Over a barrel

Nova Scotia trucker has seen ups and downs in the forest industry

by Gayle Wilson

A trucker for more than 50 of his 69 years, Richard Countway has a lot of his competition over a barrel – at least, in terms of experience. Countway and his family produced as many as 50,000 wooden barrels a year out of their plant in Chester Basin, N.S., beginning in the mid-'50s, and they transported them throughout Atlantic Canada and beyond for the next three decades.

"By trade, I'm a wooden barrel cooper," he says.

However, having first hoisted himself behind the wheel of a 1949 Ford one-and-a-half-ton at the age of 15, Countway is very much an experienced trucker, as well as a trained logger, an educator, and a self-taught mechanic. They're all skills he has used over the years, helping to earn him a reputation as a versatile straight shooter, and a guy who's been around. He's still a member of Forest Nova Scotia (formerly the Forest Products Association of Nova Scotia), and he goes to the Canadian Woodlands Forum conference every spring.

"I can pretty much go everywhere, and people still know me. And I'm not bragging. I'm just myself."

As such, Countway says he's "not scared to speak up." He is more than willing to share his opinions about current pressures being put on the local trucking industry, and on the province's forests, by major operators such as WestFor Management Inc. and Great Northern Timber.

His willingness to speak his mind perhaps comes from his mother, Jean Countway, whom he describes as "the grandmother of truck drivers."

"She was. She drove trucks for years." And according to her son, she "took no backlash."

Countway says his father, Eric, would have built up a substantial trucking fleet if he hadn't bought the barrel business from his uncle Moyle Oxner in 1955. By then, he had accumulated three or four trucks, including a 1949 Mercury, and a 1954 GMC which he transposed into a 10-wheeler trailer.

"He always kept his trucks polished and shined," recalls Countway. "I was only a kid and I climbed up on the hood. I got a boot in the ass, and believe me I never forgot it. I went through the year thinking that was not a good thing to do."

Countway says his father got into trucking after returning from the Second World War, and began hauling wharf supplies, cord wood, and "whatever needed to be hauled."

When the family acquired the barrel plant, some people were jealous. "They didn't get it for nothing," Countway insists. "Mom and Dad worked their life to pay off the debts."

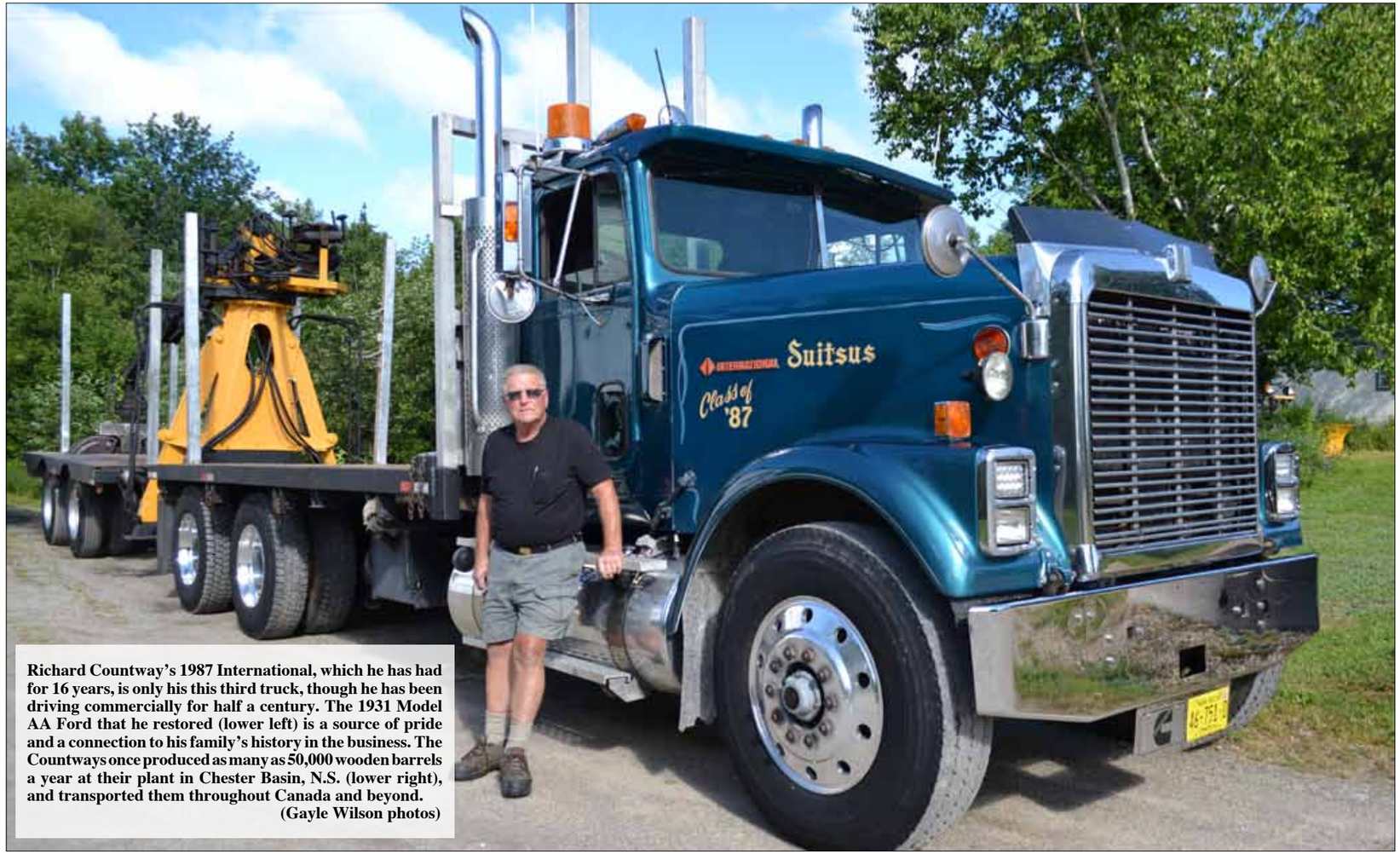
In its heyday, the plant employed 25 to 30 people, and produced an average of 200-250 tight barrels a day, using spruce and pine. The barrels were transported throughout Atlantic Canada for packing salt herring and mackerel.

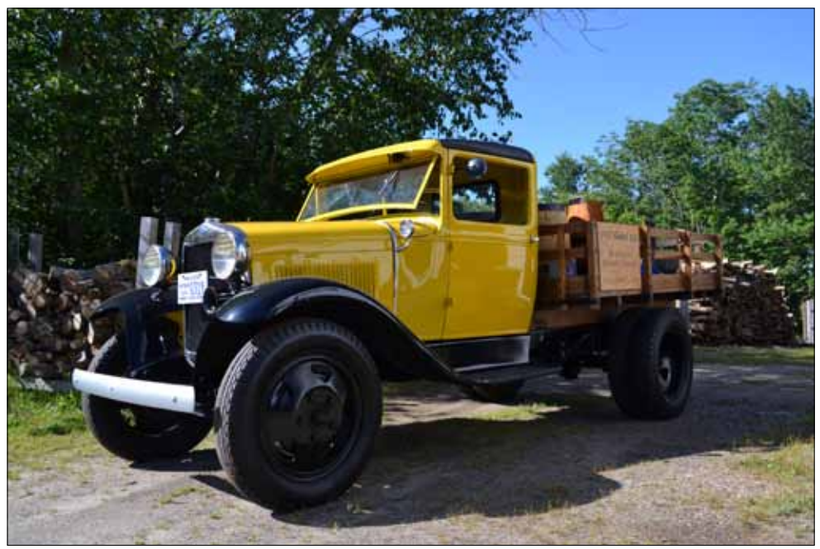
Countway says when his mom did deliveries she would throw him, or his sister, "or both" in the cab of her 10-wheeler truck, "and away she'd go down the road."

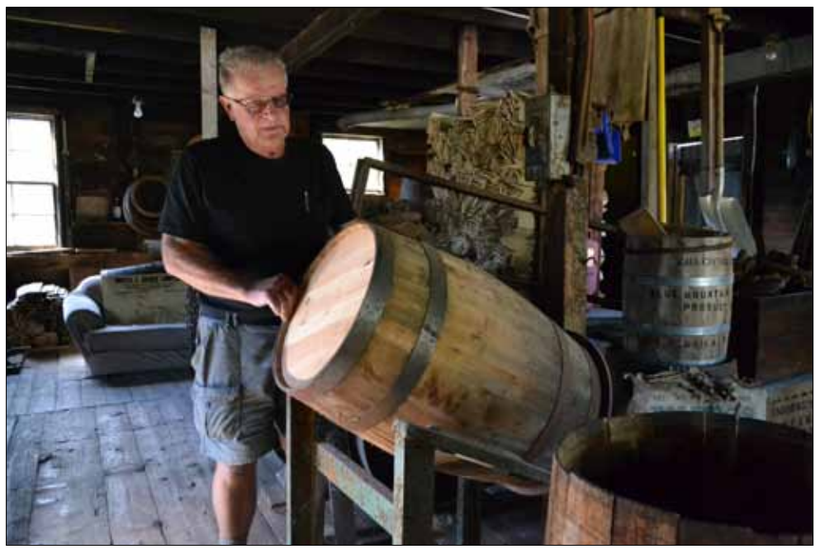
"She'd even go as far as Cape Breton with a load of barrels.… She trucked Newfoundland, Montreal, hauled Christmas trees to the States. Yeah, she's the grandmother of trucking."

He started working in the family business from an early age, when he "could barely haul a wagon." To supplement the barrel income, the family became among the first in Nova Scotia to haul Christmas trees to the U.S., and Countway sometimes got to accompany his father.

"I remember us being down in New Jersey, and he got tickets to the New York Rangers and Boston playing hockey. I was only seven years old. So I had a lot of experience of travelling with him."







Richard Countway's 1987 International, which he has had for 16 years, is only his this third truck, though he has been driving commercially for half a century. The 1931 Model AA Ford that he restored (lower left) is a source of pride and a connection to his family's history in the business. The Countways once produced as many as 50,000 wooden barrels a year at their plant in Chester Basin, N.S. (lower right), and transported them throughout Canada and beyond.
(Gayle Wilson photos)

By age 15, he was driving the 1949 Ford one-and-a-half-ton with dual wheels. He got his first tractor-trailer in 1969, a new International cab-over, and he used it to haul barrels to St. Anthony, Newfoundland. "I had 330 miles of dirt road, return," he says with a chuckle. "When I started up there, I used to deliver right on the beaches, because it was all small fishermen with the dories. It was quite a sight for them to see me backing down on the beaches."

In the mid-'70s, Countway was doing deliveries with his tractor-trailer, and his father, mother, and sister each had a Chevrolet or GMC 10-wheeler. "We were that busy with the barrels," he says. "It was a big business."

One order involved 15,000 potato barrels to go to New Brunswick. Often the Countways would make 10 or 12 stops to collect barrels from smaller manufacturers in New Ross and surrounding areas. But the tide began to turn in the mid-'80s. The fishing industry was in decline, and wood was no longer the preferred material for barrels.

"The introduction of plastic containers started to squeeze us out," says Countway. Eventually, the plant was no longer viable.

SILVICULTURE BUSINESS

Countway had always enjoyed going to the family's 400 acres of woodland to harvest wood for making barrels, so he decided to turn to forestry work full-time. He recruited a couple of employees from the plant, bought an old forwarder, and started cutting and transporting wood.

He recalls being inspired by a local logger who practiced strategic thinning. At that time a government subsidy was available to woodlot owners having work done by contractors certified in silviculture. So in 1987 he took a six-week, Level 2 forestry course in Debert, and went into business as Richard Countway Silviculture Ltd., with the motto, "We cut the rest and leave the best."

"Today, they cut the best and leave the rest," he grumbles.

Taking the course was "a good move," Countway says. "We learned a lot of the Scandinavian methods for working with your head and not your back."

He started off cutting and transporting wood for Bowater. "We had markets for pulpwood back then. Stud wood, I would take to Ledwidges in Enfield. If we had logs, I supplied some of the local mills. But I wasn't a big producer, because there was only three of us. I never really got any bigger than that."

The business was successful because, unlike today, he had good markets. "We were getting as much then for wood as we're getting now," he says, adding that the business costs for logging are now "sky high."

In 1990, he was approached by the Forest Safety Society of Nova Scotia to instruct a 14-week skidder-operator maintenance course. "I had no education, but I had the hands-on. I could take a motor apart or an engine and fix it."

The pay was $25 an hour, "the biggest money I ever made," Countway says.

His silviculture work was mostly on small private lots. "Then I got a little bigger into it," he says. "I mechanized."

By the early-'90s, he had a two-grip processor, which he mounted on the back of a forwarder. "Then I had the one machine. It was making wood and working good," he says.

Later he bought a 1972 Tree Farmer C6 to use as the carrier for the processor. The old skidder turned out to be "a basket case," and required a rebuild, but in the end he had a nice little piece of equipment. "It was small enough I could do thinnings with it. I had that for two or three years. I kick my ass why I ever parted with it."

In 1999 Countway expanded his arsenal to include a single-grip harvester on an excavator carrier, and later a four-wheel drive tractor with a trailer to haul the wood. "I didn't want for work. I always had work ahead of me," he says.

While his thinning techniques gave him relatively low production, he was still cutting as much as 25-30 cords, or two truckloads, per day. "We were marketing everything we were making," he points out. "There was no waste."

MUSCLING IN

But the bigger operators gradually began muscling in, offering higher stumpage prices. Hurricane Juan, while regrettable on many fronts, was a godsend for his business. "My men and I spent two and a half years down around east Musquodoboit and all those areas picking up the blowdown from Juan."

Not all contractors could cope with the challenge of salvaging wood in the aftermath of the 2003 storm. "Wind shear," Countway explains. "When the hurricane came down, it just didn't come down all in one way. It swirled around, and it was like you dropped toothpicks. Oh, some places it was devastating. It was hard work, but we had good workers."

After that period, however, business continued to become even more challenging. "The big guys were coming in, cutting, paying bigger prices, and I couldn't compete," Countway says. "I mean, there were some real hustlers out there. It was tough."

Some of the large players in the business were offering prices 10-20 percent higher than he could offer. "They just squeezed me right out."

Meanwhile, his equipment was getting old and costing him money. He liquidated assets to keep up his loan payments, and basically lived in his truck for six or seven years. "And I paid off my debts," he says, adding that a number of land clearing jobs in Halifax helped along the way.

Standing back and looking at today's forest industry, Countway criticizes the large-scale clearcutting that is going on. "A hundred acres today, there's a poof and it's gone, with the equipment there is."

He believes that large companies such as WestFor, Great Northern Timber, and Wagner wield too much control over wood prices, as well as trucking rates. "I mean, they had crews from Quebec and New Brunswick down here, just pounding 'er. And the people are getting upset with it."

Countway says fellow truckers tell him he's lucky to be out of the game. "I didn't get out without debt, but I got out. I was fortunate, because I was at the point that I had to go work for big guys."

But with no pension to speak of, he still needs to work. He says business is the slackest it's been in a long time. Last year he hauled wood for 18 different clients – some big land-clearing jobs, others small. "This year, I can count them on one hand."

Nonetheless, he intends to maintain his focus on smaller landowners. "I know I've got a good reputation. I don't do people. It might start coming back a little bit. You know, I've ridden some pretty hard damn storms."

He reckons he deserves "bragging rights" as a survivor – and as someone who has kept up the family tradition of taking good care of his vehicles. He points out that his 1987 International, which he's been driving for the past 16 years, is only his third truck. "But I still have the same woman after 49 years," he adds with a grin. "That's my bragging right."

(Gayle Wilson lives in Blockhouse, N.S.)