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Bondurant Family Builds Reman Business

Alabamians leave sawmill behind for more promising opportunity.

By Jennifer McCary
July 2004

Former Flomaton, Alabama, saw-miller and present wholesaler-remanufacturer John Bondurant, 54, is busy building a family enterprise focused more on service than sales. Five short years ago, he established Bondurant Lumber Wholesale & Export (BLWE) at the former sawmill site where he and five brothers apprenticed under their father, D.J. Bonderant, for nearly five decades. His wife, Teresa, and their sons, Dietrich, 28, and Jason, 25, are key members of the team. The sons worked at the family's sawmill and building supply outlets during their teens and young adult years.



Founded in 1952, the former D.J. Bondurant Lumber Co. operated 46 years before the family elected to close the sawmill and liquidate all equipment assets in 1998. For years the company's management had noted changes in the industry that made it difficult for small independents to remain competitive. In the '80s they began to focus more on retailing and less on manufacturing, eventually opening three retail outlets in nearby communities. When the mill closed, eldest son Dewey Jr. assumed management of the family's three retail building

supply stores in Century, Fla., and in Atmore and Brewton, Ala.

John, who had served as sales manager at the sawmill, was the only brother to actually stay in the lumber processing business. Drawing on his 30 years of experience and contacts, he hoped to develop a future for himself and his sons. As it happened, eldest son Dietrich earned a degree in business management from Auburn University that same year.

"We feel like the Lord has had His hand on this whole thing and we've just stood back in awe," says John, who fills the sales management role. He notes the company has grown in spite of the tough economy of post 9/11. "The reason we say that is because it

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all just fit together like a puzzle. I had the background; Dietrich had the business training; my wife had the accounting skills, and Jason has the people skills to manage the operation. You couldn't find four people who get along better."

Meager Startup

Initially, the family brokered lumber to wholesale and export markets. That quickly expanded to remanufacturing in the second year of operation, with Jason serving as plant manager. The Bondurants purchased the abandoned mill site and buildings from the family estate and started the operation with a borrowed forklift, portable circular saw and tape measure.



"We wanted to get into the reman business because we saw the potential for growth and it had some advantages that we thought were great," John states. "We saw an opportunity there and so we just started out very small."

Situated on 28 acres, the old mill facility was in a state of disrepair. Some buildings were torn down and replaced to make room for expanding production divisions that now include ripped lumber, custom cut-ups and other specialty products. Other structures such as the kiln sheds were reassigned to serve new functions. Kilns are now used for storage, for example.



Most of the \$412,000 investment—including equipment purchases, construction of a 10,000 sq. ft. metal building and several sheds, site preparation, paving and other renovations—was accomplished without outside financing, according to Dietrich, who serves as general manager.

In just five-plus years the business has expanded from a simple three-employee regrading station to encompass four operating divisions involving 50 workers. Today the company processes and sells close to 40MMBF of pine lumber and serves a wide range of customers across various industries. These include truss plants, pallet mills,

crating manufacturers, treaters, exporters and sawmills. Products are sold throughout the Southeast, Midwest and Texas. A small volume also goes to northeastern outlets. Export markets include Mexico and the Caribbean.

The specialty products division is the company's fastest growing and is expected to continue at a brisk growth rate. These products

include a wide selection of profiled products such as log cabin siding, bullnose decking, masterdeck decking, flooring and shiplap siding. Other custom items include step stringers, angled balusters, 1x2s and 2x2s. Management projects a 100% increase in specialty volumes in the next two to three years.

The business enjoys a stable workforce with lower than average turnover. About 20 percent of employees have more than three years on the job. Key non-family management includes assistant plant manager Darren Wilson, office manager Angela Jernigan and millwright Bobby Branch.

Quality, Service

Much of this growth is the result of an uncompromising focus on quality and service, which has earned the respect and loyalty of some of the largest treaters and industrial customers in the market, according to the Bondurants.



A significant component of BLWE's success is the facility's convenient location. The surrounding area has several major sawmills that often need special services or products they aren't equipped to provide. Thus, they often turn to BLWE. Lumber may be precision end-trimmed, cut-to-size, ripped, patterned or customized with services such as non-standard dressing, profiling or packaging. Loads of lumber can be picked up from the mill, remanufactured and delivered to the customer with minimal freight costs. Bondurant also has the capability of filling an order of multiple length cutups in one truckload, a service many customers appreciate.



"If a customer needs six or seven lengths on a load, I can do that with no problem," states Dietrich. "It's attractive to the customer to have all the different lengths they use on one truck."

BLWE also benefits sawmills because it is a convenient market for sawmills' mis-manufactured, weathered, low grade and/or high moisture lumber. Bondurant buys such material and adds value.

Sawmills are also reman customers. They purchase specialty products such as imported kiln sticks, grooved crossouts and lath strips from Bondurant.

Treaters are the largest segment of the customer base and primary purchasers of a full array of specialty products. They are very discerning customers, however, and are only willing to attach their

name and reputation to the highest quality products available. Bondurant supplies the three leading treaters in the region as well as several smaller independents.

Operations

Lumber is purchased from area sawmills and sorted by grade for BLWE's various divisions. Low grades typically go into one of the cut-up programs where it may be ripped or chopped to recover maximum grade and value.

In the ripping division, there are three ripsaws—a Raiman and two Alden units. Ripped materials go to a grading chain and are graded and SPIB grade stamped. Bondurant is one of the few reman facilities that is agency certified to supply grade stamped products. Truss manufacturers are a primary customer for this division.

Downfall from other divisions and purchased low-grade materials go to the cut-up and sizing division. Machines in use here include a GreCon Dimter 204 optimizing saw, installed in 2002, and chop saws by Whirlwind and DeWalt. The GreCon processes about 15MBF per shift and significantly reduces waste. It can read grade crayon marks to determine where to cut boards to recover clears and high-grade pieces. It can also be programmed for a cut list of several lengths. The system then determines optimum recovery from each board.



"We try not to throw anything away," Dietrich emphasizes. The smallest product produced is a 5 in. 2x4 block, which is used in the manufacture of a consumer product. These wood blocks are palletized and shrink-wrapped for shipping.

Shavings and sawdust are sold to Temple Inland, which operates a particleboard plant at Monroeville, Ala.

It is interesting that the state-of-the-art GreCon optimizer is housed in what was once the main sawmill building, physically and symbolically linking the Bondurant family's rich sawmill heritage and its future growth in the lumber business.



The specialty division is equipped with a Diehl molder, five-head Weinig molder and a Newman 20 ft. drop saw trimmer. Other specialty equipment includes an in-house built double end trimmer, a tenoner for angled cuts and a router for step stringers. As an added service, products may be

custom packaged to meet various
retailer specifications.

Future plans include additional investments in the specialty division, which may include a third molder and other upgrades. Depending on developing markets, the family may automate the GreCon infeed and add another building.

For the Bondurants, the sawmilling to remanufacturing transition has gone very well. Looking back to his sawmill days, John says, "It was like a roller coaster ride and most of it was downhill. I was on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This is a piece of cake compared to that. At least this affords some opportunity to catch your breath and enjoy life."

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