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Quality Hardwood Flooring: It's In the Family at Cumberland Lumber & Manufacturing

By *Clare Adrian*

McMinnville, Tenn.—Strategically located at the edge of the Cumberland Plateau, which contains some of the largest stretches of contiguous forest in the eastern United States, Cumberland Lumber & Manufacturing Company, Inc., based here, is swathed in the varied species it processes into quality Hardwood flooring.

Primarily Red and White Oak, popularly chosen for its beauty, stability, and durability, arrives from various sawmills in the Appalachian area, from across North Georgia, Northern Alabama, middle Tennessee and Southern Kentucky. After transformation into 3/4 inch solid Hardwood flooring, in 2 1/4", 3 1/4" widths, and on a limited basis 4" and 5" widths, the product is shipped to Hardwood flooring distributors and builder supply stores throughout the Eastern United States.

The company has made the necessary adjustments over the years due to the economic, market, and industry's peaks and valleys, yet persists in yielding a consistent quality product, attributable largely, said president, Ray "Buzz" Spivey, Jr. to longevity within a longstanding family-run business.

Average seniority within the company's current 108 employees and staff is 11.4 years, inclusive of the 27 whose tenures range from 20 to 37 years and those who have acquired prior wood industry experience.

The other part of the equation of the company's strength is in its long-established ownership, passed along yet today, to descendants of the founders. Observed Spivey, "Some mills change owners several times and their personnel and personality as well. As a small private company, we can address problems and make changes relatively quickly." Though retired, Ray Spivey, Sr. still makes recommendations, added his son, "And he's usually right."

Ray Spivey, Sr. and A.J. Ingle bought the shares of the company in 1949 from Herman Spivey and Floyd Martin, original founders along with L.C. Gilley, and G.W. McGregor, who relinquished his shares to the other three, soon after they'd started out in 1944 as wood products manufacturers. Today Tommy Gilley, grandson of L.C. Gilley, helps manage the company along with Ray Spivey, Jr.

Flooring has been the main product since 1949, though other products manufactured over the years were Poplar bevel siding, Oak mouldings such as base board, crown mould, and shoe mould, door parts, cabinet parts and Hardwood dimension. The company operated one flooring production

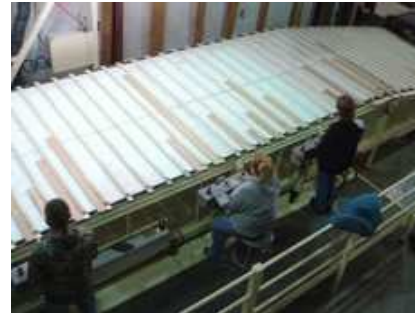


Cumberland Lumber's President Ray "Buzz" Spivey, Jr.



Cumberland employees cutting for grade and loading the end matcher table.

line and another wood products line both on one shift for many years, until hitting a snag in the 60's along with the rest of the Hardwood flooring industry when government mortgages began accepting carpeting as an alternative to wood for residential floor coverings. The company survived by cutting back to a 40-person operation, running limited amounts of flooring and other wood products. By 1970, Cumberland was one of 13 companies that remained as members of NOFMA (National Oak Flooring Manufacturers Association) a collective at one time of well over 100 manufacturers.



Lumber graders are shown here at the firm's joystick grading operation.

The flooring market slowly improved and by the late 1970's, wood flooring regained popularity.

In 1984, Cumberland added a second shift to the flooring line, which doubled their production to a 10 million board foot capacity annually and demanded considerable capital investment in additional dry kilns. The rough lumber inventory on the yard doubled. To further expand production in the mid 1990's, an additional flooring production line was installed and night production moved to the day shift. Reviving the night shift in 2001 increased capacity to 15+ million board feet annually.

Additional air-drying area, an improved boiler system, and installation of more efficient dry kilns propelled production toward a 16 million board feet peak in 2004 and 2005. Spivey recalled, "Market forces required the elimination of a production shift in January of 2007. With the addition of the automated nesting system, all production was shifted to two shifts on one more efficient line."

The 60+ acre lumber yard currently holds approximately 8.2 million board feet of lumber, the 10,000 square foot warehouse holds 200,000 board feet of flooring, well under its 1 million board feet capacity, the dry kilns and cooling shed operate at close to capacity, each at 500,000 board feet. The ripping line and two flooring lines operate within the 60,000 square foot manufacturing facilities.



Use of a Lico optimizing rip system measures each board, determines the best cutting pattern for each, and utilizing a moving arbor rip saw, can cut any combination of flooring blanks in the various widths the company produces.

The trail into flooring production starts in the yard as the green 4/4" lumber received is graded into #1, #2, and #3 Common, and stacked for air drying, which takes from four to six months, depending on weather and time of year. Once air-dried, it's transported by Taylor Big Red forklifts to the manufacturing facility for kiln drying. An assemblage of six Irvington Moore and two SII dry kilns varying in size from 30,000 board foot to 80,000 board foot at a 500,000 board foot total capacity, dries the lumber to a target moisture content of 6-9%, requiring one to two weeks before transfer to cooling sheds and entry to the manufacturing process.

Use of a Lico optimizing rip system measures each board, determines the best cutting pattern for each, and utilizing a moving arbor rip saw, can cut any combination of flooring blanks in the various widths the company produces, increasing lumber yield considerably over cutting for one width at a time, said Spivey. The strips are sorted by width manually into bins until transport to one of two manufacturing lines, typically the automated nesting system which handles a maximum 3 1/4" wide flooring, as the 4 and 5" wide flooring line remains mostly idle, due to the flooring market of late.

At the manufacturing line, Industrial cut-off saws remove major defects such as pointed ends and very large knots from the strips, which are then fed into a Hasko "Matchmaster" planer/matcher to form the face and back of the flooring, as well as tongue and groove edges. The flooring pieces are then defected for the best value of piece with another set of Industrial cut-off saws and placed into the slat table of the Doucet end-matching system which forms the tongue and groove matched ends.



An aerial view of Cumberland Lumber's facilities.

Graders record the grade of each piece as the slat conveyor carries each piece through the Blue Valley Automation automated nesting system which

measures the length of each piece, tracks each by grade and length, and builds nested bundles conforming to the minimum average length required for each grade. Completed and bundled packages are automatically strapped, shrink-wrapped and transported to the warehouse to await shipment by common carrier.

Maintaining a consistent amount of rough lumber inventory is a continuous balancing act with several legs to it. The objective is to carry a six-month supply of rough lumber in the yard, kilns, and cooling sheds at all times, with the realization that that amount of lumber bought must be ready for use six months down the road. The grades and widths ordered is determined by the needs at the time of the 50-strong customer base shipped to regularly, considering their area of the country. "Some want Select and Better, for some it's a No. 1 Common market. So we try to have a good mix and not just run one grade," noted Spivey.

From month to month, the amount of inventory teeters between supply and demand. When the market is slow, Spivey cuts back on purchases. On the supply side, during some months the amount of inventory depends on the weather. "If loggers can't get in because of drought or rain, we have to go with the flow of Mother Nature."

A slow and steady company growth pattern, established early on by Herman Spivey and marred only by market and economy conditions, awaits a slow moving recovery to increase 4 and 5 inch flooring production and reinstate an idle flooring line. Meanwhile, Spivey would like to see an upgrade of the Lico rip system and the Hasko planer/matcher, possibly including scanning, and automated defecting and grading of pieces. Until then, the Cumberland heritage, its stamina and resilience, sustains a sound reputation for producing high quality Hardwood flooring.

Contact Cumberland Lumber & Manufacturing Company, Inc. at 931-473-9542.



Vice President of sales Marty Johnson on the skywalk.



Ray Spivey, Sr. (photographed) and A.J. Ingle bought the shares of the company in 1949 from Herman Spivey and Floyd Martin, original founders along with L.C. Gilley, and G.W. McGregor, who relinquished his shares to the other three, soon after they'd started out in 1944 as wood products manufacturers.



Once air-dried, Taylor Big Red forklifts transport the lumber to the manufacturing facility for kiln drying.

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