Illinois timber is rated highly everywhere. Yet making sawdust isn't what it used to be in the Land of Lincoln.

Making the Cut

Logs await processing in at an Illinois sawmill. Computer-assisted mill equipment keeps operators a safe distance from the massive blade.

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

Everybody knows where to buy lumber these days. When most of us need a few boards, we step inside a climate-controlled warehouse at one of those big stores where drywall, light fixtures and washing machines are sold, along with potting soil and lawnmowers, and maybe bathroom mirrors.

Purchasing lumber today is nearly like visiting a supermarket. Nobody really knows where food comes from, and nobody really knows where their lumber comes from.

Here's a challenging fact: Illinois ranks fifth among all states in annual consumption of wood products in America. Yet our contribution of raw timber to produce those wood products ranks 32nd among the 50 states. It's not because Illinois doesn't have timber resources—Illinois timber species such as black walnut and white oak are considered the best of their kind in the world.

And demand remains strong.

Illinois once hosted plenty of sawmills throughout its rural communities. For example, whenever a barn needed to be built, or a wooden bridge constructed, primitive sawmills—sometimes powered by overworked farm tractor engines—would spin into service.

Those old wooden barns and wood-plank bridges are disappearing fast from the Illinois landscape, and so are the rural sawmills that once cut the planks and beams everybody used for construction.

"Twenty-five or 30 years ago, there were probably seven or eight times as many commercial sawmills in Illinois as there are today," estimated Gary Stratton, a regional forester for the Depart-

Stan Curtis operates his Carbondale Veneer Company while keeping two timber crews busy in southern Illinois.

ment of Natural Resources (DNR). “In the late 60s and 70s, mom-and-pop mills could still be found all over the state. Now we’re down to a relative handful. At the same time, we have seen a large increase in the number of portable band-mills that offer custom sawing of a few logs at the customer’s place.”

Those mills provided wood for everything from barn beams to polished executive desks. The greatest gun stocks in the world can be made from Illinois black walnut.

While Illinois is known as the Prairie State, more than 4 million acres of deciduous forests and woodlots exist within our borders, with additional acreage now returning to forest through conservation initiatives. Illinois’ once-booming mining industry demanded mine timbers made from strong Illinois oak (heavy mining equipment can navigate the muddiest areas while riding upon bolted-together mats of unsinkable beams). Railroads every year purchased millions of board feet of hardwood ties to lay beneath the thousands of miles of rail lines in Illinois and elsewhere.

And while mining-industry demands might be diminished, furniture, shipping pallets, railroad ties and home construction projects around the world still utilize the exact kind of timber found in Illinois forests.

The reason why our timber isn’t being utilized? The answer might be surprising.

“Finding labor is a real problem,” explained Stan Curtis, whose Carbondale Veneer Company, Inc. keeps three crews of loggers busy from May through December in the forested hills of southern Illinois. “The supply of timber isn’t a problem. I hate to say it, but it’s getting harder and harder to find people willing to work anymore.

“Young people today have so many different job opportunities—jobs we never imagined would exist 25 years ago,” Curtis said while visiting one job site on a humid August afternoon. “Kids just don’t want to consider taking a job outdoors where they work hard.”

It seems the life of a lumberjack just isn’t the dream of every child today, reflected by the fact a mere 9,000 Illinois workers are still employed in the entire wood-products industry, not including

The father-son team of Mark and Clarence Willenborg keep logs rolling at their Effingham mill. Samuel Alstat takes in the view from atop his father’s shoulders on the sawdust mountain at Alstat Wood Products in Murphysboro.

For more information about Illinois wood products, visit:The Illinois Wood Products Association at: www.siu.edu/%7Eiwpa/index.html. Also: The Illinois Forestry Development Council: http://ifdc.nres.uiuc.edu/about.htm.

Timber buyers are licensed by the Department of Natural Resources. Landowners are advised that licensed buyers will have an identification card. If a landowner has any concerns they should contact their local DNR forester, or call the Office of Law Enforcement at (217) 782-6431.

smaller, independent businesses or self-employed timber buyers and loggers.

At family-run businesses like Heartland Hardwoods near Effingham, third-generation timber man Mark Willenborg offers his sawmill employees a short day on Friday, one of the incentives to retain his portion of the Illinois wood products workforce.

"I like to give the guys the afternoon off on Fridays," Willenborg explained while offering a tour of his state-of-the-art milling operation. About 20 years ago, Willenborg decided his best chances for surviving a stalled business climate was to diversify with a range of products.

"We do everything from selling wood mulch to manufacturing moulding and hardwood flooring—the sawdust even goes into the local agricultural community. We get everything out of the tree we can," Willenborg said while strolling through a nearly spotless warehouse where pallets are assembled by machine. "We keep it this clean because it encourages safety."

The high cost of liability insurance and Workers' Compensation made it impossible for many sawmills to survive into the 80s and 90s (in 2000, Illinois timber processors paid out $1.06 in Workers' Compensation fees for every dollar paid in worker salary), and so Willenborg stresses a clean operation, which ultimately reduces costs.

To increase efficient use of the lumber, he also installed laser guides on his saws to reduce the occasional mis-cut.

"They weren't cheap," he grinned. "But they eventually paid for themselves with the boards we saved—and they're kind of neat."

Outside in the wide lot, a pair of semis rumble to a stop, carrying a load of fresh logs, and Willenborg stepped outside again. Even with his sawmill crew off for the afternoon, certain production carries on.

"We like to get the logs off the ground and away from moisture as fast as possible," he explained. "People don't think of logs as perishable produce, but they really do change quite fast from the moment they're cut."

Inspecting the new logs also reveals what no expert can predict among standing timber: hidden flaws. Every buyer of standing timber rolls dice when offering a price to woodlot owners, hoping that only a small percentage of timber that appears to be healthy is, in fact, not plagued by a heartwood rot.

Clarence Willenborg loads cabinet-grade Illinois oak, bound for an Alabama furniture maker.

Laser beams reduce waste for precision cuts at a modern Illinois sawmill.

"The lower part of the log near the base is the most valuable part," offered Daniel Alstat, whose Alstat Wood Products in Murphysboro mills logs into everything from pallet boards to furniture-grade lumber. "But you really don't know until you cut into it whether it's going to be a good log or something we really can't use."

Alstat resurrected his father's idle sawmill operation some years ago and tries to keep a balance of services available to customers.

"Sometimes we'll custom-cut a log for a person," Alstat said, "People might want a certain size fireplace mantel they can't find anywhere else."

Or a favorite shade tree might get knocked over in a storm, and customers will bring the log to Alstat for processing into boards which will become keepsake furniture or cabinets.

"We're not a huge operation," Alstat said. "But we keep busy."