

# CHAMPLAIN HARDWOODS — —

## Finding A Niche In Northern New England

**Essex Junction, Vt. —** Champlain Hardwoods was founded in 1982 by David Williams, now 39 years old. Williams has spent all of his adult life in the Hardwood business and now is very thankful to have actually been involved in many aspects of the business. In 1974, he piled lumber for six months for a lumber yard while waiting to attend the NHLA grading school in Memphis. According to Williams, "this was a great experience and a good motivation in helping me want to get up on that lumber pile."

Dave graduated the top man in the 54<sup>th</sup> class at Memphis and went to work for a sawmill in Vermont. "I learned many aspects of the sawmill business from piling lumber to grading, sorting lumber, loading trucks and running various mill equipment. I was assistant manager of the mill which meant taking the jobs people

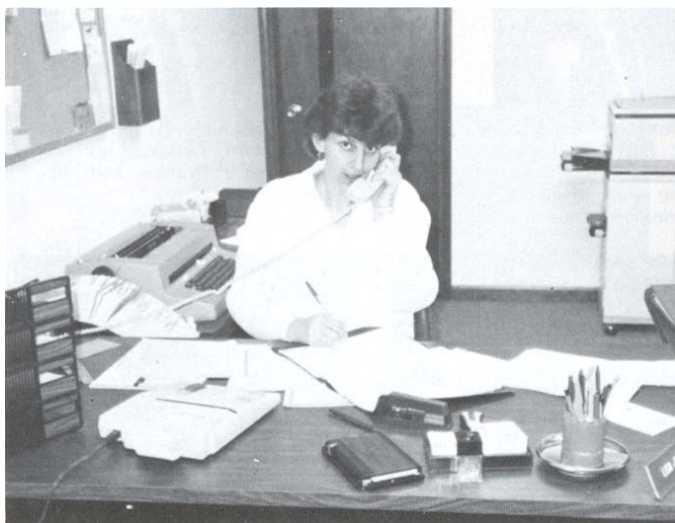
didn't show up for, usually the wettest, coldest or dirtiest. Even today, I'm always overly appreciative to arrive at the office on a wet day. I feel well in tune with what mill guys go through," he said.

"For years, I dreamed about founding a Hardwood company and today, I am really thrilled to have done it and to be part of this industry," he said. "Businesswise, one of the things I'm most thankful for today is that I came all the way up through the ranks. If we have a problem loading trucks, for example, I know what the problem is, because I've loaded a lot of trucks. I talk to other salesmen, and they wish they had had that hands-on experience," he said.

Champlain Hardwoods inventories lumber at three locations in northern New England, marketing mainly Northern Hardwoods, including Ash, Hard Maple, Red Oak, Yellow Birch, Soft Maple, Beech and Cherry in all thicknesses, but

primarily in 4/4 through 8/4. In addition, the firm handles Northeastern furniture Pine. Champlain Hardwoods' location, 40 miles south of the Canadian border and 90 miles from Montreal, has proved advantageous, since about half of the company's lumber is shipped to the Canadian market. "We have found ourselves a little niche here in northern New England," Williams said. Although everyone complains about all the softwood lumber coming into the United States, it benefits us tremendously, because there are plenty of trucks going back into Canada."

Part of Champlain's success can be attributed to a reputation for credibility. "We feel fortunate to be involved in an industry where small really is beautiful," Williams said. "The good thing about the size of our



**LISA JAQUEMOT** handles trucking for the firm.



**LINDA AND DAVE Williams**, Linda, Dave Williams' wife, works as the company's bookkeeper.

– by Doug Knowles

company is that we still have a heart. We base our business on relationships with people, not just company policy,” he said. “I think we can sympathize with our customers’ problems, see what they need and respond to it, and I think that’s a little bit unique in our business. We recognize that we exist only because of our customers and suppliers and that we represent them,” he said.

As the new kid on the block, Champlain has had to earn the respect of suppliers and users in the region. “Many of the companies we are dealing with have been in the business for 100 years, and we have been in the business for five,” Williams said. “So we feel we have to work hard to be worthy of them.”

Williams and Chris Castano are the only two traders in the firm. Castano holds a bachelor of science degree in forestry management from the University of Vermont and has been with the company almost two years. The two work well together, since their business philosophies are similar. “One of the most important things Chris and I do when we sell lumber is to represent it as it is,” Williams said. “And over the years, the customers learn that the lumber will be exactly as we say it is. We would rather pass up an order than misrepresent it or not come through on it,” he said. “Chris wants to feel good visiting any customer or mill and not wonder what they are thinking of him. He wants to maintain the idea that what Chris says, happens,” Williams said. To that end, Castano and Williams visit the kilns every week to check the quality of the inventory.

Madeleine Tremblay has been with the company since its founding as office manager. Her continued hard work and careful attention to detail have played a major role in



**DAVE WILLIAMS**, company owner and president, checking the grade on Select and Better Red Oak.



**CHRIS CASTANO**, lumber grader, checking sticking job on narcel being air dried.



**MADELEINE TREMBLAY**, Champlain's office manager.



**LUCILLE ROCHELEAU**, works part time in Champlain's office.

Champlain's customer and mill service abilities. Lisa Jaquemot handles the trucking. Both are bilingual in French and English, a tremendous asset to the company according to Williams, who by his own account, flunked out of French in high school. Lucille Rocheleau comes in part time and helps make up a very dedicated and well rounded trio. Dave's wife, Linda, keeps the books.

All work well together as a team in the close-knit environment. "We don't have any plans to grow very big," Williams said. "We like being small. One of the big considerations is that I really enjoy trading lumber. If we

got any bigger, I would have to spend a lot of time on administrative stuff which would take me away from my first love, lumber trading."

Despite the desire to remain small, the firm is interested in staying up to date. For example, the company recently installed a FAX machine to better communicate with suppliers and buyers.

Williams remains grateful to be where he is. "We are all well aware that our suppliers don't have to sell to us and our customers don't have to buy from us," he said. "And we intend to do our best to continue to earn their trust."

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