



TRU-CUT SAWMILL

No matter what size sawmill you run (or are thinking about running), one thing is certain—at some point, you will try to push it beyond its maximum capacity. In my case, this involves the time-consuming task of quartering logs with a chain saw, milling one quarter at a time, then reassembling the slabs for final use. Final planing and sanding are challenges for anyone who works with wide slabs. The solution is investing in a wide-cutting mill that can handle these logs, and then to surface and sand them after drying. The Tru-Cut sawmill, manufactured by Coblenz Fabrication of Crab Orchard, Kentucky, does it all



DUNLAP ENTERPRISES

The West Coast is home to some of the biggest of the big timber. John Dunlap of Dunlap Enterprises near San Francisco, California, mills big logs on a regular basis. “Everyone thinks we’re either big cities or redwoods,” he explained. “We’re in a unique area. We have every climate under the sun except, maybe, arctic. The kind of work I do is tied in with tree services. You can find a tree in someone’s yard over a hundred years old, maybe 6 or 7 feet in diameter and it has to go. I’ve worked with incense cedar, sugar pine, black oak, eucalyptus, maple, and walnut.”

John has been involved in logging and firewood for the last 40 years, mostly in small lots being cleared for development. “I was paid to take the logs out, and I started piling up logs that I thought were too good for firewood, so I started milling them. Wide slabs were get-

The current trend for slabs is lots of character, including wide forks. The Tru-Cut mills are designed to cut and surface these slabs quickly and easily.

Above: The surfacing unit rides on the same track as the mill.

Tru-Cut SS-70 Sawmill

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| Manufacturer | Coblentz Fabrication, Crab Orchard, Kentucky |
| Length of cut | 25 feet (longer tracks available) |
| Width of cut | 70 inches |
| Throat | 18 inches |
| Power | 35-hp Briggs & Stratton Vanguard (30-hp electric available) |
| Weight | 3,500 pounds |
| Band wheel | 28 inches in diameter |
| Band blade | 2 inches width |
| Blade tension | hydraulic |
| Feed | manual (hydraulic optional) |
| Track construction | 2-inch by 4-inch steel box beam |

ting real popular, but I couldn't cut them on the equipment I had. I was at the Paul Bunyan Show to get some new ideas and saw the Tru-Cut sawmill." Impressed by the size of the machine and the 5-foot-diameter log that it was cutting easily, John knew he had found what he was looking for.

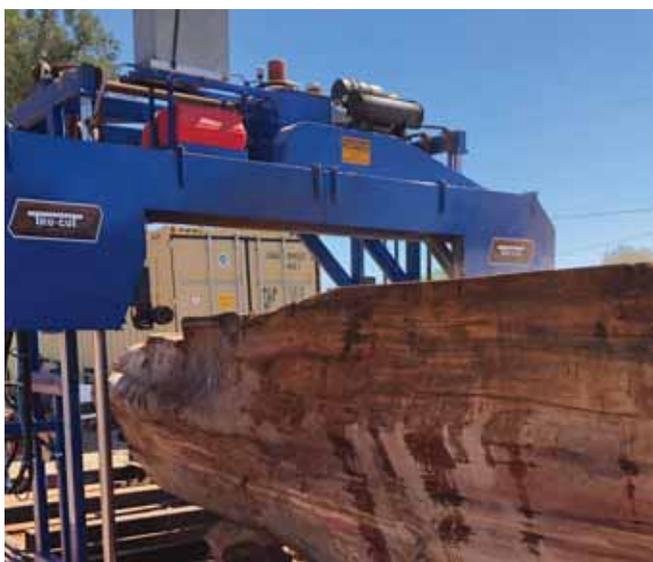
When watching John's demonstration of the machine at the 2019 Paul Bunyan Show, the first impression was that this is a massive sawmill. The track is 30 feet long and wide enough to slab a 70-inch-wide log. The 35-hp Briggs and Stratton Vanguard engine turns a 3-belt pulley attached to a 28-inch-diameter band wheel. The 18-inch throat (thickness of cut) is plenty for most milling. Overall, the mill weighs in at 3,500 pounds and the carriage is 11 feet wide (the 96-inch mill weighs 4,500 pounds and is 13 feet wide)—a bit much for a portable sawmill, but John hauled his mill from California to the Paul Bunyan Show in Ohio with no problem. "The track loads in one piece and the carriage sits sideways on the trailer, so I wasn't hauling a wide load," he explained. Once at the show, he unloaded the track and held it in place with a forklift while he put leveling blocks under it, then carefully set the sawhead in place. "The heavy-duty frame is rigid and strong enough that it is pretty easy to set up," he said. Finally, he installed the feed chain. "It only took about an hour and a half before I had the first log loaded and ready to cut," he said.

John uses his Tru-Cut sawmill for his own business. "I personally use a 70-inch-wide mill, but I'll be setting up a 96-inch machine as soon as the factory can ship one to me, probably around the first of the year," he told me. Has he actually come across logs too big for his mill? "Ohhh, yeh," he said, laughing. "I've had requests to cut 84-inch- to 88-inch-diameter cherry logs that customers didn't want to waste." Working with big slabs requires more than just a big sawmill. Lifting a 12,000-pound log, or even a single 500-pound slab, takes some serious mechanical muscle. "I use a large forklift with a 16,000-pound lift capacity for moving logs and slabs. Fortunately, milling slabs doesn't require a lot of log turning," he explained. "Typically, I load the log, turn it the way I want it on the mill, then cut slabs about halfway down." To flip over the log, John pushes it off the mill with the forklift, flips it over, picks it up, then sets it back on the mill, flat side down, to finish cutting. The standard mill has a 7-inch thickness on the last cut, but an optional fixture allows a 1-inch-thick final cut.

According to John, drying the slabs isn't much of a problem in central California. "The outdoor humidity is typically about 10%, so I can get by with air drying the slabs. In fact, with a good wind, we have to put a tarp over the pile to slow down the drying. I can air dry 3-inch slabs over the summer. It's that fast. In the winter, the drying is slower, but even in February, we can get a spell of 70° [F] temperatures and 10% humidity." John sells his slabs rough cut and leaves it to the woodworker



Focusing on quality of cut and a thin kerf for maximum log utilization, these mills can handle logs that are too large for most commercial sawmills.



Rather than clamping big logs and turning them, Danny Yoder blocks them up on the mill and slabs straight down, much like a swingblade mill.



This sycamore log is blocked in place and ready to be slabbed on Danny Yoder's sawmill. Quartersawn sycamore has a particularly beautiful quilted pattern that will make an impressive table or countertop.

to plane and sand them. “Surfacing the slabs would definitely allow me to charge more for them,” he noted.

So far, John has only sold lumber locally, but, he said, “living only three hours from San Francisco with about 15 million people in the Bay Area, that’s a pretty big market. You would be surprised how many woodworkers are within driving range.” John says that the slab market is constantly changing. “What’s becoming popular is to cut through wide forks in the logs to make countertops. One customer built a square bar from slabs a size that people can sit all the way around.” The long lead for milling and drying slabs means anticipating changes in what customers want. The trend, according to John, is toward more “character”—forks, branches, and bark inclusion in the slabs, with epoxy fill being very popular. Top on John’s wish list is the planer/sander, which he also demonstrated at the Paul Bunyan Show. “I’m on the waiting list and hope to have it in a few months,” he said.

From talking to owners and from his own experience, John works with Tru-Cut to make modifications and add features that make the mill even more useful. “When one person suggests something, you file it away in your mind, but by the time you hear the same request from a half-dozen people, you take it seriously,” he noted. For example, two suggestions under consideration are a diesel option and deepening the throat to allow a 24-inch-thick cut so users can quarter logs for quartersawing. “And, of course there is always someone who wants an even bigger mill,” he added.

LONOKE SAWMILL

Danny Yoder of Lonoke lumber near Munfordville, Kentucky, has had his Tru-Cut sawmill for a little over a year. He and his son had been loggers but decided to purchase the mill after seeing the number of oversize logs turned away from the local sawmills. “The wide

slab market was slow at first, but now it’s going better,” he added. “My goal was to just sell slabs, but so far sales are not enough for just that, so my son and I are milling and making tables.”

The Yoders take advantage of the capacity of their mill to work with other area sawmills. “They send me logs that are too big for them to saw. If it is a good log for slabbing, I’ll buy it from them. Otherwise, I’ll use my mill to split the log so they can get it on their mill. That works well, because I get first pick of the logs.” Danny has also put the word out to area loggers and tree service companies that he is looking for special big logs. “I work with pretty much all species,” he says. “Mostly hardwoods, but we get a little cedar, too. We do struggle to find enough walnut over 36 inches in diameter, but I had one yard tree that measured 8 feet long, 52 inches at the big end and 42 inches at the small end. Sycamore also makes a nice slab. I cut a little of that,” he added.

The 25-foot-log capacity of the standard track was a bit short for Danny, so he ordered a custom frame capable of cutting 35-foot logs, “in case someone wants a special beam.” Three months ago, he added a surfacer but opted to put it on its own track in a separate building. The Yoders air dry the slabs for 6–8 months, kiln dry them to 5% to 8%, then plane and sand with the surfacer, producing slabs ready for the woodworker to finish. Kiln drying 2-1/2-inch-thick slabs with minimal defect takes six weeks or so. “The kiln is full right now, and I have two more charges air drying,” he said. With nearly a year between milling slabs and having a kiln-dry surfaced product, the Yoders have to keep a lot of inventory. Throughout the process, he keeps slabs from each log together in the order in which they were cut, so that customers can select multiple slabs from the same log if they so desire.

“Sawmilling is the easy part. You just load a big log and slab it,” explained Danny. “Surfacing is what takes

the most time.” The Tru-Cut surfacer is mounted in a head rig that rides on the same track as the mill itself. Powered by a 35-hp Vanguard engine, it can accommodate logs up to 73 inches wide. A 14-inch rotary head on a vertical shaft shaves off up to 12 inches per pass at 1/4-inch depth. Although it has hydraulic power feed, vertical adjustment uses a hand crank that raises or lowers the planer head 1/16 inch per revolution in order to maintain close tolerance. When the slab is flat, Danny slips a 36-grit sanding pad over the cutter to erase any planer marks, leaving the slab ready for hand finish sanding. He estimates that it takes about 45 minutes to an hour to surface and sand both sides of a 32-inch-wide by 8-foot-long slab, depending on how flat the slab is and the species of wood. For their own furniture, the Yoders finish up by hand sanding with an orbital sander to 220 or 320 grit. “If everything is set up right, it is just a little hand work,” Danny said. “We’re pretty much running it every day. One day we may be sawing and the next day we might plane and sand. My wife does the finishing.”

When asked whether the mill has paid for itself, Danny hesitated. “That’s hard to answer. So far, we have about 1,000 slabs, but we’ve only had a finished product for the last three months. It is close to a year from the time a log is cut until it is ready to sell. It is a lot of work to just build the inventory, and it takes a big inventory to satisfy everybody. A lot of the time,



The surfacing unit has both a rotary cutterhead and a coarse sander that can handle both conventional slabs and “cookies.”

people look through the inventory and find something the shape and color they want, and that’s what they buy. You never know when fads will change. Now it’s walnut, but it might change to something light, like maple. Right now, the live edge market seems to still be growing.” ■

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.

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