



'Shaky' Business

THE FINISHED product lies stacked and ready for shipment as a worker bundles more.

Demand for natural materials means good business for Sandy Shake

While recent advances in plastics and metals have replaced everything from glass windows to concrete, one building material that there is still no good substitute for is the cedar shake. Durable and attractive, cedar shakes and shingles keep a house cooler in the summer, warmer in the winter and are in demand like never before despite a shortage of raw cedar that has increased the price fivefold in the last 10 years.

This all spells good news for Dennis Melstrom, the owner of the Sandy Shake Company, a collection of corrugated iron buildings filled with whining saws and hydraulic wedges that puts out about 6500 square feet of shakes and shingles a day.

"They're rustic, and that's the fad right now," says Melstrom, over the hubbub of the mill.

Sandy Shake has been at its location four miles east of Sandy since 1967, when Melstrom and two partners built it on the crumbling remains of an old sawmill, of which the mill pond and burning wigwags are still visible.

With 20 people manning the saws and wedges, the company now produces shakes and shingles for markets in Oregon and California.

For the uninitiated, shakes and shingles are easy to get confused. Basically, a shake is longer (24 inches, as opposed to 16 for a shingle) and split rather than sawn. Melstrom's mill produces "Hollywood" shakes, split on one side but sawn on the other, a type that generally yields more shakes per bolt.

For both shingles and shakes, process begins as the raw cedar logs are fed through a guillotine-like chain saw that whacks off selected lengths of wood.

In the old days, it was then up to some burly fellow to take a maul and sledge to the bolts, breaking them into manageable sizes. Now, a massive hydraulic wedge splits a bolt in just seconds.

From there, the blocks are stripped of their bark and shuttled down one of two conveyor belts—one for shakes, the other for shingles.

The shake blocks are then split again in a smaller version of the big hydraulic wedge, then sawn diagonally so each

piece of wood split off the block yields two shakes.

For shingles, the blocks are fed into a machine not unlike what the corner deli uses to slice hams with. As a large circular saw pares off the shingles, a workman picks them from the edge of

the saw, trims and squares them and sends them on their way to the shipping room—all at a rate of 36 times a minute.

The man with the nimble fingers at Sandy Shake is Henry Weick, who's been trimming shingles for 25 years.

"Very few men have their fingers left—all of them—after doing this that long," said Melstrom.

Despite placing his hand just inches from a whirling blade over 1800 times an hour, Weick has all of his.

The saw used in this operation is of a variety used since the early part of the century. The one at Sandy Shake was made in 1910. "They just never came up with a better way," said Weick.

Finally, the finished product is bundled up for shipment.

Melstrom is sole owner of the plant now. His brother, Dale, works as the millright, making it a family operation.

Melstrom has been in the woods since "I was old enough to work."

But while falling timber 12 years ago he suffered a serious eye injury that prevented him from doing any logging for several months.

Casting about for something to do, Melstrom hit upon shake manufacturing. "I had a chance to buy a mill in Tillamook," he recalls. "The fellow who owned it couldn't find a market, but we (Melstrom and two partners) knew where we could sell the material."

Business was fine until 1968, when on Friday, March 13 a fire destroyed the mill.

Fortunately, work had begun on the Sandy plant, so the entire operation moved out here. In 1971, Melstrom bought his partners out.

But while business is brisk, Melstrom is the first to point out that lumber products is not the most stable field to be in.

"You can go bankrupt so easy," he says, pointing to the skyrocketing cost

of raw material and a sometimes fickle market.

Even now, with the demand for cedar shakes virtually insatiable, production lines at Sandy Shake stand idle due to a shortage of logs. "We have the market, we just don't have the material," said Dale Melstrom.

The main reason for this has been the closure of the Bull Run area to commercial logging, even recovery of the

salvage that most shake bolts come from.

"Cedar only grows in certain areas, and the Bull Run is one of the largest around," Melstrom said. "I've been trucking logs in from all over just to stay in business."

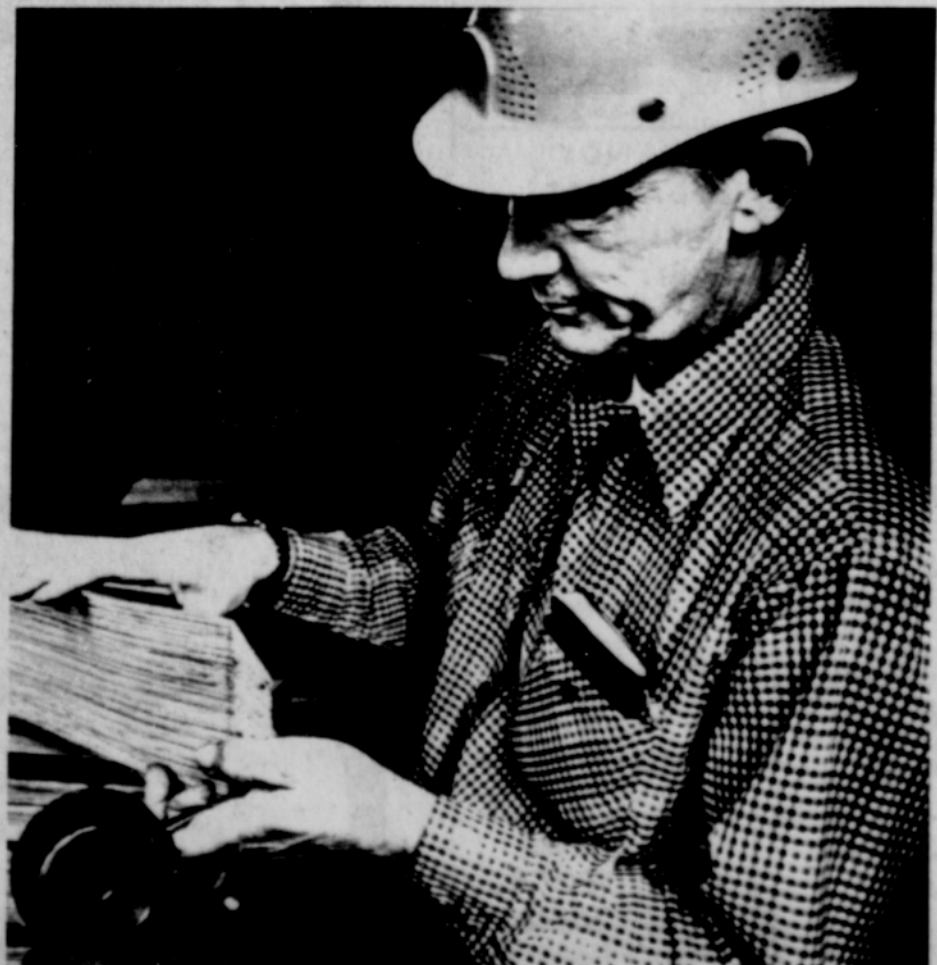
Melstrom hopes that recent moves to loosen logging restrictions in the reserve will once again make local logs available.



DENNIS MELSTROM: Owner of the Sandy Shake Company on Highway 26.



GREG JORDAN has the ticklish job of splitting the shakes from cedar blocks with a powerful hydraulic wedge.



MELSTROM EXAMINES an unfinished shake to make sure it is split properly.

Text and photographs by Douglas Gantenbein