

Collins Companies

Installs 'MegaMill' And Receives Maximum Results

BY WAYNE MILLER

Richwood, W. Va.— Purchased by The Collins Companies, seven years ago, the Collins Richwood Hardwood mill manufactures **Red Oak, Ash, Hard and Soft Maple, Poplar, Basswood and Cherry.**

Situated on 27 acres, the mill has a 20 million board feet annual capacity. Facilities include a sawmill, dry kilns and a planing mill. Lumber is available in 4/4 through 12/4, rough or surfaced.

Continuing to innovate equipment and operating methods, Collins latest installation to this location is its 'MegaMill.'

"The MegaMill, as coined by the crew, is a complete lumber processing center," General Manager Ernest Lake explained. "It includes two tilt hoists, auto stick collection, a Lucidyne board reading system, double end trimmers, dry lumber stacker, Yates-American B-26 planer, and a packaging station. One tilt hoist feeds product to be sold rough and the second feeds the planer and is used for surfacing.

According to Lake the idea and research for creating the MegaMill was extensive, but once the plan was 'in-motion,' completion of the project was time-efficient. "We had to tear the old office down because we did not have a building large enough to house equipment of this magnitude. This new building is 300 feet long by 80 feet wide. So we tore the old office down, moved into some temporary trailers and started the process. Installation began in June of 2011. We moved into the new office in December. Different parts of this mill were started up in January 2012 and by March everything was up, running and online.

"Part of the equipment came from the Georgia-Pacific facility that was closed in Suffolk, Virginia," Lake continued. "Collins bought various pieces of equipment. Some of it came from up north, some out of Pennsylvania, some from out West, some from Oregon, and parts of it



The Collins Companies Richwood Virginia 'MegaMill' sorting chain and stacker by-passer.

were built new. Combined, this state-of-the-art lumber processing center gives us the ability to put out a quality package of lumber that is second to none."

As he explained how the lumber is processed, Lake noted that the grading station in particular is a highlight of the operation. "Our graders have a grading table and station where they can really see the lumber. It's lit up so that they're not grading in the dark. Everything

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1. Jimmy Thompson, who is responsible for quality control shown here with Collins' FAS Poplar:

2. Ernest Lake, Collins Companies Richwood plant manager:

3. A stack of Collins Richwood lumber stenciled, end tallied, tagged and ready to go.

4. The Collins Companies Richwood mill's sawyer Robbie Taylor:

5. Collins Richwood lumber Inspector Gary Owens grading boards.

6. One of the Collins Companies tilt hoists with stickered kiln dried lumber:



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is double end trimmed. It comes down to an automatic stacker where it's stacked and side squeezed. Next it's end coated and banded. And finally it's stenciled, end tallied, tagged and ready to go.

"Our sorting system gives us the ability to pull out specialty items for width, color or whatever else we need to do," he continued. The MegaMill has the ability to do 30 sorts. "With a half million board feet of kiln capacity, we have 10 dry kilns. Six of the kilns were here when we became a Collins mill and four new ones have been added," said Lake. The four new dry kilns are manufactured by SII Dry Kilns, located in Lexington, N.C. "We also have two Irvington-Moore kilns and two dry kilns by BOLDesigns Inc., located in Lenoir, N.C."

Collins sources timber approximately 60 miles out from this location. "We will go further out if a really good tract is available. We normally log in the five surrounding counties."

Lake mentioned that the location of the Richwood mill was strategic and imperative to its offerings. "You can build a sawmill anywhere in the country, but you have to have the resources to operate it. The finest Hardwood timber is available in this region. The elevation is perfect, the growing season is good and the specie mix is right.

"The Red Oak in this area has the color and texture that everybody wants. It's a slow growing, tight grain that has a wheat color. Yellow Poplar doesn't get any better than what we have here. People in Pennsylvania, which is considered the 'Cherry Capital,' have said that you can't tell the difference between our West Virginia Cherry and the finest Pennsylvania Cherry."

Collins has foresters on the ground at this location, which are continually sourcing timber." We have three foresters and one Procurement Manager that oversees them. Basically they have all been in the business for an extensive amount of time," he said. As for logging crews, Lake said the company hires contractors.

Lake offered interesting history about the mill itself. "Built at the turn of the century in 1901, the mill was then called Cherry River Boom & Lumber Co.," he explained. "It was established by a group of investors from Pennsylvania, which is actually where the

Collins family is from.

"This sawmill was built in 1965 and the equipment in it has been modernized and upgraded. We have a Corley carriage with Lewis Controls, which was in there when the Collins Company bought it.

"When CEO Eric Schooler first came here with the Collins Co., we installed a slabber. Then we bought another, smaller edger that was manufactured by Reckart Equipment that first fall in 2005. In the spring of '06 we installed the new Brewco twin horizontal resaw in the mill, which totally transformed the mill."

Among the many measures Collins takes to ensure a consistent, quality product, Lake said quality control is a sizable part of the process. "We have mill supervisors constantly checking the thicknesses that come out of the mill. They check it at the beginning of the shift, during the shift and all throughout the day. The inspectors watch it and if they see a problem they converse with production. When it comes to the kilns, the kiln operator monitors material as it dries, performs tests and makes sure it dries properly. When it goes into the MegaMill to be loaded, the inspectors re-inspect it. Jimmy Thompson is also a NHLA Inspection School graduate and he 'is' quality control," said Lake. "Jimmy observes the way it's graded, the way it's trimmed and the way it's packaged. He follows it all the way through, and then it's checked again before it goes to the customer. We have a team effort here. The lift drivers are instructed that if they find a unit that's not right, they don't put it on the truck, but instead bring it back to be reworked."

As for logistics of the product, Lake said Collins uses contract carrier trucks and containers. "We load flatbed trucks for domestic orders and containers for export." Collins exports containers from the port of Norfolk, Va.

Operating at about 48 hours a week, Collins employs approximately 55 people at the Richwood location. "We work four 10-hour shifts and one 8-hour shift," Lake explained.

A 1967 graduate of the National Hardwood Lumber Association's Inspection School, Lake said all of Collins lumber graders are excellent at what they do. "Most of them have family backgrounds in the lumber

industry and they are very experienced. Many of our people have been here since the early 1980s."

Collins Richwood Hardwood mill markets its products primarily to manufacturing distributors in the cabinet, moulding and millwork, furniture and flooring industries. "About 25 percent of our product goes to the industrial grade users such as the pallet and box manufacturers," Lake noted. "We also market a small portion to wholesalers."

With more than 40 years experience in the forest products industry, 36 at the Richwood plant, Lake is proud of the operation he oversees. "I'm proud of the entire operation, the resource, the people and the Collins Companies make our products a reward to us and to all of our customers." Ernest retired June 29th. His crew and staff wish him well.

The Collins Companies, headquartered in Portland, Ore., is well known for their sustainable Forest Stewardship Council certified Hardwood and softwood products. Perhaps a less likely known aspect of this family-owned operation is their dedication to the forest as a renewable resource.

"We are the true tree huggers," Lake offered. "We love trees. We love growing them and we love harvesting them. Our desire is to manufacture a product that the entire world can use while taking extraordinary care of the forest. The world needs to know that is what we do. We're not out here to destroy the forest, we're here to use it and share it and preserve it for future generations."

The family-owned Collins Companies was established in 1855. Today the firm's holdings also include three forests totaling over 310,000 acres, each with an associated sawmill, including the 119,000 acre Collins Pennsylvania forest with Kane Hardwood sawmill; the 90,000 acre Collins Lakeview Forest in southern Oregon and northern California with Lakeview Sawmill (Fremont Sawmill); and the 96,000 acre Collins Almanor forest in northern California with Chester Sawmill (Collins Pine).

For more information visit www.collinsco.com.

Reprinted from September 2012 issue of National Hardwood Magazine