

160th
YEARS
ANNIVERSARY

Heartwood:



The Chisholm Lumber Story

Article by Lindi Pierce

Photography by Daniel Vaughan

Chisholm's Mill, that iconic structure on the Moira River near Roslin, is a favourite destination for painters and photographers. Debra Tate-Sears, who rendered the mill in watercolours in 1986, explains the appeal. "There is something very romantic about old mills as a reminder of our past, and

something very special about one that crosses years and generations to remain relevant in the landscape of the present." Debra points out the features that draw artists: reflections in the river, old limestone, stained tin, and faded signage, the variety of forms and planes.





For artists, historians, and those who simply enjoy picturesque spots on Sunday drives, this aging building is Chisholm's. But nothing could be further from the truth. Turns out the old mill (a rebuild after a 1944 fire) is unused, preserved by a family steeped in lumbering tradition but solidly forward-looking. A visit to the site – or to the informative Chisholm Lumber website – reveals a modern,

Chisholm Lumber knows where it came from, it knows where it's going.

Folks who buy the occasional sheet of plywood or a 2x4 at the local big box store may fail to grasp the uniqueness of Chisholm Lumber. Naturally, Chisholm's retail store sells those things. A customer who buys a piece of pine at Chisholm's purchases a board sold by the family who

private wood lot owners. Chisholm's is a fully integrated forest products operation. All the divisions operate in sync; production can turn on a dime in response to new demands and trends. Production meetings are typically held on the fly; with any planned conferences being squeezed in around 5 a.m., before the day's busy operations begin at 7.



multi-faceted international business with a very long history, and a local family – six generations of it – at its heart.

The year was 1857, the era of lumber barons Booth, Gilmour, and Rathbun. Men, horses, and forests were squandered in desperate and dangerous pursuit of prosperity from the resource considered inexhaustible. Sawmills flourished along the Moira and its tributaries, processing logs floated downstream from northern townships. In that year, William Fraser Chisholm moved his family from Marmora to a log house in Roslin and acquired Shipman's water-powered flour/grist and sawmill at this location.

Lumbering changed over time. Railway flatcars and later logging trucks replaced horses and log drives; the last one took place in 1910. Water power gave way to diesel, then electricity. As much as

grew, harvested, and manufactured the lumber.

Chisholm Lumber is primarily a hardwood sawmill. Their saws bite into white pine, as well as other softwoods – red pine, spruce, cedar, hemlock – for local retail and custom building. They are best known for, locally and globally, hardwood lumber derived sustainably from their own forests, then manufactured and dried on-site.

Diversification and integration are the keys to Chisholm Lumber's success in today's markets. The Chisholm Lumber Group of Companies encompasses the wholesale lumber division, managed by Peter Chisholm, the sawmill division managed by Jordan Chisholm, the retail division managed by Patrick Cassidy, the custom home building division, managed by Richard Reid, and a division which provides sustainable forest management services to businesses and

A guided tour around the 25-acre property begins with a drive through the massive retail warehouse, into a riverside field of neat board and batten buildings and open storage sheds, an old-style hip-roofed barn, and piles of weatherproof rough lumber. On the hill above, the story begins in the log yard.

Chisholm Lumber holds Sustainable Forest Licences, which allow them to sustainably harvest timber on their allocations of Crown Lands – mainly in the Bancroft/Mazinaw areas. "We have to manage this resource for 50, 80, 100 years into the future," explains Peter Chisholm. "Our certified forester walks every property and writes a prescription for the forest – what to take, what to leave – to ensure a healthy regenerating and renewable resource." Planned sustainable harvesting ensures mature trees are harvested, younger ones given room to grow.



Chisholm Lumber contracts loggers who, following the company's prescription, harvest logs and truck them to the yard at the Roslin mill. All the good softwood and hardwood logs are graded and processed on-site. Pulpwood logs are typically sent to paper mills.

YouTube videos on the Chisholm Lumber website show grapple trucks

gently unloading double flatbed trailer loads of forest-fresh logs into piles in the yard, and huge front-end loaders trundling forkfuls to a giant rotary grater, the debarker.

Once inside the sawmill, the debarked logs are 3D laser scanned then optimized by computer to obtain maximum yields of lumber with minimal waste. A massive automated hydraulic log carriage passes

logs back and forth through the saws, readjusting each log with a casual flip to position them for the most efficient cuts. A professional sawyer controls everything from an electronically sophisticated cab. The saw is not the enormous whirring circular blade of the melodramas (two old ones are displayed about the property, artistically laser-cut with the company logo) but an efficient six-foot double cut high-speed bandmill.



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Lumber off the saw is edged, then trimmed as it makes its way through the mill on different conveyers and chains. As a final step before being packed, a professional grader trained in National Hardwood Lumber Association at a hardwood grading school in Memphis Tennessee, ensures grade standards are kept as high as Chisholm customers' expectations.

The hardwood and softwood lumber is then trucked to Tweed for kiln drying. Chisholm Lumber's commitment to sustainable practices is again evident in their kiln drying operation. The computer-controlled facility is run over 95 per cent off the company's bioenergy heating system. Sawdust and dry shavings from their sawmill and planing mill are burned as fuel for the boilers, heating the kilns, and drying the

lumber, helping to keep oil dependence and energy costs down.

Back at Roslin, at the planing mill, dry lumber is again reprocessed and dressed to different profiles. Planer knives set by hand and eye by a seasoned mill operator produce an impressive range of profiles in a variety of sizes, species, and grades – v-joint, shiplap, log and cove siding, board and batten, floorings, and

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mouldings – which eventually make their way to the retail warehouse down the road.

There is next to no waste at this modern sawmill; the use of residual wood is a new motivation for the industry. Sawdust, once discarded at a cost, can now be transformed into pellet stove fuel. Leftover slabs off the saw are now sent to the chipper; the chips used by paper mills, or as bio-fuel, or by landscapers. Bark off the logs can be used for landscape bark mulch, or cattle bedding for farmers. “Formerly you paid to get rid of this stuff – it’s a complete reversal now with customers worldwide inquiring on availability.”

Responsiveness to trends is key. Peter points to piles of darkened lumber stacked under the tall trees near the river. These aged, cracked boards are the weathered top layer from piles of lumber stored outdoors. “It looks reclaimed, looks worn and useless, but it’s one of the most expensive products we sell. Designers, builders or homeowners come from all over Ontario and Quebec and they’ll just take it all in one go.” It will be used for accent walls, headboards, fireplaces, and furniture. Live edge stacks of pine and

reclaimed or new mantels are displayed along the warehouse office walls. Board and batten and the live sawn effect (boards with untrimmed bark edges), are popular rustic looks at the moment.

Hardwood lumber represents more than over 80 per cent of what Chisholm Lumber manufactures. The emphasis is on grade – the best quality ash, basswood, poplar, beech, birch, butternut, cheery, hard and soft maple, red and white oak. Kiln dried hardwood lumber is sold through their retail store, but mainly through their wholesale lumber division – Chisholm Forest Corp – where it is shipped in truckload or container load quantities to markets in Ontario, Quebec, the U.S., and overseas. End users include long-established furniture, flooring, and moulding manufacturers, cabinet and casket makers.

Their website and the Internet are helping Chisholm’s extend their reach, both in wholesale and retail. On the wholesale side, customers find them from all over the world. “It helps that we’ve been around so long – it shows customers from other countries we’re a reputable, long standing business.” The Internet also helps find potential off-shore markets, dealing with Canadian

trade commissioners to find trustworthy customers in countries worldwide – Taiwan, South Korea, Vietnam, and China to name a few.

The retail division of Chisholm Lumber is housed beside their historic mill in Roslin. The gleaming showroom panelled with pine and cedar provides a full range of lumber and building supplies. But the difference: most of the lumber and manufactured wood products are produced by Chisholm’s.

Much of the retail business is now done online too. “Customers can find us, see our products, pricing, learn about what we do,” explains Peter. “We’re a niche lumberyard with a diversified product mix. Hobbyists and woodworkers say we have all the stuff they can’t find anywhere else. Our website helps, but retail is also successful because we’re heavy on servicing these products to our customers. Here, the company and person who’s making the customer’s lumber is also the company and person they’re talking to.”

The showroom showcases Chisholm’s new line of rustic furniture, crafted by two Chisholm staffers. Unique designs and woods – wormy soft maple dining tables, live edge white pine coffee tables,



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hemlock benches. Furniture grown, harvested, manufactured and marketed by the family business. In a world that values 100-mile diets – 100-mile furniture!

Next door, the retail warehouse, a soaring structure with curving roof trusses, offers three tiers of racks of smooth, dry, fragrant lumber in rich colours, the deep grey of hemlock, warm brown of walnut, rust of cedar, bright white pine.

Craftspeople like to know where their wood comes from. Artisan Darryl Stutt explains. He appreciates Chisholm's because of the wide variety of woods available, the dry indoor storage, good prices, and knowledgeable service.

Darryl fashions willow, juniper, oak, elm, walnut, and maple into desks, tables, blanket boxes, shelves, urns, cutting and serving boards. "Each wood has its own





beauty and practical qualities. Maple, for instance, has antibacterial qualities. Elm repels water. Butternut is amazingly light.” And the beauty of wood! Darryl displays a walnut table showing the two distinct colours of light sapwood and dark heartwood in a single board. “Woodgrain is as unique as fingerprints. You don’t know what’s in a piece of wood until you begin machining.” He describes spalting, random black lines like seismograph records, and figured maple, with its deep shimmer like moiré fabric. The appeal of wormy wood. The darkening of patina on cherry.

Yet another division of Chisholm Lumber, their construction operation, began 10 years ago. Chisholm Lumber Design Build has built over 100 homes, with an emphasis on custom building. It’s a great value-added business to their other businesses – from log, to sawmill, to dry kilns, to planing mill, to retail store, to builder, to home owner – the entire process controlled by Chisholm Lumber. Log to living room, keeps quality up and costs down: timber framing to flooring,

walls and ceilings to wainscoting and siding, finished with the company’s own rustic furniture.

In 2017, Chisholm Lumber celebrates 160 years in business. How do they do it? Diversification. Integration. Quality. Sustainability. Innovative technology.

And family. Peter, Jordan, and Patrick are cousins. They work as business partners, each bringing strengths to the overall company, but with that extra connection, that special dynamic of a family business – shared vision, loyalty, pride. “We want to make the family business thrive.” Loyalty extends to the workforce, “the backbone of the company, the guys getting the product out every day.” Many of the 40 employees have been with Chisholm’s for 20 to 30 years.

The partners grew up in the business. “When you’re a kid you pile lumber, do what you’re told, try to learn what’s required.” Now it’s figuring out how to change and progress forward. Hard work. Being there. “If you’re not here

every day, paying attention, picking up on trends, changing, you won’t survive”, Peter observes. “That’s what’s kept this going for so many years, we’re always here, working, listening, thinking of ways to make it better – year after year.”

Along with a lot of hard work, Peter attributes Chisholm’s longevity to careful planning and mentoring. Chisholm Lumber is a case study in good succession planning; the last of the fifth generation, Doug Chisholm, has moved primarily to an advisor role and is always available with his knowledge, patience, and assistance. When asked, Peter admits he looks ahead to, “hopefully being as supportive to the next generation as he is to us.”

As to a seventh generation? Each of the partners has a young family, so it’s possible. A visit to Chisholm Lumber, a chat with the Chisholms, and it seems highly likely. Proud past. Innovative present. Confident future.





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