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The Ward Family: Pioneers in New York's Sawmill Industry

By: [Eric Johnson](#)

Sidney Ward Jr. is sitting at his desk early one summer morning, in a spacious, wood-paneled new office suite built directly over the company garage. Through a large picture window just behind him, a wisp of smoke streams out of the stack of one of the lumber company's wood-fired boilers. Beyond that is a breathtaking view of the wooded mountains surrounding the small town of Jay, New York, home of Ward Lumber Company.



Sidney Ward Jr., the third generation of Wards to be in the sawmilling business of Jay, New York. The Ward Lumber Company employs about 150. Small, family-owned sawmills supply the nation with most of its lumber.

"This whole valley was stripped at one time," Ward explains, "part of it by fire and the rest for farmland and timber harvesting." He pauses. "Now, of course, it's all forest. That parcel back there," he says, pointing over his shoulder, "is some of our own timberland."

Looking around the valley from the central vantage point of the Ward Lumber log yard, the mountains today look almost pristine—untouched save for the widespread damage recently inflicted by nature herself in the devastating "Ice Storm of '98."

Indeed, it would not be unreasonable for tourists to think they were looking at virgin forestland, following the Ausable River as it winds through the valley down from Lake Placid, a short drive to the southwest. That's because both Placid and the town of Jay are located within New York's Adirondack Park—a six million-acre "forest preserve" in which timber harvesting is prohibited on the roughly 2.5 million acres of state-owned land and restricted to some extent on the remaining 3.5 million privately owned acres.

Visitors—most of whom are aware that they are in a "forever wild" preserve but may not know that forest management is allowed on the private land in the Park—often confuse the two. To the untrained eye, in fact, some of the land managed for timber production is more inviting than the "forever wild" parcels.

Observers with a little more forestry savvy, by contrast, see an obvious distinction. State-owned land is dominated in many cases by over-aged timber, which, since the establishment of the Adirondack Park Forest Preserve more than a century ago, has been allowed to fall over and decay. Many wildlife species prefer managed forests because they contain more diversity and thus, more opportunities for food and shelter.

"I think it's a shame New York State doesn't manage its land in the Park," Sid Ward says simply.

Ward, who retired as full-time CEO two years ago at age 54, is the third generation to head up the family-owned company. His sons, Sid III ("Jay") and Jeff, represent the fourth generation. He points to a child nestled in her mother's arms in a family photo: Jay's daughter, Mollie. "She might be the fifth generation."

At age 80, Sid's mother, Agnes Ward, still reports for work as company Treasurer every morning, as does her son. But, Ward is quick to point out that he and his mother are strictly support personnel—Jay and Jeff now run the company, as President and Vice President of Manufacturing, respectively. Their mother, Janet, served as company secretary until joining her husband in retirement.

On one level—as a family-owned white pine sawmill—Ward Lumber Co. is a fairly typical enterprise in the northern Pine Belt. Hundreds of companies fitting this narrow description are scattered across the region stretching from the Adirondacks to the Atlantic coast. They come in a wide variety of sizes and conditions—from 120 million board foot per-year behemoths, to operations sawing a million feet a year or less. Some are extremely successful, while others just barely hang in there. Many have become technological marvels, while a few still look more like something out of the nineteenth century. Size has little to do with success or failure in the modern pine business.

But beyond the superficial similarities with other operations, Ward Lumber Co. is not a typical white pine sawmill. Over the generations, the company has joined an elite group of mills in the region, combining creative utilization of the forest resource—white pine logs in this case—with aggressive and imaginative marketing of the resulting lumber and all other byproducts.

In fact, the company is involved in every aspect of converting white pine into useful consumer products—from growing the trees to selling what they yield to the end user. As such, retail sales represent a big part of the company's recent growth. The Ward Lumber Co. hardware store and building center, located adjacent to the sawmill complex, has long provided a retail outlet for some of the mill's finished products. The company recently expanded retail operations when it acquired a store from the defunct Grossman's chain in Plattsburgh, a small city and major population center about 35 miles to the north on the Canadian border.



On a typical day, freshly-harvested white pine logs enter the Ward log yard on trucks, and they are quickly turned into a dazzling array of useful products.

The Ward Family: (L-R) Janet Ward (Mrs. Sid Ward Jr.), Ward's son Jay (Sid III), Sid Ward Jr., Mr. Ward's mother, Agnes and the Ward's other son, Jeff. Jay and Jeff, the fourth generation of Wards, now run the company. Most of America's sawmills are still small, family-owned operations much like Ward Lumber Company.

Maximizing lumber production is everyone's main goal, of course, but the company also produces everything from pet bedding (dry planer shavings) to livestock bedding (green sawdust) to landscape mulch (ground bark) to chips for making paper (chipped slabwood) to fuel for the company's lumber drying kilns (various wood wastes).

Not long ago, these residues were considered (and disposed of as) waste. Today, they're called "byproducts" and can mean the difference between profitability and bankruptcy. Virtually all white pine sawmills in the region today have markets for non-lumber byproducts.

What distinguishes Ward from most other pine mills, however, is the lengths to which it goes in producing and marketing lumber. The two retail stores are a good example. Sid Ward says that the combination of product diversity, niche markets, production flexibility and quality have been essential to the company's success. He points to largedimension green timbers, used in such upscale projects as post-and-beam buildings and log homes. "Years ago when we first got into the log home market I figured it was a passing fad," he says, "but it's become a steady, long-term market for us."

From the bigtimber sorting area, he crosses the yard to the planer mill, where wide, dry pine boards are being turned into different kinds of siding. At one end of the planer mill, pine clapboards are stacked. In another, cove siding emerges from the planer. A shipment of rustic pine siding is being loaded onto one of the company's distinctive green trucks for shipment to New England.

In a warehouse full of tongue-and-groove paneling and planed boards—the premium stuff—Ward points to a pallet stacked with short boards averaging about one foot wide and two feet long. These, it turns out, are defective sections trimmed from premium boards to increase their grade and thus, their value. "In the past we would have chipped these for the paper mill,"

Ward says of the short ends, "but we've developed a market for 'hobbyist' wood sold through retail outlets."

The list of markets and potential markets goes on and on. Some companies specialize in trimming high-value sections out of knotty and other defectladen boards. Ward has a supply of lowgrade lumber ready for shipment to one of these "chop-shops." One big industrial customer uses low-grade pine to make pallets and shipping crates for its machines. Ward employees sort out the right boards, accumulating loads to fill the orders.

Where does all this wood come from? Sid Ward says that about 95 percent of the 11 million board feet of logs sawn annually by the company come from independent loggers working on private forestland—much of it in the Adirondack Park. Ward itself has roughly 4,500 acres of timberland in the Jay area, which is managed for the sustainable production of pine. "Most of our land was acquired by my father in the '50s," he notes, "and a lot of it was old farmland that has been planted or naturally regenerated to pine. We don't post

our property,” he adds, “in part because we believe people should be able to enjoy managed forests.” And when hunting season rolls around, “managed forests are where you find the deer.”

The company has a full-time forester, Kendall Southard, who splits his time between managing company lands and buying logs for the mill from logging contractors and landowners.

Lately, company woodlands have been contributing a much larger share than five percent of the mill’s logs. The huge ice storm, which devastated millions of acres of productive timberland across northern New York State and much of New England in January of 1998, took a heavy toll on the forests around the mill. Ward has been salvaging what it can from its own property, resulting in smaller logs on average, than those usually supplied by independent loggers. According to Sid Ward and others, the small-to-medium sized pine trees took the biggest hit during the storm.

The immediate effect of processing smaller logs has been a reduction in the number of big timbers sawn and a big increase in boards—narrower boards in particular. Ward says the glut of smaller logs has created both production and marketing challenges, which have to be balanced with the need to care for Ward timberlands and salvage damaged timber from the property. There’s an old adage in business circles that most family-owned and run companies don’t make it past the third generation. Part of this has to do with problems common to dividing up estates, such as steep inheritance taxes and complicated legal maneuvering. But changing personalities within the company and attitudes towards the business are perhaps even more important. It’s just tough to sustain the interest in, and commitment to, a family-owned business from generation to generation, particularly as the distance from the founder increases.

Ward Lumber Co. seems to be headed in the opposite direction.

“Years ago, Jan and I didn’t know if our sons would be interested in the business, even though they grew up around this mill and worked here through school,” Ward notes. But in the late ‘80s both sons chose to bring their college degrees—Jeff’s is in engineering and Jay’s is in business—back to the mill to focus on different, but complementary, aspects of the family business. Their father is clearly pleased.



Ward Lumber Company operates its own retail lumberyard adjacent to its Jay, New York sawmill. Most family-owned lumber companies sell their products exclusively through brokers and wholesalers.

In recent years, Jeff and Jay have headed up major projects—from acquiring the store in Plattsburgh to installing a new wood-fired boiler for the kiln drying operation. The next big step, according to Sid Ward, will probably be replacing the main sawmill building with a bigger, more efficient and productive place to turn raw logs into lumber.

Walking through the Ward Lumber Co. complex, Sid Ward discusses the changes he's seen and adapted to in the business over his working life. He marvels at those he sees just ahead, that his sons will have to tackle. He says he's proud that the new mill he built in 1973 to cut one million board feet of pine annually is now turning out 11 million board feet, and proud of how the company payroll of 147 people pumps millions of dollars directly into the regional economy every year through paychecks.

“The last thing the State of New York needs is more publicly-owned land,” he says. “What we really need to do is create more opportunities like this—” he states, pointing to a truckload of dry paneling, “—clean industries that use renewable resources and provide good jobs.”



**"We must always consider the environment and people together, as though they are one, because
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