

A brief outline of the methods and process used to produce quality lumber in 1905 at the Potlatch sawmill. From pond to boxcar.

Inside the sawmill is where the boards first begin to show up as they are cut from each log. Their first stop is at a machine called the edger. A good share of the boards produced off the log have bark on both edges. This has to be trimmed off, and the board ripped to a standard size which is either 4, 6, 8, 10, or 12 inches wide. Or, in the case of a wide board, any combination of two or more of these widths. This the edgerman does, producing the widest board possible with little or no bark on either edge. Many boards come to the edger from the headrig correctly sized in width and with no bark. These are run through the edger without processing.

All boards then go to and are passed through a trimmer. This trims and squares each end and at the same time cuts the board to a standard length of 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, foot length, which most lumber is produced at. There is occasionally demand for 18 and 20 foot stock. Two men work at the trimmer, one on each end of the short transfer table placing each board in rapid succession on the table where lugs on a transfer chain carry it through the trimmer. Imbedded in the table are a series of circular saws spaced 2 feet apart along its length. The operator or trimmerman, who sits in an overhead cage and looking down on the table, has control of these saws and he decides which one to use to cut it to the proper length. This had to be done in a split second. The Potlatch sawmill had two trimmers and these crews were swamped most of the time. From here the lumber made its way out of the sawmill to a sorting shed or more commonly known as the green chain.

Lumber was pulled off both sides of the transfer chain manually, the crew all wearing leather aprons and mittens. It was piled on yard trucks which ran on narrow gauge rail tracks. For the most part the stock was piled on the trucks ^{with each} width and length, thickness and specie all separated. The Potlatch mill cut 5 specie of lumber during the first years, Idaho white pine, ponderosa pine, red fir, tamarack and cedar. This made for a lot of differant sorts, but the green chain was over 500' long.

30 men or more worked in this sorting shed, and it was hard physical work. If any individual momentarily got sorta caught up, he didn't get to rest, he was required to go help any neighbor who might be swamped. This chain very seldem stopped during working hours.

The next stage of processing lumber was to dry it. The first five mechanical dry kilns that Potlatch had dried only a small fraction of their total production. So most of it had to go to an open air drying and storage yard. It was piled by hand.

Cont.

Lumber processing through the plant #2

And each layer of lumber was spaced by narrow wood sticks spaced every 4 feet or so. This let the air circulate through the piles and this would eventually ~~make~~ dry the lumber. Each pile when finished would be covered by panels to protect it as much as possible. This method of drying using the wind and sun could take anywhere from two months to six months or more, depending on specie, thickness and if it was winter or summer. At one time there was 120 million bd ft in the yard. And it was claimed there was 45 miles of track throughout all the yard alleys.

The lumber sent to the dry kilns to dry had to also be stickered to separate each layer from the other. It was stacked on special bunks that fit the kilns, and each kiln load contained around 24,000 bd ft per charge. When filled doors on each end would be closed, air blowers & heaters turned on and this warm air continuously circulated around the lumber. The internal kiln temperature and humidity was constantly monitored and closely controlled. Lumber was considered dried when its moisture content was down to 12%. This method of drying lumber was so much faster than yard drying, one to two weeks for most lumber, and it produced a product that was far superior to that that was left out in the open with unpredictable results. And far less warping, checking and stains.

From either the kilns or the yard, the dried lumber then headed after the sticks were removed, for the planer. With 32 various machines in the dept., it was planed or surfaced, as the process is called, and made into plain lumber, cut to a pattern, matched, made into moulding, flooring and graded. Orders for lumber were filled from the output from the planer and went directly to the boxcar for shipment. A shipping dept. processed the orders, checked talley, ordered box cars etc. Any output from the planer not used to fill orders went to dry storage sheds and this inventory was kept track of and used to fill future orders.

All this processing and handling in those days took a large work force. One Potlatch payroll I saw for Dec. 1912 covering all operations of the plant and town, included the following summarization ;

Main office	32	School staff	13	Potlatch Merc.	32
Doctors	2	Townsite & barn	29	Co. Ranch & misc.	24
Supt. & foremen	22	Salesmen	11	Firewood dept.	11
Sawmill 2 shifts	147	Pond 2 shifts	13	Green chain 2S	68
Dredge	6	Teamsters	4	Motor & switch	17
Planer	82	Yard	296	Box factory	24
Power House's	22				
		Grand total=	857		

In reviewing the yard force of 296 men, it looked like about 10 to 15% were part time, probably shoveling snow. ^{However} It took a lot of man power to pile and tear down all that sawmill production.