

Lashway Lumber Uses a Vacutherm Dryer To Ramp Up its Business

By Carolee Anita Boyles

Lashway Lumber, located in Williamsburg, Massachusetts, has spent four generations being successful. The current vice president, however, has decided to take Lashway Lumber to the next level of success. Larry Lashway has added a Vacutherm vacuum kiln to the company's lineup, which is giving Lashway Lumber a whole new direction to its business.

"My father, my brother and I are partners in Lashway Lumber today," Larry said. My father, Gerald Sr, is the president and CEO, and my brother Gerald Jr.—Gerry—is the other partner."

Lashway Lumber grew out of family members' employment with another forest products company.

"My great-grandfather William Lashway and my grandfather Lawrence worked for another sawmill through the Great Depression," Larry said. "My grandfather was the second oldest of 16 kids, and when he turned 14, he left school because he got sick and never went back. Instead, he went to work at the local lumber mill to help support the family."

This was one of those situations where the local sawmill owned the store and most everything else in the town. In order for an employee to quit, he had to come up with enough cash to "buy out" any existing debts.

"After the Depression was over, my great-grandfather wanted to quit but he needed about \$4000 to do so," Larry said. "So he would shovel coal in the evenings at the local college to save up the money to quit."

After William and Lawrence left the sawmill in 1954, he started Lashway Lumber.

"He started out just logging," Larry



Lashway Lumber dries about 4000 bd. ft. of lumber at a time in its Vacutherm vacuum kiln. It is able to dry small quantities very quickly. With our vacuum kiln they do not end up with a lot of inventory on hand. Larry says, "Their custom drying has allowed us to be much more versatile. We can dry for a number of customers, which means a whole new marketplace."

said. "A short while later, he leased a sawmill here in Williamsburg. Before long he had purchased the sawmill."

The original sawmill was about a mile from the site where Lashway Lumber stands today.

"As soon as they started making some money on the original sawmill, they purchased the piece of property we're on now," Larry said. "They built a second sawmill here, and we've been here ever since."

Gerry Lashway, who is almost 63, operates their Cleereman sawmill, which was purchased back in 1993. He runs the mill daily, cutting 15,000-18,000 bd. ft. of lum-

ber a day. Though he has sawn most types of logs on the mill, he currently cuts primarily softwood...mostly hemlock. Gerry is very impressed with his mill. He said "My Cleereman mill is the backbone of our operation; we've been running the mill since '93, and it just never breaks. That goes for the Silvatech controls as well."

Gerry also has a very high regard for the people at Cleereman Industries. He said that he might touch base with them once a year or so for parts or a maintenance question. "When I do call, everyone at Cleereman is extremely helpful, including the principle owner, Fran Cleereman. I can't

say enough about their company. They are wonderful people.” Having sat in the sawmill cab for almost two decades, Gerry summed up his feelings about the mill by saying, “As far as I’m concerned, there is no other sawmill but a Cleereman.”

Although there was some growth and change in the company from 1954 until about 2000, Larry said the past ten years have seen a great deal of evolution in what the company does.

“Today, we saw everything,” Larry said. “We’re neither a hardwood mill nor a softwood mill; we’re a custom mill. We were kind of that way from the beginning; when we get an order, we saw it, whether it’s pine, hemlock, hardwood, maple, birch, or something else.”

In 2004, Lashway Lumber started a custom floor and molding company called Ponders Hollow, located in nearby Westfield.

“My brother Gerry runs that part of the company,” Larry said. “Now we also saw rough lumber for Ponders Hollow.”

In 2009, Lashway Lumber took the step of purchasing a vacuum kiln from Vacutherm to reduce the time involved in getting lumber ready for Ponders Hollow and other customers who wanted dried lumber.

“A vacuum kiln is very different from a traditional kiln,” Larry said. “A vacuum kiln dries only small quantities at a time; we do only about 4000 board feet at one time. However, are able to dry it very fast. A maple load is about a day and a half, compared to 17 or 18 days in a conventional

kiln.”

This works very well for the flooring company, because now Lashway Lumber can saw “per order,” and supply material on a “just in time” basis to Ponders Hollow.

“From 2004 to 2009, we had to saw an entire trailer load of, say, maple and send it out to be dried, and then hope that someone would purchase what we had in inventory,” Larry said. “Doing it that way, the yields aren’t as good and there are a lot of negative things going on. For example, the lumber picks up moisture again, and you’re putting a lot of money into inventory because you’re drying a trailer load of everything at a time. That means you have a lot of lumber sitting around.”

With the vacuum kiln, Larry said, he doesn’t end up with so much inventory on hand.

“In a single week, I can dry a small load of maple, one of birch, and one of ash,” he said. “I’m only drying one kiln charge of each, so having the vacuum kiln allows us to be much more versatile than we were before.”

In fact, having the vacuum kiln has allowed Lashway Lumber to begin custom drying for a number of customers, which means a whole new marketplace.

“We now dry musical instrument parts for a couple of different guitar manufacturers, and we dry major league baseball bats,” Larry said. “We also dry wide, thick slabs for making table tops and mantels. Next week I have teak and cypress coming in for someone who is building a boat out on Martha’s Vineyard. We dry just about any-



Larry Lashway and son L.J.

thing under the sun.” Part of what brings him so many customers, Larry said, is that he will dry as little as 100 board feet at a time.

Jim Parker, vice president and co-owner of Vacutherm, said the small vacuum kiln is perfectly suited to the way Lashway Lumber is using it.

“Larry has a great application for the kiln because of the flexibility and diversity of what Lashway Lumber does,” Parker said. “Larry takes full advantage of the fact that the kiln can dry small batches quickly. That fits their business model really well, because they’re able to dry small amounts to order. What they’re doing is almost unheard of in the industry, but it really works for them.”

Of the lumber that comes into the mill, Larry said, about 30 percent is from Lashway Lumber’s own crews and 70 percent is from outside vendors. The logs are stored in the yard at the sawmill, sorted by length, species and grade.

“We pull what we’re looking for, and sell the rest,” he said. “For Ponders Hollow, every day Gerry gives me a ‘wish list’ of what he’s looking for in the next few days, and if I have any of what he needs in inventory I pull it and send it over to him. If we don’t have it cut yet, we schedule it for sawing. With the vacuum kiln we can cut it, dry it, and get it over to him quickly.”

Some of the custom work Lashway Lumber does can get very detailed. In one case, Larry said, a customer wanted the company to come cut some trees that were around her house. It took down the trees, cut them into lumber, dried the lumber, and had Ponders Hollow cut it into flooring. The customer now has flooring in her house that originally was standing in her yard as trees.



Standing left to right - Gerry Lashway, Jr. (son), Larry Lashway, II (son), Lawrence Lashway (grandfather), Gerald Lashway (father), and Dylan Mailoux standing in front of the Vacutherm kiln.

“With the vacuum kiln, we can do that within a week,” Larry said. “Usually it takes three to six months to do what we can do within one week. The drying process is a bottleneck in a lot of things because you have to wait for a whole kiln charge or a trailer load; with a traditional kiln that may be as much as 50,000 feet or even more.”

Larry said Lashway Lumber has 14 employees, only four of whom work inside the mill. The others are truck drivers or loggers, or they work in the yard; one is a secretary in the office. There’s plenty to do in the yard, Larry said, because the company converts as much waste into usable products as they can.

“We grind bark mulch and playground chips,” he said. “We also sell chips to a local biomass manufacturer, and we sell firewood. Whenever we have a job, we try to utilize everything we can at our own facility.”

Larry said the company’s market for these products is small retailers, not big box stores.

“We sell to nurseries and garden centers,” he said. “We work very close locally; the farthest we go is only about 70 miles from our operation. We believe that if we take care of our local economy, it will take care of us.”

Besides all the custom lumber that goes through the Vacutherm kiln, Lashway Lumber also produces a lot of industrial lumber. In fact, industrial lumber is the company’s main product line; the custom lumber is a sideline that has developed over the years.

“If you ever see a bridge that they’re tearing apart, and look at all the lumber under it to stabilize it, that’s what we do,” Larry said. “We produce a large quantity of that type of lumber used in New England, including Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont and New Hampshire, as well as a little bit in New York and Maine.”

Larry and Gerry are not the only Lashway grandchildren to whom grandfather Lawrence passed on the “timber products” gene. In the area surrounding Williamsburg, no fewer than three of Larry’s cousins own various forest products companies.

“There are four sawmills within five miles, all owned by Lashways,” Larry said. “We’re Lashway Lumber; then there’s Lashway Forest Products, David Lashway, and Dan Lashway Lumber. We all do things that are different, so we compete with each other very little, and we don’t go after each



Lashway’s Cleereman sawmill, bought in 1993, has been running daily for almost twenty years with little upkeep or repair. Larry said, “It has been an unbelievable sawmill. As far as I’m concerned there is no other sawmill but a Cleereman.”

others’ customers.”

Ultimately, Larry said, the big advantage of the Vacutherm vacuum kiln is that it’s made Lashway Lumber more versatile than it was in the past.

“First, instead of putting all our profits into inventory, now we can put money into logs or woodlots,” he said. “That’s a lot better for us because we’re not stocking inventory that we’re not sure where we’re going to sell.”

Having the vacuum kiln also has opened many new markets for Lashway Lumber.

“That includes the baseball bats and the musical instrument parts,” Larry said. “I’m also getting ready to meet with someone who makes ThermoWood. He heats kiln-dried lumber to over 400 degrees. This crushes the cell structure so that the wood will never rot, and it turns the wood kind of a golden color. In Europe, they make decking out of this kind of wood, and it’s coming to the United States. When you use that for a deck, you have wood that won’t rot, but that’s not chemically treated. A customer can cut maple or ash out of his own yard and use it for decking. What you’re actually doing is over-drying the wood and breaking up the cell structure so it can’t take up water. All you have to do to use it is put a UV protector on it.”

Larry said he believes that kiln dried lumber is the wave of Lashway Lumber’s future.

“In fact, we just ordered our second Vacutherm kiln, which should be delivered

in a couple of months,” he said. “We never thought our kiln dried lumber business would expand as quickly as it has.”

Jim said this second kiln will be slightly bigger than the one Lashway Lumber is using now.

“The second kiln will be a slightly different style of kiln,” he said. “It has the ability to condition the lumber, particularly species that are difficult to dry from green. It uses fans and hot air to heat the wood, rather than the aluminum heating plates that Larry’s current kiln uses.”

Larry sees Lashway Lumber moving more in the direction of the small custom markets that the vacuum kiln has allowed him to reach.

“Having the vacuum kiln has made us very attractive to small companies, where they may pay a little more, but they’re getting exactly what they need and when they need it,” he said.

In the next few years, Larry said, he would like to get Ponders Hollow onto the same property where Lashway Lumber now resides.

“I believe it’s possible for us to do that,” he said. “We’re doing really well right now, and I think the economy is coming around.”

Larry said it’s really gratifying for him to visit with a customer such as a large musical instrument manufacturer and have the CEO tell him he’s done an incredible job of drying their lumber.

“The Vacutherm kiln is what’s letting me do that,” he said.