

Peterson *Slabber*

The trick in operating a successful small sawmill business is to find a niche and mill specialty lumber at a premium price. Jesse Kemp of Kemp Fine Woodworking has found such a niche cutting wide slabs as part of his woodworking/sawmill business in Springfield, Missouri. "I did my first paying woodworking job when I was 12," Jesse recalled during a recent interview. "My dad took me to a mill, and I bought enough to make a plant stand. Now I'm 35, I've realized the dream of milling these logs myself."

After working in a commercial cabinet shop for a couple of years, Jesse decided to strike out on his own. He now builds doors and furniture. "A little bit of everything from Federal to contemporary styles," as he describes it. But Jesse's specialty is slab furniture—tables, headboards, bookcases, and heavy shelving. "I enjoy building them, and people really like the look of the live edge that shows the way the tree was formed," he said. Initially, Jesse purchased his slabs from sawmills, but discovered that they simply could not produce the material he wanted. "Nobody could slab up a 6-foot-diameter log, or even a 4-foot-diameter log," he recalled. The solution was to set up his own sawmill.

Below: The Peterson slabber has a manual feed that gives a good feel for how the chain is cutting. All it takes is a light, but consistent, push to get straight, smooth slabs.



"I did a lot of research before buying the mill," Jesse noted. "Slabs are commanding a premium right now, but no one around here is cutting them." Encouraged by what he learned, he decided that the Peterson dedicated slabber would fit his needs. "I looked at a local Peterson swingblade mill, and saw the quality of construction, welds, overall design," Jesse said. "Other [Peterson] customers all had good things to say about their mills and about Peterson's support for them. It has a solid, stable frame, and seems to be well designed."

Winging It and Training

Although Peterson offers a training program for new sawmill owners, Jesse had to wing it at first, since he had customers lined up before he even had it assembled. With his familiarity with woodworking equipment, Jesse says he found the Peterson slabber to be a simple machine. After cutting a few of his own logs to get a feel for the sawmill, he was ready to saw for hire. "It started making money almost as soon as it was out of the box," he said. "I put 40 or 50 hours on the mill before I got the training. I had a lot of questions, and the Peterson staff members were very helpful." By the time Nathan Westerfield arrived to provide the training, Jesse was already familiar with the basics. "It worked out great, because I had enough experience to know what questions to ask," Jesse said.

Jesse soon encountered logs that challenged the mill's 6-foot-diameter capacity. "I've cut a honey locust with a fork that was right at 72 inches—and hard as a rock," he told me. The mill has a cutting thickness of 12 inches and rides on a 20-foot-long track. With a 27-hp Kohler engine driving a 0.404 "hyperskip" chain, the mill took it all in stride. "With this, I can handle the big logs that nobody around here is doing," he said. Ironically, some of his best customers are band saw mill operators who need to cut wider slabs than their mills allow. "It is a big investment," he noted, "but in this area, no one else does this as a service to the general public."

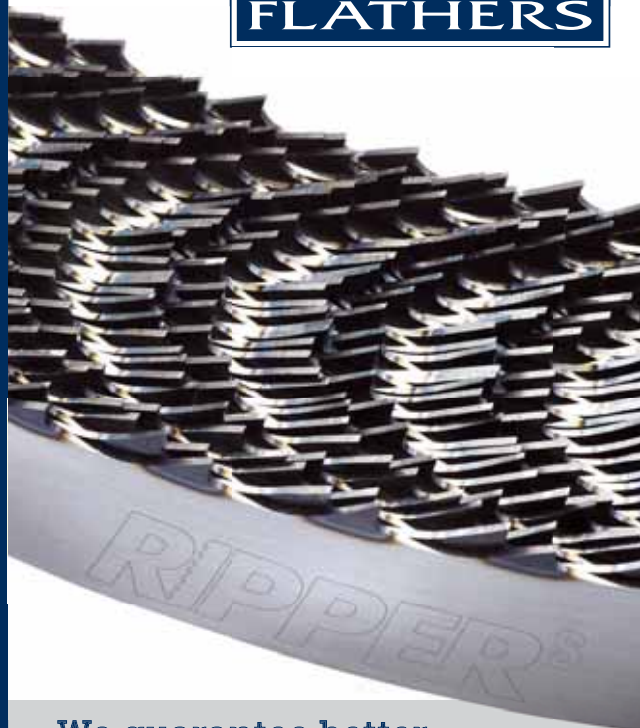
Milling Walnut Logs

On the day of my visit, Jesse had several large walnut logs to mill. Using a small forklift, he pushed the log in place on an asphalt parking lot, and set up the mill's track around the log. He then rolled the engine and cutterhead out of the shop on a dolly, and in 15 minutes had the slabber assembled and ready to cut. For most mills, a 3,000-pound log would be cumbersome and require heavy equipment, but the Peterson slabber requires no log handling. Jesse simply took off one 3-inch slab after another, moving each onto a stack with his forklift.

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Manufacturer	Peterson Sawmills
Cutter type	0.404 pitch multi skip chain saw
Power	27-hp Honda
Weight	616 lbs.
Maximum width of cut	76 in.
Maximum depth of cut	12 in.
Maximum log length	20 ft. standard, extensions available
Operation	Manual
Log handling	N/A

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Jesse took his time with each cut. The 3/8-inch-thick kerf and wide slabs make for slow going. As the cut progressed, Jesse drove in plastic wedges to keep the kerf open. The widest cuts from the middle of the log took nearly 6 minutes, but all that was forgotten when he pulled a stunning 3-inch-thick, five-foot-wide by 8-feet-long slab off the mill. The cut was perfectly straight, much smoother than one would expect from a chain saw mill. After he had cut four slabs from the log, Jesse stopped to put on a fresh chain. "Chains are definitely the most time-intensive part of maintenance," he told me. "You spend a lot of time sharpening them." Within 5 minutes, Jesse had the new chain mounted and was cutting the next slab. Overall, it took about an hour and a half to slab up the log, including offbearing, and two blade changes.

Urban Timber Lumber Sources

Jesse's main source of lumber is from inside the city of Springfield. "I'm very interested in the urban timber movement," he explained. "I have gotten quite a few logs from tree trimmers that I have turned into slabs." He noted that some of his clients specifically ask for an urban lumber source for their projects. "It's a growing trend, and people are interested in local sources and in reusing some-



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“Chains are definitely the most time-intensive part of maintenance,” he told me. “You spend a lot of time sharpening them.” —Jesse Kemp

thing as beautiful as a tree,” he continued. “You hate to see a tree go down, but you’d rather see it go for something more than firewood or mulch or going into a landfill.” In the short time he has had the mill, Jesse has stockpiled a good number of logs from tree trimmers, and says it looks like he will have a consistent supply of logs for his business. The portability of the mill is a big advantage for Jesse. “If someone has a huge tree in their lot, I can set up the mill around it and slab it up right there,” he said. “As long as I can get it through a garden gate, I can set it up and mill,” he said.

The Importance of Tracking

Organization is important to Jesse. For example, he keeps each chain in a plastic container and tracks the number of times it has been sharpened. “You figure out what makes money and what doesn’t,” he says. “I track the hours I run the mill, maintenance, things like that.”



Jesse soon became an expert in untangling nearly 200 links of chain in just a few seconds. The branching pattern produced some beautiful grain in this walnut slab.

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SAWMILL REVIEW

Jesse also tracks how long it takes to mill logs of different sizes and species so that he can give people an estimate of how long it will take to do a job, and predict how many chains, how much fuel, and how much bar oil it will take.

Jesse works with all species of wood, but favors walnut. "I'm in the middle of walnut country, so I have access to a lot of it," he noted. "The slabs bring a premium. I might look at \$7,000 just for one large walnut slab." Getting that price will require Jesse to refine his product. "I sell some slabs green, but I hope to have a dry kiln running this spring." Properly kiln-drying massive 3-inch-thick slabs takes up to four months, but Jesse is convinced that the extra value of the slabs will easily pay for the kiln. "I plan to stockpile some for my own use and to sell to other people. I like the idea of being able to go from the tree to a kiln-dry slab." He is also considering a Peterson planer head for the wide slabs, as well as a swing mill attachment so that he can cut dimension lumber, both for his own business and for clients who want to buy reclaimed urban lumber. ■

Dave Boyt has a BS degree in Forest Management and an MS in Wood Technology. He manages a tree farm (2006 Missouri Tree Farm of the Year), and operates a band saw sawmill.



Jesse rolls out the cutterhead for his Peterson slabber. The entire assembly rolls onto the tracks with no heavy lifting. In about 10 minutes, he was ready to cut.



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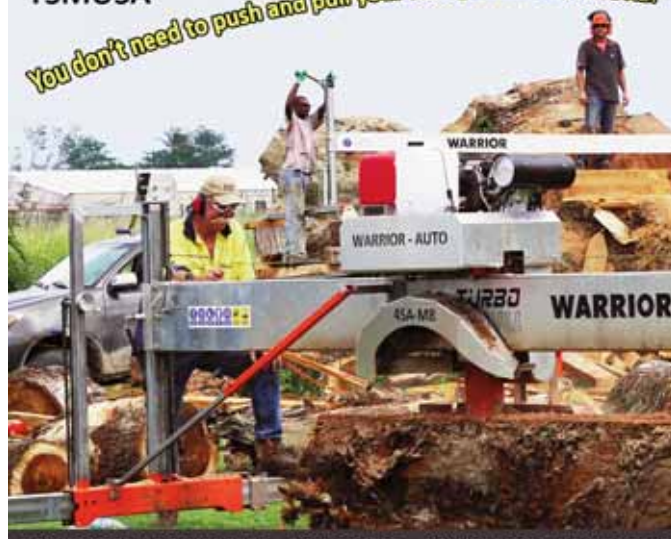
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