

The Hubert Clodfelter Sawmill

During the days of the Depression Hubert Clodfelter had a farm, but since it was not making much money, he would get another job. He would have that supplemental work for a while, but in those years, a job frequently didn't last long before it was closed down. The result was that Hubert had several different jobs through the Depression years.

In 1938, he made the decision to get into the sawmill business. Having successfully borrowed enough money to buy the needed equipment, he leased about 400 acres of timber, setting up the sawmill in the woods. When Hubert started in the sawmill business, he admitted to knowing nothing about it, prompting him to hire a knowledgeable fellow and make him the head sawyer. He hired another fellow by the name of Ira Stand, the man from whom he bought the sawmill, and who knew how to use all of the equipment. Hubert hired Strand not only for his knowledge, but also because he hadn't been making any money.

Hubert powered his saw using an old threshing machine engine, what one would call a steam engine. At that point, to operate the mill's big circular saw, he hired 15 or 20 men, some of them with their horses. Of the men he hired, Hubert had some cut down the trees; a number of timber guys who would cut them into pieces so the crew could get to them; and fellows with their horse team, who would drag the logs into the mill area. When you got all of the lumber cut close to the mill, you'd start hauling it in on a truck. After purchasing another truck, Hubert had the logs hauled from the woods on one, while the other, bigger truck hauled the raw lumber.

With the ongoing work of the mill's crew, he started getting contracts for his lumber, hauling into Chicago; Hammond, Indiana; St. Mary's, Ohio; and Louisville. As his business grew, rumors of war started, prompting other businesses to buy lumber. Hubert remembered selling his product to the Pullman Car Company in Hammond. The latter had a contract for tanks, and the amount of lumber needed to brace these tanks on the Pullman cars meant that this was a lucrative deal.

Here's how Hubert described another of his endeavors,

I got a contract over in St. Mary's, Ohio for harness hames. These hames were to be made out of green beech timber without too many bird pecks. So I set up a production system. Those harness hames were 32 inches long, two and a half inches square. You'd saw them off with this enormous circular saw. You'd slab off a great big piece of lumber. The slab would be, oh maybe the slab would be nine feet long or three times 34 inches. Well, you'd have that nine-foot long slab, maybe two and a half or three feet wide, and two-and one-half inches thick. First, I would set it up, so I would have a crosscut saw, a smaller saw, and had it fixed so that the guy who was pushing the lumber into the saw would saw them off automatically 34 inches long.

One day in 1939 Hubert suffered a severely broken jaw, along with some other injuries, while working at the sawmill. He was taken to the Greencastle Hospital where he was put on an operating table to have his jaw wired shut. Dr. Wiseman leaned over the operating table and told Hubert, "Sorry, we can't give you any anesthesia because I am afraid you will swallow your tongue." With that, the Doctor hauled off and hit Hubert with his fist, knocking him unconscious! Dr. Wiseman proceeded working on Hubert's jaw, but before he was finished with the procedure Hubert regained consciousness. No problem, Dr. Wiseman simply punched him again, with the same result. Fortunately for Hubert, the doctor finished the procedure without having to strike him a third time.

Subsequently, on another day in 1939, the sawmill burned down completely. Hubert had no insurance, lamenting,

It broke me flatter than heck and then right after that I had an appendix operation. I had to sell hogs to pay for the hospital, had money borrowed for the sawmill operation, and financially I was really hurting. It was rough. I didn't have anything left as far as the sawmill was concerned. My creditors said, 'Look, we've got to have the money.' So I dug up the money and what I couldn't dig up, I had to pay later because I had thousands of dollars in back debts.

War production had begun then. I would say quite a bit of war production had started in 1938, and it had some positive effect upon

the lumber operation that I was operating. I sold an awful lot of lumber on government contracts.

Hubert Clodfelter's experience with his sawmill was a successful venture that made money sufficient for him to care for his family and to meet his monthly expenses—until the day the fire destroyed his mill. Hubert was down but not out: With the country anticipating war, he was able to find employment in Indianapolis working for Allison. At long last, he had a stable job.