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LOGGING & FORESTRY

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CLEEREMAN

CHANGED SAWMILLS FOREVER AND

By Fred Williston

SPECIAL TO THE LAKELAND TIMES

Francis Cleereman, Sr., was involved in one of the most historic events of the 20th century: he fought in Europe in World War II and he and his fellow soldiers were photographed shaking hands with their Russian counterparts at the fall of Berlin in 1945. But Cleereman is better-known for something else: he single-handedly revolutionized the world's sawmill technology and his legacy — Cleereman Industries — has remained an industry leader.

His father, William Cleereman Sr., owned and operated Cleereman Lumber Company, a sawmill in Newald, (Forest County) Wisc. From an early age, Francis Sr., showed an uncanny Mozart-like aptitude for mechanics and applied his budding

talents to his father's machinery. Word of the young man's troubleshooting skills spread around the area, and other mills often hired the teenager to repair, modify, and improve their equipment.

Paul Cleereman is Francis Sr.'s grandson and is now vice president of Cleereman Industries.

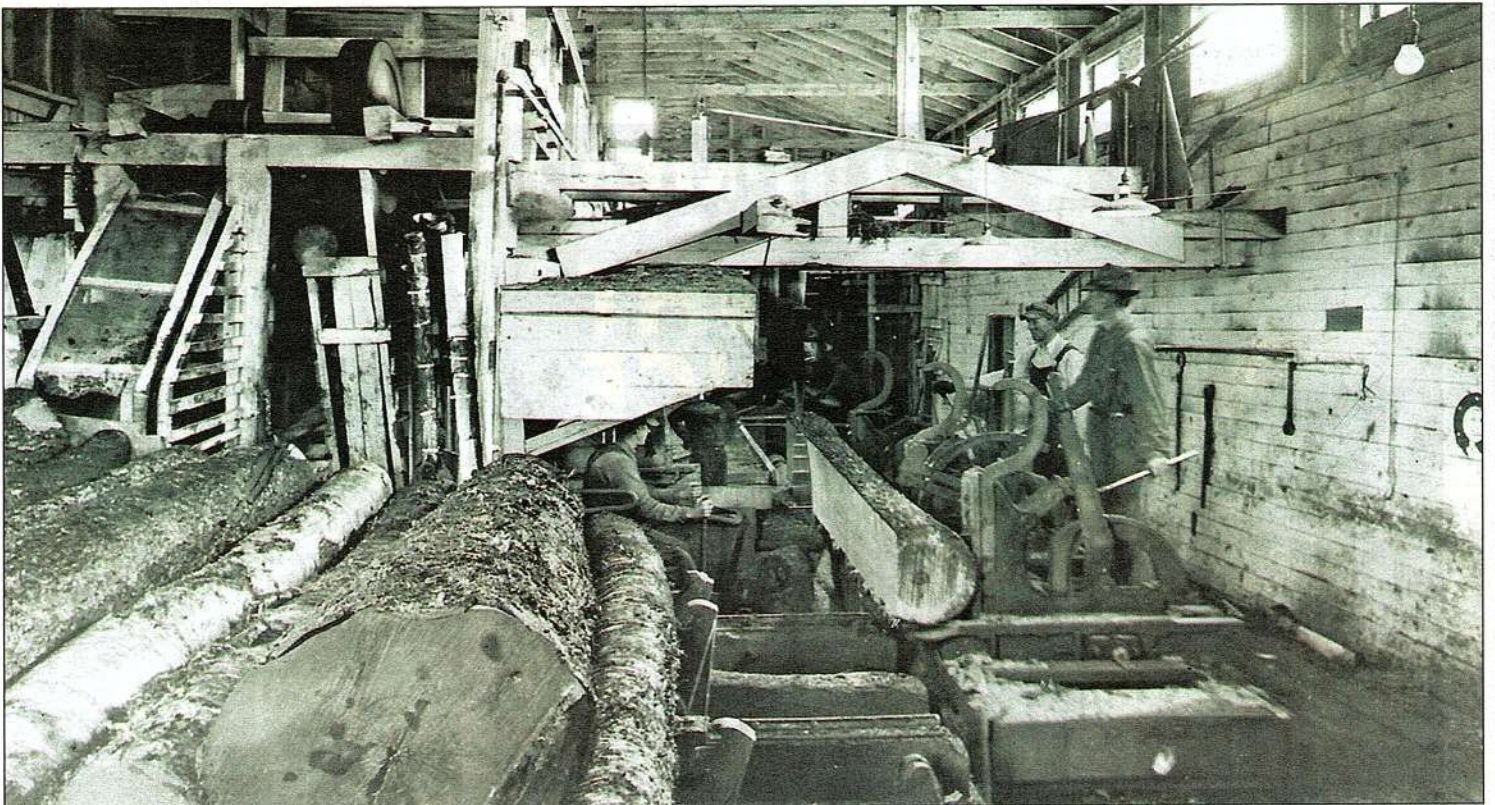
"He was a guy that was just basically self-educated," Paul Cleereman said of his grandfather. "He was one of those guys who just had that gift: he was so mechanically inclined that he could have a vision, put it on paper, and then make it work. He was an engineer in his own right, but as far as how he got his experience, his father owned a sawmill. So as a boy, he was always working in the sawmill. He started working there at age ten with his dad. He grew up his whole life in the sawmill, and

then he went to war. He was just educated through the school of hard knocks."

"He went right to World War II," Paul Cleereman said. "My dad, (Francis Cleereman, Jr.) who's the president and owner here now, he's 75 now. He didn't see his father until he was three years old because he was over fighting in World War II. My grandma and grandpa got married, and he shipped right off to war. She was pregnant when he left, and when he came home, my dad was three years old."

When Francis Cleereman, Sr., returned from war, he split his time between working in the mill, spending time with his burgeoning family, and designing and building prototypes of new equipment.

In the early 1950s, his tinkering turned into real construction and he unveiled the Cleereman Carriage.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOGRAPHS

An early photo of sawing lumber at Cleereman's in Newald.

CARRIAGES

ARE STILL LEADING THE INDUSTRY

"My grandfather is credited across the United States with inventing the first automated sawmill carriage," Cleereman said. "The rest of the industry was still doing it the way everyone was doing it: with three men working the carriage. Two men would ride the carriage, working all the functions. It was all done manually. And what my grandfather did was to make it automated. He used pneumatic valves and hydraulics and he made the whole thing automated so that one guy could sit there and run it, and run it all by himself without two guys riding it and working on it manually. It eliminated the two men you needed to run the carriage line. Now, it was all done by the guy who was actually running the carriage."

When the first Cleereman Carriages were sold, mill owners were not only

thrilled by the machine's productivity, but also pleasantly surprised by an unintended side-effect of the automation: safety.

"Before that, you had guys right by the saw all the time," Cleereman said. "This made a huge difference. It changed the industry from a safety standpoint, a labor standpoint, and from an automizing standpoint. He was ahead of his time. My grandpa's the one who started Cleereman Industries, but he started building the first automated carriages in the blacksmith's shop at Cleereman Lumber Company. And my uncle, Robert Cleereman, ran the logging crews while my grandpa ran the sawmill side with his father. When my great-grandpa died, they shut the sawmill down and grandpa went into building equipment and my Uncle Robert stayed in logging his whole life and retired."

"My grandpa was the kind of guy who, right up until the day he died, he worked here at Cleereman Industries," Cleereman said. "He died in his house right here on the property. He worked right up until he could no longer walk from the house up to the shop up here on the hill. He was one of those guys who always carried a little pad of paper and a pencil in his pocket; always sketching something. He'd envision something and he would sketch it. And a lot of the time, we'd stop what we were doing, and build something based on a sketch from his head, and we'd build it for him in the shop. You'd be surprised how many times it actually ended up being a good idea and it worked out for us. Sometimes we'd have to tweak them here or there, but usually, when he had an idea, it was an idea that worked pretty well."



Cleereman's staff includes, from left, Jon Cleereman Jr., Rod Chitko, Fran Cleereman, Jeff Krueger, Adam Cleereman and Paul Cleereman.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOGRAPH

A Cleereman debarker.

KEEPING UP WITH THE DEMAND

Currently, Cleereman Industries has a total of 42 full-time employees.

"It's a long way from what it was in the olden days to what it is today, that's for

sure," Cleereman said. "But the same basic designs and concepts? We still use a lot of them today. We build a lot of other lines of equipment, too. My grandpa just did carriages. Now we put out complete turn-

key mills from the ground up. We have an in-house engineering department now where we do everything from the concrete plans for a building to hiring the building and electrical contractors. We run the diagrams for the electrical contractors. We handle everything now. If somebody said 'I want to build a \$10,000,000 mill that's gonna put out 100,000 feet a day. Here's the check. We'll let you guys do everything,' we take care of everything from one end to the other now."

"We're into 3-D scanning and automation now," Cleereman said. "And we have a computer controls company now. We're the parent company of Cleereman Controls and we have seven engineers on staff. That's a fairly new company. It's only two years old."

While production takes place in Newald, most of the design work goes on in Cleereman Controls' main office in Vancouver, Wash.

"That's where our engineers are from, so that's where our engineering department is," Cleereman said. "We have an office out there where they do testing and they do computer programming. But



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Photos taken of a load of logs on what is possibly a new logging truck in 1941.


Cleereman Controls' panel shop — where we build the actual computers and put all the

systems together and test them — is here at Cleereman Industries. It's a separate

space here at Cleereman Industries because it's got to be clean where they're building and assembling electrical components. Once the engineers in Vancouver have the system done and designed, they'll pass it off."

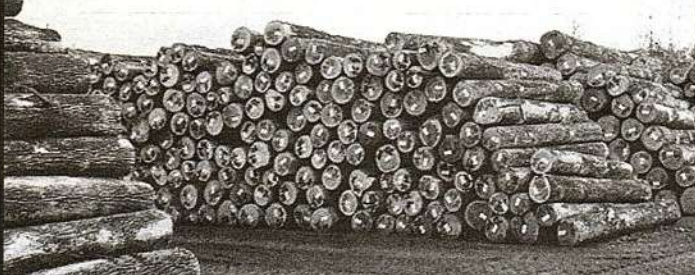
"Not many sawmill equipment companies own their

own controls company, you know?" he said. "To stay ahead of everybody else, we started that controls company two years ago, and we've already got 21 systems running and 27 systems sold. And we just went to market selling product last April. Next month will be one year of selling products



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two years in the making, but we did a lot of homework and we did it the right way. Our customer base is so loyal that when we come out with something, they'll always buy it."

While Paul Cleereman has nothing but respect for his grandfather's purely-mechanical designs, he is excited to see them improved upon with modern technology.

"With the 3D scanning of a log, you're basically taking an X-ray of it that shows the defects and it sets the saw for the sawyer," he said. "It's all automated, so it takes all the human element out of it. They all have an operator; there's none running un-manned. It's just that the operator doesn't have to guess where the saw goes into the wood; the computer sets it for him so that when it comes up to the saw, it automatically will say 'OK, in the computer, I have programmed in the smallest board I can sell' and the computer will set it so he doesn't cut too much waste and over-slab it when he only had to go in a certain amount. So the computer sets it up for him to take the error out."

CUSTOMER SERVICE

While much of the technology supporting Francis Sr.'s carriages has changed, one thing at Cleereman Industries is still

exactly as the company's founder made it: customer service.

"That's what we built our business on, is unparalleled customer service," Cleereman said. "We're the only sawmill manufacturer in the United States that stocks every part, in-house and on-the-shelf. One of our sales things is 'If you have a breakdown, you're only down for as long as it takes us to ship it or for you to come get it. Because we have every part for every machine, in-house and in-stock.' We inventory more than \$4,000,000 in parts."

"We had a mill go down in Virginia on the day before New Year's Eve," he said. "On New Year's Eve, we loaded a hydraulic motor for a hydrostatic carriage feed-drive into a pickup truck. One of our guys ran it down and met him halfway between here and Virginia so he could have the mill back up and running the next day."

Jay Glime is the president of G&G Lumber in Florence. Recently, his mill facility was destroyed in a fire. Within the last month, he re-opened at a new location in the Florence Industrial Park. When his insurance company wrote him a check to buy new equipment, Glime was only interested in one brand: Cleereman.

"Years ago, I went to auctions to look

at different pieces I might want to buy, and I was told Cleereman was by far the number-one in-demand carriage," Glime said. "Everybody wants to buy a Cleereman Carriage before anything else. I very rarely run into anyone who likes another carriage besides the Cleereman. Plus, they're really close by and Fran is a great guy to work with. I had a Cleereman Carriage in the past. And once, I did buy one from a different company after I had my first Cleereman Carriage just because there was a difference in price, but it just wasn't a good carriage; it was way too light. It didn't do what we needed it to do; it was too slow. Now, with Cleereman's, it's really heavy duty and it does exactly what we need it to do; we're producing a lot of lumber."

"We've only been running again for two weeks, but we're putting out about 40,000 feet a day," Glime said. "We're flying — and we're still turning it up. I think we can squeeze out a few thousand more. I never should have bought that other equipment, but I learned the hard way. It was cheaper, and I made a mistake."

"Cleereman is way better — hands down — than everybody else," Glime said. "When I had the other equipment, the mill was down and I called the company. He said he

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Photos taken of a load of logs on what is possibly a new logging truck in 1941.

was busy and he wouldn't be able to help me the next day. That's craziness! You don't say that to a sawmill that's down! That outfit was a total joke. But when you buy from Cleereman, they take care of you. They're fair, and they're just good people."

According to Cleereman, his company sells between 30 and 50 sawmill carriages per year.

"Ninety percent of our customers are hardwood manufacturers," Cleereman said. "And then the other 10% would be soft-

wood. So we market in the Continental United States, Canada, and Europe. We've got a couple of mills in Austria and Germany. We don't advertise in Europe, it just comes from whatever they see on our website or through testimonials ... Our name is out there. We're really well-known in our industry. We're always trying to stay one step ahead. Even though we're in a small, rural area in Wisconsin, it's great to have international customers."

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Cleereman Industries is a family business. Paul Cleereman works with his father, his son (an engineer), a nephew, and two cousins. But the family is expanding. The junior Francis rewarded a long-time employee with ownership shares, and he did the same for the owner of a company Cleereman Industries acquired in 2007.

"Even when we started our new controls company, we hired our biggest competitor's vice president to head up the new company," Cleereman said. "And the way that we did that was by giving him some ownership. He had no ownership where he was. But when you give a guy ownership, he doesn't leave and he's got some skin in the game and you get a better partner and worker: he's not just working for the man, he's part of it."



Photos of the Cleereman's facilities.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOGRAPHS

Photos of the Cleereman's facilities.

While the future may hold more expansions and acquisitions for Cleereman Industries, operations will remain centered in Newald.

"We're in Forest County because we're part of it and it's part of us," Cleereman said.

He said even if he were offered a Fox-

conn-type deal to move the company to an industrialized urban center, he wouldn't take it.

"All of our employees are from Forest County," he said. "We get the best employees and the best workers here. We have very little turnover. That's one of the advantages of being here: our people."

"I don't want to live in someplace like Chicago," he said. "We're blue-collar. We're from logging families. We grew up snowmobiling and hunting and fishing. It's our way of life. We don't want to go anywhere else. We've got 55,000 feet of shops. We like it here, and we're here to stay." ■

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