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Alabama Sawmiller Turns to Added-Value

Logosol PH260 Four-Head Planer-Moulder Exceeds Expectations; 'The Finish Is Second to None'

By Diane Calabrese
Contributing Author

TIBBIE, Ala. — Craig E. Howard worked in a chemical plant for 13 years on a swing shift, three days on, three days off. He figured he could make some extra money by sawing lumber during his days off. So in 1998 he bought an Accu-Trac portable sawmill, paired the mill with a Miner edger, and launched his company, Howard Lumber.

Today, Howard Lumber is a full-time business for Craig, 36. He decided he could have more financial security if he had his own business, and he liked sawmilling.

With his technical know-how, Craig was confident he could maintain his equipment and keep it going. "I can build pretty much anything," he said. "Give me a burning torch and a welding machine." He has built air kickers, conveyor belts, done electrical and plumbing work, and more.

Craig's mechanical expertise makes him an exacting customer when it comes to buying sawmill equipment for his company. When he decided to take Howard Lumber in the direction of specialty lumber production, he looked for a tough, durable planing machine. He found it in the Logosol one-pass planer-moulder, which he has been running since June 2002. "The machine exceeded my expectations," he said.

And Craig had very high expectations. "I'm kind of a control nut," he explained. "I do all my own sawing because that's my business. We do specialty work, and we do quality work. My quality is going to be next to none." Word-of-mouth brings him much of the work.



Craig Howard with Logosol PH260 Planer-Moulder; the machine is fitted with a chip extractor also made by Logosol.

The Logosol PH260 four-head planer-moulder, which accommodates a variety of molding knives, fits Craig's philosophy. All he has to do is look at the finished wood, planed on four sides, to know he made a good choice in the Logosol. "The finish is second to none," he said. For the Logosol's size and what it does, Craig believes the planer-moulder has no match. Logosol also has provided good service and technical support, he said. "Service is more important than anything."

Craig's business is focused currently on producing flooring and paneling. "We do lots of custom work," he said. Specialty work includes custom remanufacturing and resawing for paneling and other products. For example, a customer recently brought him a few hundred board feet of antique pine for remanufacturing. Another recent remanufacturing job was over 1,000 board feet of cypress and red oak.

An integral component of Craig's business is manufacturing pine flooring and paneling. He buys about 4,000 board feet of pine logs per week, mainly long-leaf pine and slash pine. "We cut it up and mill it into one-by material," he said, for anything that is going into pine flooring and paneling.

After sawing the logs into rough lumber, Craig dries it before planing. He built a dry kiln that can dry green lumber to 6% moisture content in two weeks. The kiln has two cells and a capacity of 8,000 board feet. It is heated with an outdoor wood-burning furnace from Hardey Mfg; the furnace is fueled with waste slabs from the sawmill. Craig also uses a Hardey furnace to heat his house. The system works just like central heat because hot water passes across a coil and regulates the flow of warm air.

The Logosol planer-moulder is fitted with a chip extractor that was also made by Logosol. The chip extractor "does a good job," said Craig. "It has plenty of suction, plenty of flow." The chips recovered by the extractor are sold for animal bedding.

Logosol, which is headquartered in Sweden, also makes portable sawmills, which it sells in 50 countries. It has had a U.S. subsidiary in Madison, Miss. since 1998. Logosol distributed its one-pass planer-moulder in Sweden for six years before it began to offer the machine in the U.S. in December 2001.

Craig and his one employee have been so busy that Craig's wife, Angela, often steps in and operates the Logosol planer-moulder. "She runs it as much as I do," he



Craig Howard with a stack of random length tongue and groove flooring ready for shipping. Craig built a dry kiln that can dry green lumber to 6% moisture content in two weeks. Shown below, the kiln has a capacity of 8,000 board feet, and is heated with a Hardey outdoor wood-burning furnace. The furnace is fueled with waste slabs from the sawmill.



said. Angela also does all bookkeeping for the business. Craig anticipates hiring another worker in 2003.

Business is going so well that Craig, who also has another planer, is considering adding a second Logosol PH260 planer-moulder. The combination of planing and kiln-drying adds significant value to wood products — as much as a 10 times in some cases. Craig grades finished lumber into two categories, mill run and premium grades; he prices premium grade lumber about 25% higher than mill run.

Craig has become very savvy about wood products, but he had no first-hand experience in the industry until he got started with his sawmill five years ago. "I'm self-taught, the whole nine yards," he said. He reads everything he can get his hands on about the forest products industry. His father-in-law manufactures custom molding, and Craig got some advice from him.

Craig keeps a sharp eye on his return on investment, and he said he likes the fact that he can "take an ordinary piece of lumber that was worthless and make it into" a valuable commodity.

Howard Lumber advertises on the Internet, and Craig routinely sends e-mail photos of products to prospective customers. "The Internet is the best tool to come along for the little guy," he said. When potential customers can view photos

of his company's work, it eliminates the need — and cost — for manufacturing and shipping sample materials. Craig has received Internet inquiries from as far away as Maine. He routinely sells out-of-state in Texas, shipping via contract haulers.

A native of Tibbie, Ala., Craig is happy he has been able to have a business in the same town where he grew up. Tibbie, which has a population of 327, is about 42 miles northwest of Mobile. To house his sawmill operations, Craig converted an old hog barn on his property to a shop. "My daddy had hogs in it for 20 years," he said. He also built a 4,000-square-foot shed that is used to air dry lumber as a supplement to his kiln.

With his array of equipment and his talent for building and designing, Craig is happy to take on custom jobs of all sorts. "Anybody can bring me any kind of wood, and I'll turn it into a valuable custom product," he said. From the custom work of planing, such as in V-joint paneling, to the manufacturer of pine flooring, his business is keeping him very busy. "It takes every minute I have," he said. "I probably have less time than I had, but I wouldn't trade what I do. We enjoy it. We do it as a family.

"I'm just doing my own thing," he continued, "and I'm not subject to a plant closing. If I give people a good product and service, they'll come back to me."