

10 July, 2006

Port Alberni, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada

Hello to all,

While visiting the R.B. McLean Mill National Historical Site, the last remaining commercial scale steam powered sawmill in North America, I had the opportunity to speak with one of the volunteers who keeps the place going and operates the mill for museum visitors.

He'd worked all over the island in the logging business, but got his start on the dreaded Greenchain at this mill. The Greenchain was the mechanism that pulled the cut lumber into the sorting yard where the entry level workers, usually local teenagers, were responsible for pulling it off the line and stacking it into its proper position.

He told of long days of freezing rain, blistering summer heat, and blowing winter snow all spent struggling to keep up with the output of the sawmill, whose relentless log carriage never stopped, the song of the blades never ceased, and the cruel Greenchain continued to rumble, hour after hour, day after day, week after week.



The McLean Mill Greenchain

Every local man I met in the community, from salesmen to teachers, had their first job on the Greenchain. All got the same weathered look on their face as they told their story. Their eyes creased partially shut, their shoulders tightened and their voices hardened as they all, every one, related almost identical epic tales of their battles with the Greenchain - lonely days out in the weather of the sorting yard while the cutting crew enjoyed the heat of the steam pipes and the shelter of the mill.

Around the mill they referred to the Greenchain as "the path to higher education," since it only took a month or two before a young man usually decided there were better ways to spend his life.

Those that stuck it out joined a crew of 22 men who operated the modestly sized mill. From the boiler operator to the head Sawyer they were an elite, hard working team who needed to be ultra-efficient, not only because they were working for legendarily frugal Scotsman McLean, but because they were operating a steam powered sawmill that was an antique even back in their day.

Finding and maintaining an economically viable niche versus the giant electrically powered mills in the highly competitive logging industry was a daily struggle until one of the McLean sons abruptly posted a shut down notice one day at lunchtime in 1965.

22 men



The Head Sawyer (left) passes the log carriage through the double saw. The McLean mill is now unique in its ability to cut lumber of long lengths and large dimension, as modern mills are designed to only cut common lumber lengths and dimensions.

The world's largest mill recently went into operation in Houston, British Columbia. The basic processes are still the same, incoming logs are sorted by type and size, the round logs are squared off by repeated passes through the saw and then the "money cuts" are made to produce finished lumber. The lumber is cut to length and planed to dimension, stacked with like product and dried for market. Ships, trucks and trains carry the finished lumber to waiting wholesale and retail market channels. Like the steam powered McLean mill, the Houston mill also employs a relatively small crew to run the operation.

At its peak the 22 men of the McLean mill produced about 32,000 board feet of lumber a day. The crews of the Houston mill produce, on average, 2,700,000 board feet of lumber a day. Every day. The owner of the Houston mill, Canfor, Canada's largest softwood operation, last year produced 4,624,000,000 board feet of lumber in all its mills.



A log raft (or boom) can contain up to 4,000,000 board feet of raw logs.

Where does all that lumber go?

Annual housing unit construction:

Canada	200,000
USA	2,000,000
China	10,000,000

It is estimated that western Canada can supply, on a sustainable basis, about 40% of the world's demand for wood products. In 2002 the forest products sector contributed \$30 billion to Canada's GNP and employed 361,000.

Be well,
Doug

Board Foot: 12 inches by 12 inches by 1 inch (12"x12"x1")

Sources: R.B. McLean Logging Museum, Vancouver Sun, Global Forest Watch, Canfor

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