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2017

PERSON OF THE YEAR

TIM BIEWER
BIEWER LUMBER CO.

ST. CLAIR, MICHIGAN

FOCUSED

LEADER

By
Jessica Johnson

Tim Biewer of Midwestern sawmill company Biewer Lumber is Timber Processing's 2017 Person Of The Year.

ST. CLAIR, Mich.

Well known for his strong leadership in a Midwestern family owned lumber business, which now includes a growth opportunity in the Southern U.S. starting up the newest and perhaps the most modern sawmill in the country, Tim Biewer of Biewer Lumber

Co. is named *Timber Processing's* 2017 Person Of The Year.

When first contacted about the award, Biewer was hesitant in accepting it. He firmly believed he didn't "deserve" it, saying instead it belonged to his father, Richard Biewer, who died just six weeks before the announcement was made in mid-December. Biewer credits his father for all the company's



**BIEWER
LUMBER**

successes over the years, pointing to the fact that if it wasn't for the elder Biewer, the sawmill business wouldn't exist. "He had a vision," Biewer says of his father, "and grew a lot of this company into what it is today."

Today, Biewer Lumber owns and operates three predominately red pine sawmills in the Midwest with a combined annual production of 300MMBF, has a management contract with another Midwestern softwood mill, and is in the startup phase of its first owned and operated softwood mill in the Southern U.S., which is permitted for 250MMBF.

Biewer says that his father was going strong in the business until he became ill—though Biewer had been basically running the company for the last 15 years. One of the biggest foundations his father left him was a strong connection to the people that make up the company. Recognizing the importance of putting the right people in the right places to allow the company to succeed is a core principle for Biewer Lumber, and one that his

father embraced, Biewer says.

The people behind the Biewer Lumber name are the single biggest point of pride for Biewer in terms of the company. The pride he feels as an owner is something he thinks is tangible with the staff: "They run it like their name is on the door."

Longevity is important to Biewer when thinking about his employees, because he invests in them and they invest in him. "We believe in our people, they are the ones that brought us where we are today," he recognizes.

Thanks to that belief, and the culture created by Biewer and his father, the company has many long-term employees—including a few in manufacturing roles that began when the first Biewer sawmill opened in McBain, Mich. in 1984.

BEGINNINGS

The Biewer family did not start out in the lumber business. Before Prohibition, the family immigrated to Michigan from Germany to be a brewmeister for a local

brewery. Eventually Biewer Brewery was sold, and the family settled in St. Clair on the river.

"My grandfather ended up coming to this site, where the Biewer Lumber headquarters are, to operate the Sherman House, a bed and breakfast with a bar and then started bottling beer," Biewer says.

Prohibition shut down the Biewer beer business, leaving the family without a livelihood. With the proximity to the river, it was natural for the Biewers to turn to it. The family opened a fishing boat rental business, John A. Biewer Co., and bait and tackle shop.

"We got in the lumber business because a guy rented a fishing boat all summer and couldn't pay for it. He told my grandfather, 'hey for letting me use the boat all summer, I'll trade you some logs.' So my grandfather had the logs sawn and started selling lumber out of the back of the boat livery," Biewer explains.

That trade became a watershed moment for the Biewer family. It was a way



to earn money in the winter when the fishing boat rentals were slow. “My dad always called them peckerwood sawmills,” Biewer says with a chuckle, referring to the portable sawmills Biewer operated in the woods.

One of the most popular lumber items sold out of the livery was piling for docks. Biewer remembers his father being very concerned about treated piling and what might happen to his markets if all the customers went to treated. After some research, Biewer realized that treated piling was actually a business that could be sustained in Michigan, and the company entered the treating business.

Biewer Lumber established treating facilities across the Midwest in Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin, but it became obvious the business needed to change again. In 1984 Biewer Lumber—then known as John A. Biewer Co.—built its first red pine mill in McBain, Mich. with the intention to only supply the six treating plants in operation at that time.

Biewer again credits the wisdom of his father for laying down the groundwork for expansion, saying he saw the opportunity in Michigan as the red pine came of age and there was no existing market. “So we built the mill in Michigan,” he says simply.

As McBain’s production came online, the opportunity presented itself for Biewer to grow again, and the company built its second softwood sawmill in Prentice, Wis. a handful of years after, and supplied other markets besides its own treating facilities.

Following graduation from Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Biewer entered the family business helping to build the Prentice mill. He stayed on after startup as plant manager for five years, before coming to headquarters as vice president.



Tim Biewer in the lobby of the Biewer Lumber headquarters, where portraits of John Biewer, left, and Richard Biewer are prominently displayed.



The evolution of the Biewer's family business, from bottling beer before Prohibition to the first cash register that ever sold lumber at Biewer's Boat Livery.

Biewer Lumber would purchase another mill, Pine Tech in Lake City, Mich. “We were always looking to keep growing,” Biewer says of his father’s mentality—a mentality that shaped Biewer strongly, and eventually led to the biggest expansion of the company to date.

“We can’t build a new facility up here because of the timber,” Biewer says,

“We use a lot of yellow pine for our treating operations; it was natural for us to look in the South to see what was available.”

NEWTON

“Plum Creek, who’d done some business with our northern mills, called me, and said they were looking for more

markets for their timber in the South. They asked if I had ever thought about building a mill down there. They told me they had a lot of timber, and would make sure some was available.”

As the idea started forming, Biewer commissioned some timber studies, did a little traveling and started leaning toward building a new mill. He also had conver-



A mixture of Northern plant managers, foresters and senior management in St. Clair



Dan Bowen, Project Manager in Newton

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Biewer believes the right people in the right places allows for locations to be spread out across the Midwest and now the South. He visits the mills often, but spends the bulk of his days in St. Clair.

sations with Brian Fehr, principal of The Bid Group of Companies, which had recently wrapped up some projects at Biewer's Prentice sawmill under the Comact brand. "Hooking up with The Bid Group and making it a partnership between us, and building a state-of-the-art facility made a lot of sense for both of us," Biewer says.

Thanks to a strong relationship with Fehr, Biewer chose The Bid Group as the turnkey supplier for a new \$85 million sawmill to be built in Newton, Miss. With headquarters in St. Clair, and sawmill operations spread out in Wisconsin and Michigan (the closest sawmill to HQ is McBain, a three-hour plus drive), Biewer didn't flinch at taking it South when the pieces started falling into place. "Prentice is 10 hours away driving, so Mississippi isn't that big of a deal," he says cheekily.

So why not just purchase an existing SYP facility and do a few upgrades? He cites cost as a driving factor: By the time he bought one and did the upgrades, he thought financially it made just as much sense to start fresh.

The Newton mill began producing lumber late last year, Bid-owned Comact supplied the green end machinery, as well as dry trimming and sorting, while Bid's A&M Manufacturing supplied the high speed electric planer and Deltech provided the continuous dry kilns.

Will company expansion stop here? Is nearly 600MMBF in production capacity enough for Biewer Lumber? Maybe, maybe not. "We're not going to sit still," Biewer says. He was raised to always be looking at what opportunities present themselves—and as the economy continues to strengthen and get back on track, considering the timber availability and the fact that they've already conquered building one mill in the heart of SYP country, he's not sure another might not be on the horizon.

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FLEXIBILITY

Biewer says each of the mills in the Biewer Lumber portfolio is flexible—and a key to success—and one of the reasons the Biewer portfolio was able to stay strong during The Great Recession when some other mills folded.

All the Midwest mills can cut timbers, decking and dimension, and are able to grade spruce, pine and fir. Obviously Newton focuses on SYP.

"We've become a significant player

in the SPF markets in the Midwest over the last 10 years and that's been a transition in our business due to markets and species availability," Biewer comments. "When the mills were first started they were just going to supply timbers to our treating plants. We've grown and expanded both as our production has grown and the markets have changed."

Main markets include other treaters, Biewer's treating division, contractor lumber yards, as well as big box retailers.

Newton is going to be one of the most advanced mills in the country, but Biewer didn't want to divert capital investment away from the Midwestern mills. Mills in McBain, Prentice and Lake City recently received new Comact scanning on the primary breakdown systems. Prentice's dry line was also recently replaced using Pierce Construction, USNR and Comact equipment.

Biewer likes to do business with Comact, believing that the equipment is some of the best on the market. Additionally, his mills lean heavily on USNR and Cone Machinery.

As part of his first task when he began working at headquarters, Biewer integrated the various facets of the company—bringing all of the sales into the one location and hiring a senior manager to oversee all the Northern mills.

Streamlining has helped the company run lean and mean, a strategy the company deployed during the Recession.

Being family owned, and able to react quickly, also helped: "When times got tough, we didn't have a lot of red tape, we started cutting things right away where a lot of people didn't. We didn't go off-line, we buckled down and tightened things up."

Having a visible and approachable owner in Biewer is what makes the company what it is today, Vice President Doug O'Rourke says. "He's created a culture where he really listens to what people have to say. He listens to people, certainly our own employees but also other folks in the industry. He gives us the ability to make a lot of decisions like it's our own business. That's a strong attribute."

CULTURE

O'Rourke says that over the 35 years he's been working for the Biewer family, the company has really focused on building its people up, and plowing resources back into the business to give people every opportunity to be successful.

Biewer is the father of three sons, two

of whom work in the family business, and one slated to graduate college in the spring. Biewer says nothing will be handed to them. Everyone including family has to work, and work hard, for the position they have; that's the culture of the company.

As part of the commitment to the people behind Biewer Lumber, a "culture committee" exists. Five people from across the Biewer Lumber divisions—HR, manufacturing, logistics, sales and procurement—gather once

per month to discuss the culture of the company and what can be done to improve it. Biewer says he started this initiative not to change the company per se, but to nurture a positive environment, all designed to attract and retain the best talent possible.

One of the results was the creation of an annual scholarship for one local high school student to attend college.

"He's not overbearing, his people work very hard for him. That's probably the best that I could say," O'Rourke says. **TP**



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