

Steve Frazee

By Victoria Ford

Steve Frazee, like his dad Clifford, is a woodsman and a waterman. He was born in 1948 and has lived in Forked River all his life. "I'm on my 68th year, and I still can throw a log on a truck, throw it over my shoulder, no problem," he said. "Keeps your muscle tone, keeps you young."

His dad bought a logging truck in 1953, and at the tender age of 5 or 6, Frazee's dual-faceted vocation began. With his dad, he did all kinds of tree jobs – drag out the cable and hook the logs up, cut survey lines, thin the woods and brush to encourage faster growth, control-burned to help the cedars grow. From his dad he learned how to build a proper corduroy road into a swamp to haul out big timber.

"I've been in the woods my whole life," he said. "I was just born into it. When you start that young, you don't realize; you don't have a career thought or anything – fireman, policeman – I just did what I had to do."

If he wasn't in the woods, he was in the bay, fishing, crabbing or clamming at a rate of a penny apiece (later a penny and three-quarters). By the time he was in his 20s, he was running a saw mill, making and selling useful products from the wood he milled for docks, decks, and all kinds of things people want for businesses and homes.

"Built my house out of the mill," he said. "Whole house is made from the mill – the beams, the paneling, the doors. My beds, everything in the house." He made an A-frame with 32-foot, 12-inch logs, and put a lot of "pretty interesting" wood into the house, including walnut floors and red cedar trim. Built his sister's house out of pine.

For decades, Frazee cut channel markers for the bay, by hand with an ax, about 3 inches around at the butt, 25 feet long; sold a lot of wood to Bayville Cedar Products to make sheds; he sawed lumber for fencing, paneling, siding, pilings, sign posts, snow fence posts ("That was a byproduct," he explained. "A way to get rid of the whole tree, you know.") They cut pine pulp wood back in the '50s, he said, to sell it for paper, \$8 to \$12 a cord.

"We never used a chainsaw. Now it's mostly all chainsaw work. A little simpler, I would guess. Things change. Now they got machines – you put (the tree) in there and they rip the branches off. I never got 'big' at it. I always stayed small. Now I'm down to a pickup truck, throwing them on by hand, and I only cut maybe a dozen cords a year, not much. That's about what I'm down to. And I go fishing."

In the boat building realm, Frazee could saw boards up to 32 feet long, so he cut a lot of boat sides and bottom boards. Sneakbox builder Sammy Hunt used to trade him chairs and tables for the wood, many of which he still has. "He didn't have money, but he had stuff – so we'd barter."

More recently he's been sawing a lot of cedar for boats and decoys, which is light, clean and easy to work with. The price of cedar has gone up since regulations on cedar farming have gotten tougher and permitting processes cost-prohibitive. Most of the guys that run cedar mills run into that problem, he said. It's hardly even profitable anymore.

"I do a lot of fishing now," he said. "I'm out of the woods, pretty much. I enjoy it. It's a lot easier than lugging logs."

Besides fishing, he's using leftover wood from trees in Waretown that were downed in Superstorm Sandy to build benches, chairs, stools, bird boxes and the like. The trees are dead; the sap is gone, but the heart's still there, so he's milled those in the last few years. "It's just a

hobby now, pretty much. But I got a bunch of wood sitting there, dry, ready to sell, or ready to make stuff.”

When the Frazees got the mill, its previous owner Ed Britten had run it for 40 years near the school on Lacey Road and used an old Magneto flathead six-cylinder motor that had powered a hangar door at Lakehurst Naval Base. Later they replaced it with a four-cylinder diesel, which still runs the mill today.

In all the years he has operated the sawmill, Frazee has had nary an incident, injury, scratch or even close call, simply by being careful. “You run something for 50 years and you don’t get hurt, something’s working right,” he said. (Knock on wood.)

Frazee said he’s always enjoyed working with the trees, the wood, following in his father’s footsteps. He enjoys the feeling of being productive – “going out there and getting something somebody can use, a fence post, or a clothesline post, or whatever.”

He suspects it’s a dying art form. “There was 100 mills back in the ’30s,” he said. “And you could see that wasn’t going to last. I think there’s two mills left.”