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New sawmill boosts Dixie County economy



Dixie County Commission Chairman Mark Hatch (left) shakes hands with Sawmill Manager Andy Chesser just before the lunch and tour at Cross City Lumber Sawmill on Thursday afternoon (April 5).

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © April 6, 2018 at 8:48 p.m.

CROSS CITY -- The Dixie County economy received a significant boost recently as the Cross City Lumber Sawmill began producing boards and other products from harvested trees.



There are a few centers of activity on the 40-acre site. This huge bunch of machinery includes the area where the trees are debarked and the initial cuts are made of the process for creating boards from trees begins.

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Some of the guests are seen following Sawmill Manager Andy Chesser up some of the many steps at various points on the property. The visitors enjoyed a relatively thorough yet efficient tour of the property.



This is one part of the area where trees have their bark removed. Every single piece of every tree is used. There is no waste of timber at this sawmill.

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Andy Chesser is happy as he shows visitors the mill that is on the brink of being 100 percent operational. April 16 is the target date for every piece of equipment to be operating.



Stairways painted yellow are seen here, as is a relatively large saw blade (center of picture) and some of the path that logs travel in the early part of their journey into becoming boards.

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Human access to different parts of the giant sets of machines requires metal stairs and walkways.



One of the big pieces of new machinery is seen here.

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**Dixie County
Commissioner
W.C. Mills
grants a request
to put a person
in the picture
for a
perspective on
how big these
machines are.**



**This part of this machine for
cutting logs has not had one
log through it yet as of
Thursday (April 5). It was still
being wired on Thursday.**

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This is the control panel for the brand-new stacker. (More information about this machine is in the story.) There are rooms at various points on the property where controls also are used to make the giant machines move and cut logs.



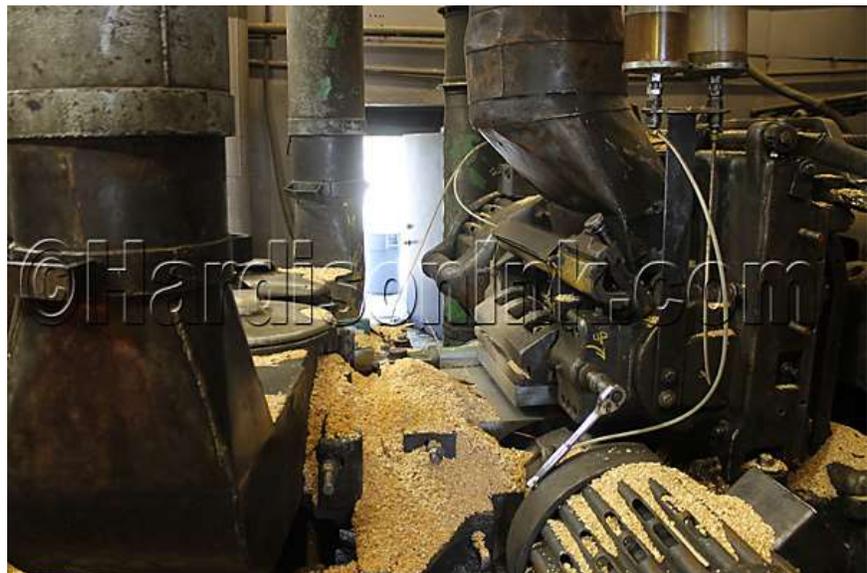
Andy Chesser shows guests the new stacker.

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Planing Mill Supervisor Sean Cannon stands in front of a set of boards that are going to be dried in a huge kiln behind him.

Fresh sawdust is seen shortly after boards were planed by the very machine where the sawdust rests. That sawdust will be blown from there and collected for use as fuel or for sale as sawdust.



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These tracks can carry scores of boards per-minute to be quickly evaluated for quality, and to be separated and sorted by size as well.



This mark shows “881” which is the mill number, as well as other information. Human inspectors look at boards and judge them for quality. Those evaluators are in turn checked to assure lumber standards remain firm in America.

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Andy Chesser (left) and Sean Cannon look up at a photographer capturing some of the most recently completed boards at the lumber mill.



(from left) Andy Chesser, Thomas Valentine and Sean Cannon pause for a photo. Just prior to this one-sixtieth of one second, the gentlemen were talking about some of the very next things they would do after completing this walking tour of the facility.

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The sawmill is still in its construction mode, however leaders at the sawmill have set April 16 as the target date for it to be fully operational.

This new business venture is already producing – even before it is 100 percent completely finished being restored.

Cross City Lumber Sawmill Manager Andy Chesser said during a tour of the 40-acre site on Thursday afternoon (April 5), the mill already has produced two loads of completed lumber and one load of wood shavings. More than a decade ago, this property was owned by the Georgia-Pacific Corp. After it was sold, it closed.

There are 30 employees right now, including those who are there just for the completion of construction of all of the aspects at the sawmill. Twenty-one of those 30 workers, Chesser said, are sawmill employees who will continue on after the April 16 completion of construction.

There will be 42 to 43 workers then in the sawmill, Chesser said, and that is in one shift. The plan is to have a second shift started by the beginning of 2019, and then there will be even more jobs.

Steve W. Conner owns this mill in Cross City. He owns two other mills, Chesser said – one in Homerville, Ga., and one in Alapaha, Ga. Conner was unable to be in Cross City on Thursday, Chesser said. The owner has been on the site in Cross City most of the time since he bought it, Chesser said.

Joining Chesser in the leadership roles at Cross City Lumber Sawmill are Planing Mill Supervisor Sean Cannon, Sawmill Supervisor Thomas Valentine and Maintenance Supervisor Lewis Dyals.

Dixie County Commission Chairman Mark Hatch, who actually worked at this very location when it was owned by Georgia-Pacific, was among the people on the tour Thursday, as were other County Commission members – Gene Higginbotham, Jason Holifield, David Osteen and W.C. Mills; and County Clerk Dana Johnson; County Administrator Timothy W. Alexander; Cheyenne Stemple, assistant to the county administrator; Assistant County Administrator Duane Cannon; Dixie County Director of Emergency Services Darian Brown; Dixie County Emergency Services Operations Chief Roy Bass; Jered Lizotte of Locklear and Associates; and others.

All of the guests enjoyed Subway subs, cookies and soft drinks.

Chesser, Cannon, Valentine and Dyals provided the tour during their lunch (and a bit beyond) as they are in the midst of completing construction as well as turning out finished lumber. In fact, two more loads of trees came in later that same afternoon. While the output of board-feet is relatively slow now, that pace will multiply many times once the construction part of this project is completed.

This is just the beginning, because in time there will be hundreds of loads of trees flowing through the mill on a regular basis. Those trees are expected to become 52 million board-feet of lumber per year, Chesser said.

As he gave the tour on Thursday afternoon, the sawmill manager shared quite a bit of insight with people who were unfamiliar with sawmills.

One very interesting fact about this process is that every part of the tree is used.

The bark is used, the wood is used, the shavings are used and even the sawdust is used. Most of the products made at the mill are sold.

The sawdust, though, is used as fuel. That is what powers the huge kilns that dry the boards to make the final products for sale. The sawdust that is not burned in the kilns is sold.

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There is 100 percent usage of every tree that is brought to the mill, Chesser said.

Some of the machinery was still at the mill when Conner bought it, but he needed to purchase some brand-new equipment as well.

Just one piece of equipment cost \$600,000. The 2017 Variable Pan Geometry Stacker System, built by Gillingham Best Inc., of Spokane Valley, Wash., is one of the new machines.

Chesser took the guests on a walking tour of the sawmill, the planing mill and other areas of the facility. He showed how logging trucks bring the harvested pine trees to the facility.

A crane places trees on machines that remove the bark. The trees are then run through a series of machines that categorize them and cut them into boards.

Those boards are then finished to very specific and exact measurements, as well as being heat-cured.

The final products are all marked to show which mill they came from in America. The American Lumber Standard Committee Inc. assigns numbers and other coding for board quality.

This non-profit organization is comprised of manufacturers, distributors, users and consumers of lumber.

The ALSC serves as the standing committee for the American Softwood Lumber Standard (Voluntary Product Standard 20) and in accordance with PS 20, administers an accreditation program for the grade-marking of lumber produced under the system.

That system, the American Lumber Standard (ALS) system, is an integral part of the lumber industry's economy and is the basis for the sale and purchase of virtually all softwood lumber traded in North America. The ALS system provides the basis for acceptance of lumber and design values for lumber by the building codes throughout the United States of America.

The proverbial bottom line for the new sawmill is that it is going to be a strong economic engine in Dixie County. This mill is taking an agricultural product grown locally on tree farms, and it is manufacturing boards for building.

This sawmill did not just spring to life overnight. Chesser said the start of the process to revive the property began on June 10, 2017, although the more intense work began in August of last year.

Before then, however, the Dixie County Economic Development Committee and the Dixie County Chamber of Commerce, thanks to the cooperation of the Dixie County Board of County Commissioners were able to help convince Conner to bring this – his third sawmill – to fruition in Cross City.