turn out well or not. Is their turnaround time reasonable? And even more importantly, do they turn them around when they said they would? I would rather have someone tell me five weeks and then get it done in three weeks than to tell me one week and then get it done in two weeks. I like people who do what they said they were going to do, when they said they were going to do it. It's of the utmost importance to be able to hammer the saws properly, but customer service is also an important aspect of any business.

Having properly hammered saws will have a big effect on any mill's performance, along with all of the other items involved in a sawmill's basic maintenance program. So, picking who you want to be your saw doctor is not a decision that should be

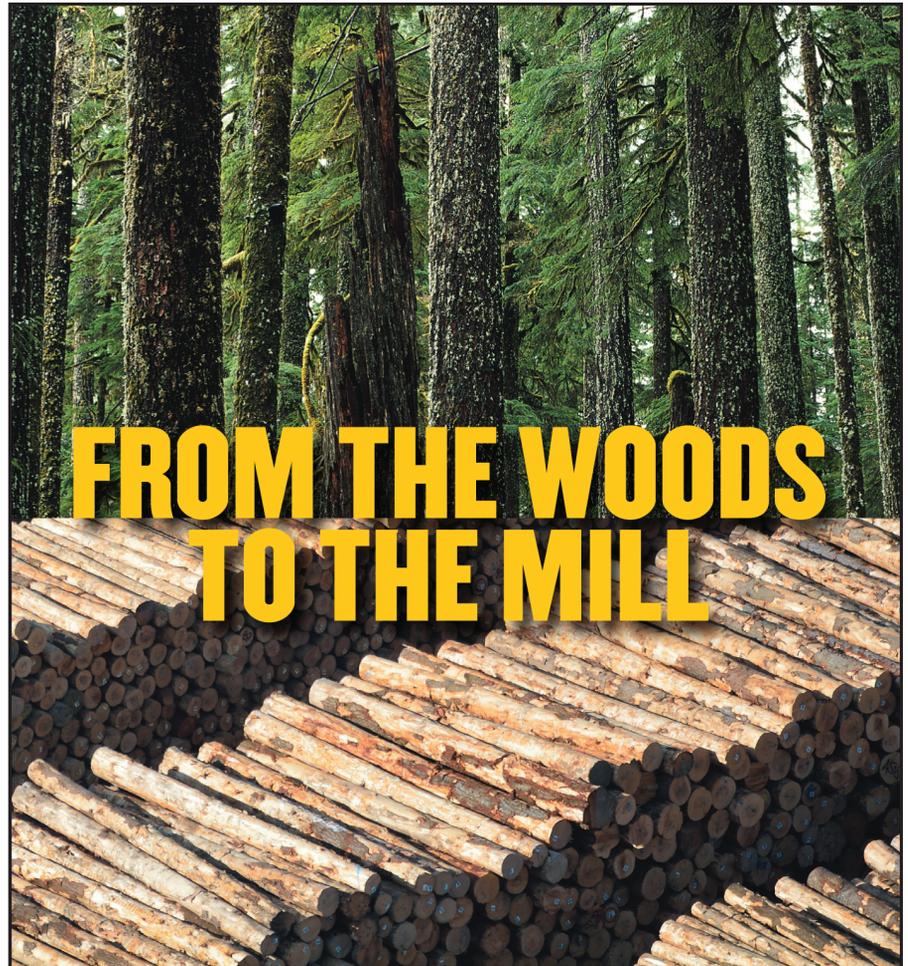


taken lightly. You need to do your own due diligence. Just asking how long someone had been at it doesn't give you nearly enough useful information to make an educated decision.

People sometimes ask me that question while they are watching me hammer their saws. Maybe I just said something about sawmills that surprised them, and they wanted to ask the question because the answer might qualify whatever I was telling them at the moment. I guess that means that if I say I have only been hammering saws for five years then they wouldn't have to believe what I just told them about why we need 1/16" lead in our saws. Conversely, if my answer was anything above 30 years, should they automatically take my word for it? Well, again, I think that is just being lazy. Instead of making a judgement based on time, ask me to explain why I think the saw should have 1/16" of lead. It does no good to just know "what." If you want to be educated, you really have to know the "whys" about any given subject. When you listen to someone explain why, it will be obvious right away whether what they are saying holds water or not.

Instead of wasting time asking about time, the first question I would ask any prospective saw smith is what a finished saw is supposed to look like. If they are not aiming for the right target, it doesn't matter how good they are. Here is your reference point: A properly hammered circular saw should be flat on the log side, with an acceptable amount of wobble and the right amount of tension in the right location. I view an acceptable amount of wobble on a 48" to 60" saw to be +/- .015" or better.

If you find someone who states their desired target as similar to that, then the



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next questions should involve turnaround time and willingness to communicate to the mill manager about symptoms reported by the mill (that may or may not agree with what the saw is showing upon initial inspection). You might also ask who some of their regular customers are and check those references out. It also won't

hurt to ask about pricing, just to be sure there are no surprises. But my experience has been that most sawmill operators would rather pay a little more for their saws to work better than to save a few dollars on saws that are hammered so poorly that they end up losing production and hurting their product quality.

Interested to learn more from Casey Creamer? You can watch our video on how Casey hammers circular saws on The Northern Logger YouTube page. Just search for "The Northern Logger" on YouTube and click the video entitled "How to Hammer a Circular Saw with Casey Creamer." Please send future questions about sawmills and their operation to Casey Creamer, saw doctor and president of Seneca Saw Works, Inc., PO Box 681, Burdett, NY 14818, (607) 546-5887. You can also reach out by email: casey@senecasaw.com.