

When we can't sell our logs, we can produce timber

Story: Hayley Leibowitz

The All-Terrain Sawmill is a portable sawmill designed for operation in remote locations and rough terrain.



THE LITTLE SAWMILL THAT COULD IS holding its own in these trying times. While the forestry industry is facing uncertainty, Peterson Sawmills shines a light on what is possible.

“The Coronavirus is not affecting us to any detriment at this point – we don’t import any substantial parts from China. In fact, where

log exports and prices plummet, we normally find we sell more portable sawmills,” says CEO Kerris Peterson (Browne).

She explains that under difficult circumstances logging contractors are resourceful and look elsewhere for an income: “Many see the abundant log supply and the continued building boom. Buying

a portable sawmill and setting up a sawing service is the logical next step.”

She says she saw a similar response to the downturn in logging and prices last year: “Instead of panicking, we thought ‘that’s going to be good for us’. The logging crews that were laid off needed to find something else to do. When we can’t sell our logs, we

can produce timber here in NZ and supply the local market.”

She gives the example of gum sleepers. “At \$40 to \$50 in the store, there’s good margin to make your own. Buy some cheap logs, saw them up and sell for far cheaper,” says Kerris. “You don’t need to dry or treat them. So those logging gangs that are out of

work have been coming to us and buying the Junior Peterson model. At \$12,000 they can get a small loan. It’s something affordable to create an income. They can see the cheap logs. They just need to turn them into timber. They can see that opportunity. Taking it has been really good for us and for them.”

She adds that when the market comes

back they won’t feel bad about having a sawmill sitting in their shed. “It’ll sit there until they need it again. It’s not an overly expensive outlay.”

Humble beginnings

It’s that out-of-the-box thinking and adaptability that took Peterson Sawmills



Above: Ancient Kauri is an extremely valuable type of wood, which the Dedicated Wide Slabber can cut with ease.
Below: A pine slab dwarfs Factory Foreman, Paul Crompton.

through to its 30th anniversary last year. The company has come a long way since its humble beginnings in Fiji.

“My parents were hippies from the States living in the Fiji islands for 12 years. They always had in mind some type of machine that could be portable enough to move into the forest and cut trees into timber to build a house,” says Kerris.

They were living in a thatched hut and had to boat in timber. “It was just completely illogical because we were living in 500 acres of beautiful forest, but we had no way to harvest. I think a lot of inventions come about from necessity,” she says.

After the 1987 coup, NZ was the nearest port that would take the family as refugees. Not allowed to work, her father, Carl

Peterson, finally pursued the idea of a portable sawmill that would be light enough to move, says Kerris. “At that point the only thing on the market that they called portable was this great big machine on a humungus trailer. If you couldn’t get a vehicle into the forest, how would you get the sawmill in?”

Carl developed the idea of having a single blade that could cut both vertically and horizontally, with a smaller, lighter motor. “He started with just a chainsaw power head. He took the bar and chain off and put a sprocket and a blade on and it actually worked. Eventually we all got work permits and I worked for a corporate company, while Dad continued to play with his designs in his garage,” remembers Kerris.

It was only once he had a workable

Above: The Dedicated Wide Slabber cuts logs into high-value wide slabs using a chainsaw slabber style bar.

Below left: Carl Peterson designed the first prototype swingblade portable sawmill in 1987, a simple box-type frame on fixed tracks and powered by an old chainsaw powerhead.

Below: Close-up of the main carriage of the Automated Swingblade Mill (ASM). The ASM makes horizontal and vertical cuts, changes the size or depth of the cut, and removes the previously cut board, all at the touch of a button by the operator.



machine a few years later that Carl hit his first major obstacle – the idea of the single swing blade couldn’t be patented as it was already open technology. There was an existing, much bigger sawmill with a large blade. “However, it’s like anything large diameter,” explains Kerris, “it had excessive gyroscopic forces working against it and the patent was abandoned.”

Carl’s smaller version that held its rigidity became popular with farmers in NZ. “You know farmers don’t want to spend a fortune and they can pull it out when they need it, saw up some wood, make some more farm fences, rebuild the barn, fix the house, whatever. It was great for farmers.”

Around five years later, Carl hit another major obstacle. Having found an agent in Australia at a time when “paperwork didn’t exist” and there were no written agreements, his swingblade design was copied and mass produced.

“Though it was a cheaper model with plastic guarding, the loss of the Australian market was gut-wrenching for him,” says Kerris. Meanwhile she started work at Petersons and could see the potential. “My husband and I invested some money in Dad’s business, so when it went under a few years later, our investment was used to purchase the brand. We then rebranded and started afresh in 2003. We stuck with quality, using stainless steel and aluminium.”

A fresh start

Having bought the Intellectual Property, Kerris and her husband, Chris, kept the original name and updated the logo. With an engineering background, Chris set about tweaking and redesigning the models. Kerris’ father has since retired to a farm in the central plateau, raising Highland cows and playing tennis, but his legacy remains strong. “Now we have all the stress,” She jokes.

And they have responded in style, with four different models sold around the world catering to demand. “Different countries around the world lean towards certain models and our models have come about to fit the needs of that market. So we’re not just one-size-fits-all like some of our competitors,” says Kerris.

For example, the Pacific Islands favours the All-Terrain sawmill, with tracks off the ground “so you don’t have to have level ground”. “They are more portable,” she says. “You can move them into the forest by hand. You can set them up on the side of a hill, down a ravine, over a creek – in very, very hard to reach places. So you carry the



sawmill in piece-by-piece, set up around the log without moving it, saw your boards and carry just the timber out.”

In New Zealand, the Winch Production Frame has been “the most prolific seller”. With a manual push-pull, it has key features like an electric winch for sighting and high-low frame to set up next to a pile of logs and roll them in under a high track. “So it’s great for contractors, farmers, small businessmen, guys who have access to their timber with a clearing in the forest to get a vehicle in. It’s efficient and fast, but still manual and affordable,” says Kerris.

Then there’s the Automatic sawmill where the operator stands or sits in one place and operates the feed with the handle. “So there’s little physicality in the operation of it, but it’s a high producer. It can go all day, every day. It’s ideal for small businesses, commercial sawmilling, timber yards, things like that,” she says. “The Americans love it because they don’t have to hire a tailout person.”

The Junior Peterson is “for your retired guys” says Kerris. “Someone that’s just building their own house. It can do a smaller log, it’s got a smaller motor. It’s for people who aren’t in a rush and have got time to saw.”

Lastly is the Dedicated Slabber, designed purely for slicing through a log in one go. “It’s for the new up-and-coming market for slabs... so board tables, picnic tables, coffee tables... where they want that rustic edge.”

With its start in Australia, the slab trend is now picking up in the US market. “So we’re selling a lot of slabbers to the US now as well. As the years go by, countries will pick up on trends and that’s very much a machine for a trend,” explains Kerris.

People and product

One happy customer is Sustainable Fine Timber’s Glenn Crickett. Originally with the NZ Forest Service planting exotic trees, primarily Tasmanian Blackwoods and then with the Department of Conservation, he has his own block of land growing trees to mill into tongue and groove flooring and panelling.

He bought a Winch Production Frame seven years ago and finds it to be “accurate, versatile, reliable and well-priced”.

Once he sets up a kiln for drying, he’ll be milling Eucalyptus for flooring and wood panelling. He says he finds his Peterson to be well-suited to what can be a tricky tree to work with.

Eucalyptus Niten or Shining Gum as it’s



Left: Kerris and Chris Browne have built their own company from the ground up.

Left bottom: The swing blade process results in plenty of dimensional lumber with very little waste.

Right: The Junior Peterson is the perfect swingblade sawmill designed for part-time sawmilling.



known, is a fast growing, sustainably grown hardwood with good strength. He has some 600 trees, all pruned and managed. “Because it grows so fast in our Westland climate, it creates a lot of tension in the log, making the boards come out crooked, with a boomerang effect. So we have to quarter saw and resaw and that means there is a certain amount of wastage. With smaller diameter Eucalypts you have to allow for the resawing wastage,” says Glenn.

He’s also growing a stand of Tasmanian Blackwood’s, “a very beautiful tree with beautiful timber”. “I wanted to see if I could grow it better than it had been grown previously in Westland. I got off to a bad start trying to figure out pruning techniques but I’m managing to grow those now, though they’re not nearly big enough yet,” says Glenn of his 400 trees.

He adds that Peterson’s back-up service is “outstanding”. “Nine out of ten times we

can sort things out by phone or email. They stand by their product,” he says.

As a hands-on manager, this is exactly what Kerris set out to achieve. With that in mind, she tries out each product herself. “If it’s too hard for me to run one of our machines, it’s too hard and I’ll send it back to R&D. A lot of our owners will be retired folk. You know they’re not as fit and strong as in their early days, so it needs to be easy to operate.

Each machine is sold with free training explains Kerris: “That’s the difference between a new owner going home and sawing up a log on his first day, versus spending two weeks trying to work it out. And we’re teaching them, not only how to run a machine, but how to look at a log, how to dissect it, how to get the best cut, the best quality timber, how to use your saw depending on what species you’ve got and what you’re using it for... how timber dries, how it bows when it dries. So a lot of our articles on our website are information

around timber harvesting and processing. It’s about what you can do with timber and how to do it. The weekend is often when they need that support and they can ring us any time.”

She adds that it’s not only about the product but also about the family they’ve created: “Not just the blood family, but with our sawmill owners as well. They feel part of the family. Our goal is to make a difference

through our staff and to our owners.”

Most of her staff are long term and her family and extended family are part of the company. “It’s a great buy-in you know. Because they are family, you know they’re gonna do their job well. Yeah I suppose the tricky thing is making sure they fit to start with,” she says.

Starting part-time initially, most of her staff are now long-terms, says Kerris: “We’re

hanging onto people for a long time. And yes, the younger ones often stay for a couple of years then go off and chase the big money – and you know what? They come back.”

A bumpy road

Though the company is thriving now, with 13 staff, it has not been without its challenges. “The 2007 Global Financial Crisis was a massive low for us,” says Kerris. “At that



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point, 60% of our income was from the US market and that went down to about 20% within six months. That hurt us real bad. But I'm a person who likes to stay ahead of issues, so we took that opportunity to cull and we became lean and changed our focus to the Australian market very quickly. Being a small business, you can react very quickly. And it was the Australian market that kept us going during those years."

She adds that it's only in the last couple of years that the company has been able to re-focus on the States again: "I suppose our challenge is that we are in NZ and when we get large orders our suppliers are not able to react to the increase in demand at short notice. It's a challenge to manufacture here because all our suppliers are also small businesses and they are also very lean and not holding stock.

"For instance, one of our motor suppliers hasn't been able to keep up and they're charging us to fly in motors at late notice. It's just not working and I said, 'you know, you guys need to hold on hand one or two of those motors at all times if you want to continue to deal with us'. One supplier has said, 'no problem at all', and the other has said, 'no, you hold them in stock', so obviously we know which one we're going to continue with. And that's an ongoing struggle with manufacturing in NZ."

Nonetheless, she's quick to point out that she's not going anywhere in a hurry: "I love this country. I'm a US citizen. I could start manufacturing in the US tomorrow, but I love my lifestyle here. We have the lakes, the forest, the ocean. I'm a triathlete. I'm a coach. I'm not going to swap that for anything. So I take it on the chin and know that I will have challenges in NZ and I will continue with those for the choice of my lifestyle."

Health & Safety too has presented a challenge. "Back in my father's day there were a couple of incidents with new designs where there was no precedent or established standard. It was a sharp learning curve in those early days. But what I can say is that we reacted really quickly to those. Dad did some fairly major recalls and upgrades very quickly. So being able to react to those again as a small company has been a great benefit."

Now it's all about R&D meetings and "idiot-proofing", creating machines that are as safe as possible, she says. She emphasises that Peterson Sawmills holds itself up to European CE safety standards, with no major accidents in the past 16 years.

Moving forward

As to the future, Kerris says she is looking

for new agencies in different countries: "We're really just getting more aggressive with our product. We place strong emphasis on our website and I write blogs myself. We're about sharing information, especially information that new sawmillers need. It's not just product. Our whole business is an industry."

Currently manufacturing all machines in Rotorua, Kerris says there will be a point where she sets up manufacturing overseas for better efficiency and scale: "But I would probably look at getting a company to do that for us. It's silly. We're importing motors from the States to put on these machines to turn them around and send them back. There's a lot of wastage in the shipping cost.

"Servicing the Pacific and Australasia is very easy for us and I can see that continuing on for many years to come. But South America, North America, Canada and Europe could be serviced better without the shipping costs."

Despite the challenges though, she says it's all been worth it, being able to reach that 30-year mark. "It means a lot. It's worth shouting about. Being a small business in NZ, having ridden out those waves. A lot of smaller companies went under in the recession. I am so proud that we have been able to ride those.

"It is like water though, you can't fight water, you have to ride it. Our designs have only got stronger, we listen to our customers and continue to improve and research and develop. I'm just so, so proud of that and so proud of our staff that stuck with us in those trying times. Now we're riding a wave that's moving again.

"Yes, the industry has become more competitive but celebrating our 30-year



anniversary makes it fairly obvious that we were the original. And being able to say that we were the original, we are the original and we're still the best, gives us a lot of credibility. Our reliability and reputation has withstood the test of time." ^(NZL)

Above: The Standard Frame or tube frame was initially screwed to the log. Carl Peterson doing a demo at the Kaikohe A&P Show, 1989.

Below: Of all the Peterson range, the Winch Production Frame is the most popular of the portable sawmills for sale, as its design features enable the operator to work more efficiently while allowing for future upgrades when demand increases.



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