

Raoul Couturier Lumber Ltd

by Michel Michaud

I. Introduction

The forest industry has been and still is in the forefront of the New Brunswick economy and particularly in that of Madawaska County. We realize, however, that the companies now harvesting our forests are big businesses coming from outside our region (*Irving*), outside our province (*Nexfor*), and outside our country (*Bowater*). But, to whom do we really owe respect for our economic survival in the logging sector? Is it to these multinational corporations, or is it to our small family-owned businesses that started it all, and now have almost completely disappeared from our collective memory? Must we forget the efforts of these regional entrepreneurs who invested body and soul to assure the survival of their family, and even more so, the survival of the whole Madawaska region? What would *Nexfor* be in Edmundston without the input of the Fraser family? What would *Bowater* be in Baker Brook without the Couturiers? This research intends to pay tribute to those families who started up these logging businesses in different parts of Madawaska territory and to give them the respect and gratitude they deserve.

Ideally, all the families who contributed to the development of the forest industry in the Madawaska region should be mentioned in this study but due to lack of time, space and resources, only one family was kept, that of Raoul Couturier. In this project we will attempt to draw a historic profile of the *Raoul Couturier*

Lumber sawmill of Baker Brook and to recall its development from the moment of its creation, in 1955, to its sale to the *Guérette* business in 1986.

This study was made possible by conducting oral inquiries. An oral inquiry can be very useful when written material is scarce, but we must always keep in mind that memory can play tricks on us. Testimonials have sometimes been contradictory, but fortunately, information provided by the local weekly newspaper *Le Madawaska* brought clarification. Generally, the testimonials were concordant. Three persons were interviewed: Pierre Couturier, one of Raoul's sons; Éli Aucoin, a former employee of *Raoul Couturier Lumber*, and Jacques Couturier, Raoul's eldest son. The first person who accepted to take the time and share with us his knowledge of the history of his family's sawmill was Pierre. We must mention that having been born in 1959, he was not around the first years of the sawmill. Mr. Aucoin had to fill that gap, as he was present when Raoul bought the mill, in 1955. Those accounts were recorded on audio-cassettes. For the section on the management, Jacques Couturier was very helpful and accepted to grant us an interview on the phone. As mentioned above, several articles about *Couturier Lumber* which were published in *Le Madawaska* in 1979 and 1988 filled in the missing parts and added to this research. The author wishes to thank sincerely all those who contributed directly or indirectly to the

realization of this project. A few regionalisms were inserted here and there in the text to give it a Madawaska flavor.

II. The Baker Brook Mill

In 1955, Raoul Couturier of Edmundston decided to buy a sawmill belonging to his father and brother, Alexis and Roland. The purchase price was four hundred dollars. Raoul had to sell an old car in order to get the money to pay for the sawmill.ⁱ We can wonder if the price would have been the same if an outsider had made an offer to buy the mill. An interesting fact is that Roland, who had a house close to the mill in Baker Brook, decided to continue living there following the sale, a decision that later proved costly to him and to his family

Even before the transaction of 1955, Raoul had always been closely involved in the survival and success of the family sawmill. His job consisted in providing wood for the mill. That is to say, his job required that he obtain cutting rights on Crown lands - rights which were often previously obtained by *Fraser*. Therefore, negotiations were held directly with the *Fraser* Company. Once the rights were acquired by Couturier, he was put in charge of woodlot operations, located mostly in Green River, and made responsible for the hauling of timber by truck to the Baker Brook mill. At the mill, the transformation of the timber became Roland's responsibility. "Raoul ran woodlot operations and Roland operated the mill". Then Raoul sold the wood products.ⁱⁱ

At the beginning of that period, there were about 20 to 25 employees at the Baker Brook sawmill, hired as laborers, sawyers, edger operators, graders, stackers, etc. Once it was sawed, lumber was carried to the lumberyard with the help of horses. As the years went by,

horses were replaced by a diesel Caterpillar. In 1962 the company was incorporated under the same name it would hold when it was sold: *Raoul Couturier Lumber Ltée*. Until 1965, a diesel engine propelled the mill. When that engine broke down in 1955, Raoul had to send it to Montreal for repairs. For the whole month of January, not a piece of timber was sawed at the Baker Brook sawmill. However, timber was stockpiled for the restart of operations at the beginning of February. The good old diesel engine was replaced by electric power in 1965. In 1979, *Raoul Couturier Lumber* counted 75 employees, forty of whom worked on location at the Baker Brook sawmill, while the others shared the responsibilities of woodcutting and hauling timber to the mill for transformation. In the beginning, 100% of the activity of the small mill concentrated on sawing hardwood. The reasons for this were simple and practical. First, hardwood was available, and secondly, the market was good. At that time, hardwood was transformed during the winter months since timber was cut in the fall, when it was free of sap, to produce wood products of better quality. Timber that is free of sap has more value. Progressively, soft wood was introduced at the mill but, for many years, only hardwood was sawed for about seven months per year.ⁱⁱⁱ At that time, the sawmill produced a lot of railway ties for the *Canadian National Railways*. In addition, hardwood was sold to a Montreal company, *Royal Bois Franc*. Some furniture companies were also customers of *Raoul Couturier Lumber*. The sawmill sometimes bought timber from small woodlot owners, many of them farmers, but most of the timber came from Raoul's woodlots located in Green River. With the growing scarcity of good quality hardwood in neighbouring forests, Raoul had to substitute it with soft wood^{iv}. At

first, since the company did not have cutting rights for soft wood, *Raoul Couturier Lumber* had to get its wood from the American side , particularly from the region of the Allagash in northern Maine. Finally, the company obtained soft wood cutting rights on Crown lands (*Fraser*) and, gradually stopped processing hardwood at the Baker Brook sawmill. It should be noted that private woodlot owners from the localities of Saint François, Clair, Baker Brook and Grand Falls also supplied the sawmill with timber ^v

During the months of February to June, when hauling wood by truck was not possible, sufficient wood reserves were necessary to keep the mill in operation. Towards the end of the 1970's, the sawmill operators were keeping about 3000 feet of timber in stock. In 1979, woodlots reserves were around three million feet of timber. ^{vi}

As a result of numerous renovations and upgrading of technology, production increased year after year. According to the study, "Évolution de l'industrie forestière en Marévie, 1910-1971" ^{vii} Raoul Couturier Lumber was one of the major sawmills in the Upper Madawaska region: it sawed at least one million feet of timber per year. Moving upward, Raoul Couturier Lumber put in place a second work shift. The mill now ran day and night. The modernization of 1979 allowed the company to increase its production from 30 thousand feet to 44 thousand feet per shift. In 1980, a few minor changes resulted in increasing production to 48 thousand feet of lumber. When the business was sold in 1986, production had reached 60 thousand feet of lumber. ^{viii}

If hardwood was sometimes sold to companies in Montreal, softwood lumber was destined mostly for the local market. What was left was

sold to wholesalers, who would then sell it to their customers. The mill produced softwood lumber in sizes, varying from 1" by 2", to 2" by 10". Wood chips were sold to *Fraser*. ^{ix}

In July 1986, Raoul Couturier received an offer for his sawmill from an entrepreneur named Raoul Guérette. The offer was certainly a good one since Mr. Couturier accepted to sell his business. When Pierre Couturier was asked to reveal the price of sale, he refused to say. Raoul sold Raoul Guérette a newly-renovated sawmill, one of most productive French-Canadian sawmills in New Brunswick, with a workforce of 125 employees.

III. The Pallet Mill, 1966

Having been in charge of the pallet mill since its opening in 1966, Mr. Aucoin had much to tell about its operation. Once it had been transformed, lumber was graded by quality. The grade determined the selling price. Classifying lumber is difficult task and requires good training. The classification scale is complex and varies from one type of wood to another. The further we get from the heartwood of the tree, the better quality the wood. Here is an example of a scale for grading hardwood:

- 1) **FAS**, first and second class,
- 2) **Select**,
- 3) **1**,
- 4) **2a**,
- 5) **2b**,
- 6) **3a** and
- 7) **3b**.

Before 1966, *Raoul Couturier Lumber* sold lumber of lesser quality at ridiculously low prices, according to Mr. Pierre Couturier, and profits were inexistant. From that fact came the idea of building a pallet mill. From then on, lumber of lesser quality would be transformed to pallets in Baker Brook and would bring a much better profit than rough lumber. Furthermore, the administrators had the idea of manufacturing potato crates for local producers. Pallets were sold all over to various sectors of the market such as beer companies and food distributors and producers, like *Graves* in Nova Scotia, and *McCain* in New Brunswick. This initiative brought more jobs to the people of neighbouring villages, and produced a value added product. ^x

IV. Fires

Like many other sawmills and mills involved in lumber operations, *Raoul Couturier Lumber* was horrendously affected by fires. In 1965, *Couturier Lumber* had just invested in a large debarker and a wood-chipper^{xi} when the mill caught on fire. Everything was destroyed and the mill was a total loss. In 1967, the planer section, the planing mill, was destroyed by fire. Roland Couturier, a former owner of the sawmill, was still living in a house built on mill property, not far from the planer mill. In that 1967 fire, flames reached his house and destroyed it completely. Luckily, no one was hurt. In 1976, the machine shop was destroyed by fire, and according to Mr. Pierre Couturier that was the last fire of the *Raoul Couturier Lumber* years.

It would have been easy to despair and abandon everything after such losses but, for an entrepreneur such as Raoul Couturier, that was

out of question. Supported by his wife Vina, and his faithful employees, and with renewed determination, he rebuilt after each disaster.

V. Renovations

To remain competitive, the management of *Raoul Couturier Lumber* felt it necessary to renovate and re-invest in new equipment for the sawmill. In 1965, they bought a large debarker and a chipper^{xii}. Unfortunately, as we now know, fire started in the sawmill later that year and destroyed everything including the new machines. ^{xiii} In 1974, it was time to invest in a new planer^{xiv} at the Baker Brook sawmill, since the first planer^{xv} was being used solely for the manufacturing of pallets. So *Raoul Couturier Lumber* undertook measures to acquire a used planer^{xvi} belonging to the *Fraser* mill in Kedgwick. That transaction was possible because the Fraser mill had just bought a new planer^{xvii}. In 1977 renovations included the purchases of a new saw, a twin-saw and a ring debarker. ^{xviii} In 1979, the public was invited to a reception to celebrate the mill's major renovations. Elaborate details of these changes at the Baker brook mill can be found in an article in the October 3rd, 1979 edition of *Le Madawaska*. In fact from July 16th of that year, *Raoul Couturier Lumber* underwent a major expansion with the installation of a new conveyer system, upgraded from manual to automatic, and a new high-speed debarker that helped to increase production. Three workers had to be assigned to other tasks. The new installations rendered operations safer for the employees. The project was made possible with " ...the close collaboration of the Department of

Regional Economic Development and was financed by the Federal Development Bank.^{xxix} So, as was mentioned, on September 30, 1979, *Raoul Couturier Lumber* invited the public to a demonstration of the new installations. A wine and cheese reception was held at the Castel Bleu to celebrate the official re-opening of the mill. Nearly 500 persons were present. Photos, placed in the Appendix, illustrate the magnitude of these festivities.

VI. The Administrators

As Nicole Lang notes in her research on *Fraser Company*, when she quotes Chandler, there is a professionalization of company management during the 20th century.^{xx} That fact is also true for the *Raoul Couturier Lumber* company.

Raoul Couturier Owner and President

As previously mentioned, from a young age, Raoul was always involved, in one way or another, in the lumber business. In the family business, he was in charge of woodlot operations and, after a while, left that position to take charge of the sawmill operation. His skill and experience were acquired on the field. However, the success of his enterprise is also due to the support provided by his family. After his retirement, Raoul remained involved in marketing lumber by becoming a close advisor to his sons, who, in 1981, established a building supply company called *Couturier Building Supplies*. He was always on the premises and kept busy with errands. It is ironic how, in the long run, roles became reversed.^{xxi}

Mrs Vina Couturier, Secretary-Treasurer

“Behind every good man, stands a good

woman”, and in this case, Raoul’s wife, Vina, was not standing *behind* but rather *by* his side. Pierre emphasized the importance of the role played by his mother in the survival and success of *Raoul Couturier Lumber*. When the business was going through difficult times, she was always there to support her husband in his trials. But more than a simple moral support, Vina oversaw all the office-work for the business. As the years passed, she accepted help from an accountant and from her son, Jacques, but she always kept a close eye on the business. Far from being a woman afraid of breaking a fingernail, Vina was often seen throwing a truck tire into the back of a small truck to go help one of her employees in trouble. When there were not enough employees, she was there in the yard, to scale logs recently arrived in the lumberyard. Furthermore, according to several rumours in the Baker Brook village, she was the “brains” behind the operations of *Raoul Couturier Lumber*.^{xxii}

Jacques Couturier, vice-president

The eldest son in the family, Jacques brought his input to the family business as soon as he could, that is to say, around the age of 13 or 14. He had set a target to do all the mill jobs so as to get a better grasp of the mill operations. After graduating, he worked with his mother and their accountant in the office. Afterwards, he occupied positions in the marketing department. He often worked with Éli Aucoin, who, for a long time, was in charge of marketing and, in this way, he learned the tricks of the trade. At one point, he was responsible for marketing and woodlot operations. He took courses in management, courses he qualified as private. Eventually, in 1981, the idea of opening a building supply store with his brother seemed plausible. In addition to his partnership in *Couturier Building Supplies*, he also worked

in Dalhousie, from 1986 to 1988. Finally, time and energy lacking, he sold his shares (50%) in the store to his brother Pierre and concentrated on his work as Director of Woodlot Operations for *NBIP* in Dalhousie, today a subsidiary of *Bowater*.^{xxiii}

Pierre Couturier, Advisor

Born in 1959, Pierre grew up in the lumber industry. Like his brother, as soon as he reached 12, he began working in his father's business. In Pierre's own words, as the boss's son he often felt as a stand-in, only able to do the dirty jobs. Until his graduation from high school, Pierre worked at his father's mill nearly every evening and weekend. Following his graduation, Pierre went to Nova Scotia to take a course in softwood lumber grading. Newly trained in that field, Pierre occupied the position of wood grader at his father's mill for two years. However, wanting to be his own boss, he decided to join his brother Jacques in opening a building supply company, that would get lumber mainly from their father's sawmill. With a "little" help from Raoul, *Couturier Building Supplies* started operations in 1981. That business continued to grow until it was acquired by *Kent Building Supplies* in 2003. It should be noted that Pierre still holds the position of Director of all the *KentStores* in northern New Brunswick^{xxiv}

Éli Aucoin, « The right-hand man of my father... »

Éli Aucoin was an experienced grader of lumber. He worked for a while at the St. Jacques sawmill of *Guimond et Leclerc*. Then, he moved to Plaster Rock where he worked as a grader at the local sawmill. He learned his trade from working in mills and sometimes, from other graders from away. In 1954, when he was

only 24, he was asked by Roland Couturier to be his grader. Luckily for Roland, Éli left his job at the Plaster Rock sawmill and came to work in Baker Brook. The lumber graders must have been rare in the Madawaska region since Roland had to go to "les anglais meaning the English" to fill the position. Mr. Aucoin changed bosses shortly after arriving at the Baker Brook mill. Hired by Roland in November 1954, he became the Raoul's employee when the latter bought the sawmill in January 1955. Éli Aucoin practiced his trade for a good many years and even taught other mill workers how to grade lumber. In 1966, Raoul appointed him director of the mill and put him in charge of selling pallets. When Raoul was absent, Éli would take over the operation of the sawmill. When the mill was sold to Raoul Guérette in 1986, Éli went from grader to manager when he was promoted to business manager of the Baker Brook mill. His decision in 1954 to leave Plaster Rock and come to Baker Brook had proven to be very profitable. In addition to being promoted to management positions at the Couturiers, he met, not long after his arrival there, a woman who would become his life companion. The future Mrs. Aucoin worked as a housekeeper for the Couturier family. Mr. Aucoin is now 74 and remains in good health^{xxv}.

Conclusion

Raoul Couturier Lumber had humble beginnings. Operated by an **entrepreneur** endowed with a keen business acumen and a stubborn determination to succeed, the company had its future marked for success. Innovative ideas, such as the manufacturing of pallets, have contributed to place the Baker Brook mill at the forefront of the lumber industry in the Madawaska region. The Couturier sawmill went through difficult times, as it was ravaged by fire many times. Courage,

determination, and, surely, pride made certain that the Couturier family did not bow to defeat. They rebuilt after each disaster, invested into new machinery, and operated a well-known and reputed sawmill business in the region. Raoul succeeded in turning a small family business into a major regional firm. The mill is still in operation today and the Couturiers made it so.

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Interviews

Interview with Mr. Pierre Couturier, son of Raoul Couturier, Verret N.-B., March 2004.

Interview with Mr. Éli Aucoin, former employee of *Raoul Couturier Lumber*, Edmundston N.B. March 2004

Interview by Phone with Mr. Jacques Couturier, son of Raoul Couturier, March 2004.

Notes

i. Interview conducted with Mr. Pierre Couturier, son of Raoul Couturier, Verret N.B., March 2004.

ii. Interview conducted with Mr. Éli Aucoin, former employee of *Raoul Couturier Lumber*, Edmundston N.B.,

March 2004.

iii. Interview conducted with Mr. Éli Aucoin, *op. cit.*

iv. Interview conducted with M. Pierre Couturier, *op. cit.*

v. Jean Pedneault, « Rénovation ..., *op.cit.*, p. 2-b.

vi. *Ibid.*

vii. Objectif Quatre, « Évolution de l'industrie forestière en Marévie entre 1910 et 1971 », *Revue de la Société historique du Madawaska*, vol. IX, no 1, juin 1981.

viii. Jean Pedneault, « Propriété de la famille Couturier depuis 1940 », *Le Madawaska*, March 30, 1988, p. 11-b.

ix. Interview conducted with Mr. Pierre Couturier, *op. cit.*

x. Interview conducted with M. Éli Aucoin, *op. cit.*

xi. Chipper (wood-chipper) : wood cutter. Machine used to cut wood chips to a more or less similar size. See: *Vocabulaire du matériel papetier, anglais-français*, Trois-Rivières, Presses de l'Université du Québec, l'Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières and Consolidated-Bathurst Inc., 1983.

xii. *Ibid.*

xiii. Interview conducted with Mr. Pierre Couturier, *op. cit.*

xiv. Planer: Machine – tool used to flatten or level the surface of wood pieces: (in French: raboteuse, dégauchisseuse, limeuse, mortaiseuse, etc. See : *Vocabulaire du matériel papetier..., op.cit.*

xv. *Ibid.*

xvi. *Ibid.*

xvii. *Ibid.*

xviii. Interview conducted with Mr. Pierre Couturier, *op.cit.* Ring barker: écorceuse à couteaux radiaux. Type of barker equipped with spikes, cogs or brush to push logs one by one toward an axle of rotating knives. See : *Vocabulaire du matériel papetier..., op.cit.*

xix. Jean Pedneault, « Rénovation..., *op.cit.*, p. 2-b.

xx. Nicole Lang, La compagnie Fraser Limited, 1918-1974. Étude de l'évolution des stratégies économiques, des structures administratives et de l'organisation du travail à l'usine d'Edmundston au Nouveau-Brunswick, thèse de doctorat, Université de Montréal, 1994 et « De l'entreprise familiale à la compagnie moderne : la Fraser Companies Limited de 1918 à 1974 », *Acadiensis*, vol. XXV, no 2, printemps 1996, p. 42-61.

xxi. Interview conducted with Mr. Pierre Couturier, *op. cit.*

xxii. *Ibid.*

xxiii. Interview conducted by phone with M. Jacques Couturier, eldest son of Raoul, March 2004.

xxiv. Interview conducted with Mr. Pierre Couturier, *op. cit.*

xxv. Interview conducted with Mr. Éli Aucoin, *op. cit.*