



Mike Wilm's operation uses firewood as a good way to maximize timber stand value and aesthetics.

Southern Wisconsin Logger Makes Hay in the Tops

by Larry Van Goethem

For Mike Wilm, a man who dislikes loose ends, everything came together last winter when his concept of full utilization of wood was fully realized on a 20-acre selective logging job at the top of a windy hill in Wisconsin's Baraboo Range, where old growth oak is the real prize.

After completion, the landowner, Columbia County Judge Richard Rehm, was so pleased with the park-like appearance of the land that he fired off a letter praising Wilm's work.

Wilm's crew was satisfied because they put in the kind of winter work that keeps loggers off the couch and jobless rolls. Also pleased was Dennis Mahy, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources forester for Columbia County, who saw the job in April and observed later that it "was a good looking site."

Did we say everything worked out? Not quite. Wilm had bid the cut, a thinning of impressive oaks and other hardwoods, when mill prices were high—but he did the job in a buyer's market.

"The trees looked better than they were when we cut them," Wilm said, poking an unhappy toe at a huge oak stump, with a hollow core instead of heartwood. Wilm says he bid \$550 per thousand board feet on the job; he sold the wood for \$650.

"But it worked out all right anyway," he added. Not only did his firewood crew

harvest the trees' huge tops for firewood for northcoast Chicago fireplaces, but he reaped a large measure of good will on a marked sale that points the way to whole tree harvesting as a way of life—for some—in the logging industry.

Wilm, 35, and wife, Tammy, own Hack Away Forest Products Inc. of Baraboo, which has morphed over 17 years into an unusual two-stage operation: Wilm moves 1.5 to 2 million board feet of sawlogs and veneer logs and up to 12,000 face cords of firewood, processed from the hardwood tops or from clear-cuts, to upscale customers.

The charm of a smoking fireplace in the luxurious homes of north Chicago suburbs is the sizzle in Wilm's life. Even Wilm likes a fireplace—there are two in his home—and he enjoys coming home on a winter day and resting by a crackling fire. "There is nothing warmer," says Wilm, "than a fireplace."

Wilm gets \$41 to \$50 a cord for firewood, mostly oak but also lesser amounts of hickory, cherry and maple, from retail outlets centered mostly in Chicago where 95 percent is sold. The stores, of course, market the wood for two or three times Wilm's price.

"Mainly, I would say that our biggest problem is trying to find jobs that are big enough to be able to justify profits," Mike

said. The dual nature of his small crew calls for careful bidding, aggressive marketing and more equipment than is typical of logging companies in southern Wisconsin, where little pulpwood is cut compared with saw timber and veneer logs.

Wilm runs two John Deere cable skidders, a firewood processor and three Peterbilt trucks. Felling is with Stihl saws; feller bunchers are not nearly as commonplace in Wisconsin's oak country as in the northwoods. You don't want any spare equipment to collect any dust, so the byword with Hack Away is to keep everything running at the same time.

One of Wilm's recent jobs was typical of land clearing projects that he often gets, because he can do it better. His logging crew felled and skidded mixed hardwoods from the Devil's Head ski hill to create a new ski slope. At the base of the hill, the firewood processor cut 16-inch firewood from whole trees loaded onto a feeder platform by the skidders.

Had another logger done the job, disposal of the brush would have been a difficult task, costing more money. Wilm undertook three such clearing projects in 1996, earning more money.

Hack Away sells green and seasoned wood. The fuelwood processor can cut and load, via a conveyor, three semi loads of wood daily, depending on the job and the

weather. Wilm said they usually truck two green loads to buyers and drop off a third near his Baraboo home for seasoning.

Wilm sees fuelwood processing as a way to overcome objections by woodlot owners to the mess left after logging. His operation fully utilizes the tree, leaving little biomass residue.

This is a unique application of mechanization made possible by fuelwood processors such as those manufactured by Multitek of Prentice in northern Wisconsin. Wilm is hard at work wearing out his second Multitek fuelwood processor and hopes to purchase another soon. In fact, Wilm said he'd really like to run two processors, one on the cut and the other at his wood yard at home.

Forester Mahy spoke approvingly of Wilm's work, observing that he leaves little mess on his jobs, converting tops to firewood and adding, "He's been making it work."

The problem with logging in southern Wisconsin, Mahy said, is that the big oaks being cut in southwestern Wisconsin woodlands have huge crowns that leave horrendous, all-but-impenetrable masses where imposing trees once stood.

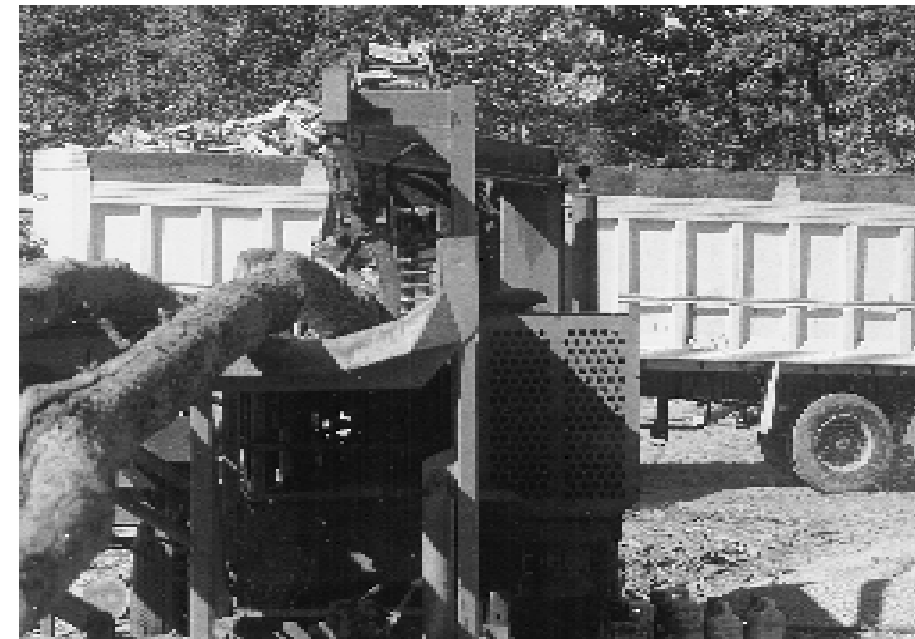
This kind of jungle dwarfs the tops left by cutters in pulpwood stands of northern Wisconsin and parts of New England where second or third growth aspen and hardwoods are harvested for pulpwood. Branches are thick as weigh/lifters' thighs and they don't break down easily to the humus that nourishes soil like pulpwood brush does. As a result, said Mahy, "The stuff left behind at the end of the work and rutted roads—these are the two biggest things landowners complain about."

When Wilm took a reporter to inspect the 20-acre site mentioned earlier, there wasn't any brush lying about. Small piles of small branches showed but a child could step over or across them. The thinning of thick oak released smaller trees in a marked sale supervised by foresters. Wilm was proud of his work there, noting that his crew hauled the logs back to home base for processing, increasing costs, because there wasn't room to build a landing at the site.

It's clear that Wilm's Hack Away operation calls for high work output by the crew and significant managerial skills on the part of Mike and Tammy. Wilm said it's difficult to get all of his ducks lined up and waddling in order when dual operations are underway.

It helps that Tammy, who staffs home base, keeps in touch with the crews and drivers, dispatching deliveries and making all arrangements with customers.

Mother Nature always knew that you have to crack eggs to make an omelette



Gnarly top-wood is converted into processed firewood.

and she made something happen in the Baraboo Range, where early settlers found prairie savannah and five foot timber rattlers among the buffalo, elk and Burr Oak.

When the settlers homesteaded the hills, they set their barns and houses sensibly in the glens and hollows, leaving the hills to the wind, sun and, in time, careless urban landbuyers who choose to live at the brows of the hills.

The settlers also stopped the fires which had renewed the old tallgrass prairie, which meant that species other than Burr Oak, whose thick cork bark survived burning, were able to sprout. Naturalist John Muir

recalled later in his life that even as a young boy in Wisconsin, he saw the forest overtaking prairie in the last century.

Burr Oak became a historical curiosity. Another naturalist, the University of Wisconsin's Aldo Leopold wrote that landowners who boast a Burr Oak on their land own a window on the theater of evolution.

Fortunately, the species that sprang up on the prairie of the last century was white and red oak and latter day loggers have harvested the virgin crop for decades. The bad news is that the Baraboo hills are still cloaked in oak but loggers are hauling ever-smaller logs to the mills.

Much of Wilm's wood is processed at this yard near his home.



The trees, in every sense of the word, are virgin oak and they are being harvested for the floors, furniture and pleasure successful baby boomers who have a taste for closegrained, expensive wood.

This is where the crunch comes. Illinois money has been flowing into Wisconsin for decades, soaking up real estate and raising property values and taxes. On the one hand Wilm finds his land is worth much more money than when he purchased it. But his taxes have shot way up as well.

Recreational home building is under way in the Baraboo hills as in the northern part of the state. The invasion is akin to that of upper New England by wealthy New Yorkers looking for their own green. The landscape is similar. Blue hills, tree-covered and fetching, cloak the rugged horizons so that your car is ever entering a vista or leaving one. It brings one to earth to learn that some land sells for \$35,000 an acre.

The upshot? The premium lumber market has been soft for two years even as stumpage bids bloat landowners' pockets and leaves loggers gasping to come up with the money to seal the deals. At the same time, points out Wilm, who uneasily watches this scenario unfold, the price downturn has shaken many fringe players out of the business.

The loggers who are left are operators that Wilm calls "for real" people, the "serious" ones who can stomach the high stakes game of big bids, big money and big time trouble if something goes wrong. The Wilms provide health care to their workers in addition to the usual insurance payments and state unemployment levies. While they cover these costs they've got to meet challenges from those who might not offer their insurance package.

Still, Wilm doesn't criticize other loggers. He believes that most loggers in his era are responsible timber processors and he's not worried about competition. But he does fret about his ability to stay with the flow, sustaining enough contracts, not forgetting those big deposits, to keep the crew busy.

Mike Wilm will tell you, and he will tell you again and then he will repeat it until you recognize that it is a thing with him, that he can fell, process and deliver saw timber to mills more economically than contract loggers who works on a pay-as-you-go basis.

That is his ideal. But many sawmills have contract loggers, who work without worrying about deposits and prices—well, not too much anyway.

The underlying concern in the lives of loggers today seems to be a rooted anxiety about how things will shake out in what is increasingly being viewed as a cosmic crap shoot. Dynamic entrepreneurs like Wilm are born to run and gun and fret more

than most people; it's their nature and it doesn't matter whether they graduate from Harvard or, in Wilm's case, the school of hard knocks.

When it comes to the future, Wilm is feeling things in his gut. A native of Eagle, he got into logging and firewood just out of high school at 18. He's been a logger for 17 years, just long enough to begin worrying about some of the things he took for granted earlier. Things like prosperity, a steady supply of good oak and a booming construction trade.

This autumn he has watched hardwood log prices creep upward, \$5 here and there, and he's hoping it's a trend but when his gut kicks in the fret begins—and maybe, he thinks, he'd better listen to the visceral wisdom. This anxiety, noted by numerous observers, is the soft underbelly of the US economy. Extreme weather patterns such as last winter's heavy snow, cold and late spring create more problems.

Weather kept him from getting the firewood business going until late June and he expects to stay busy into December with deliveries before shutting down for maintenance. Ordinarily the season would have ended in October.

