

Champlain

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Winter '80-'81

**Native
industries
weather the
turn down.**

Champlain

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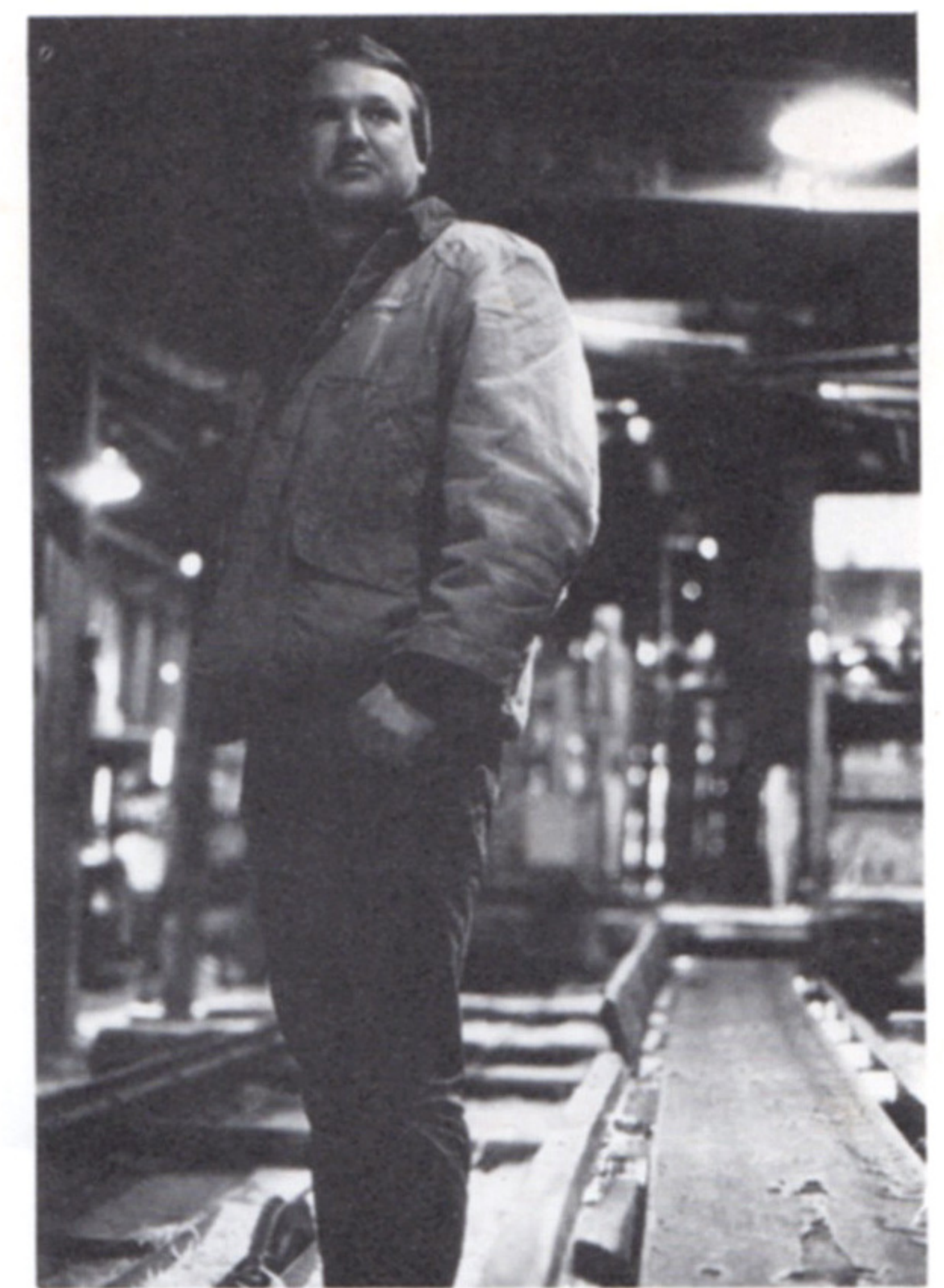
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Clifford Lumber Stands Strong

Gardner's success: a keen sense of the business.

by Bradley A. Hurlburt & Peter Post

Halfway between Hinesburg and Starksboro, Vermont, on Route 116 sits a small lumber mill. Nestled into the trees on either side of the road, the mill is almost invisible. A small, blue house borders the mill and a general store caters to the passing traffic from the other side of the road.

Clifford Lumber Company is owned and operated by Lynn Gardner, class of '69. To the casual onlooker, Lynn, a tall, blonde young man in his early thirties, might not appear to be the owner of this \$3,000,000 a year business. Yet, not only is he the owner and operator of the business, he can do and has done every job in the lumber yard.

A heavily-laden lumber truck with its load of logs swaying back and forth rolls into the log yard and grinds to a halt. Gardner gestures to the driver to off-load his logs in a certain area. The logger pulls over to the designated spot, revs up his engine to operate his hydraulic claw, clambers to his perch over the cab near a series of levers used to operate the claw and begins unloading logs.

Lynn has been in the lumber business since junior high school when he worked for his grandfather in the lumber yard both after school and during the summers. Over the years he learned the ins and outs of the business, and finally, after finishing college, he purchased the operation from his grandfather in 1972.

"I always knew I would be in the lumber business," he says of his chosen profession.

Through the past eight years Lynn has seen his business survive both recession and energy crisis pressures. Basically, he notes, "The economy may go up

and down, but there will always be a demand for wood."

During the current recessionary swing in the economy the lumber business in general has suffered. The reduction in housing starts has a direct effect on the mills which, in turn, has a direct effect on the amount of wood the loggers are called on to cut. From the point of view of lumber for the housing industry, Lynn says, "The lumber business is in trouble."

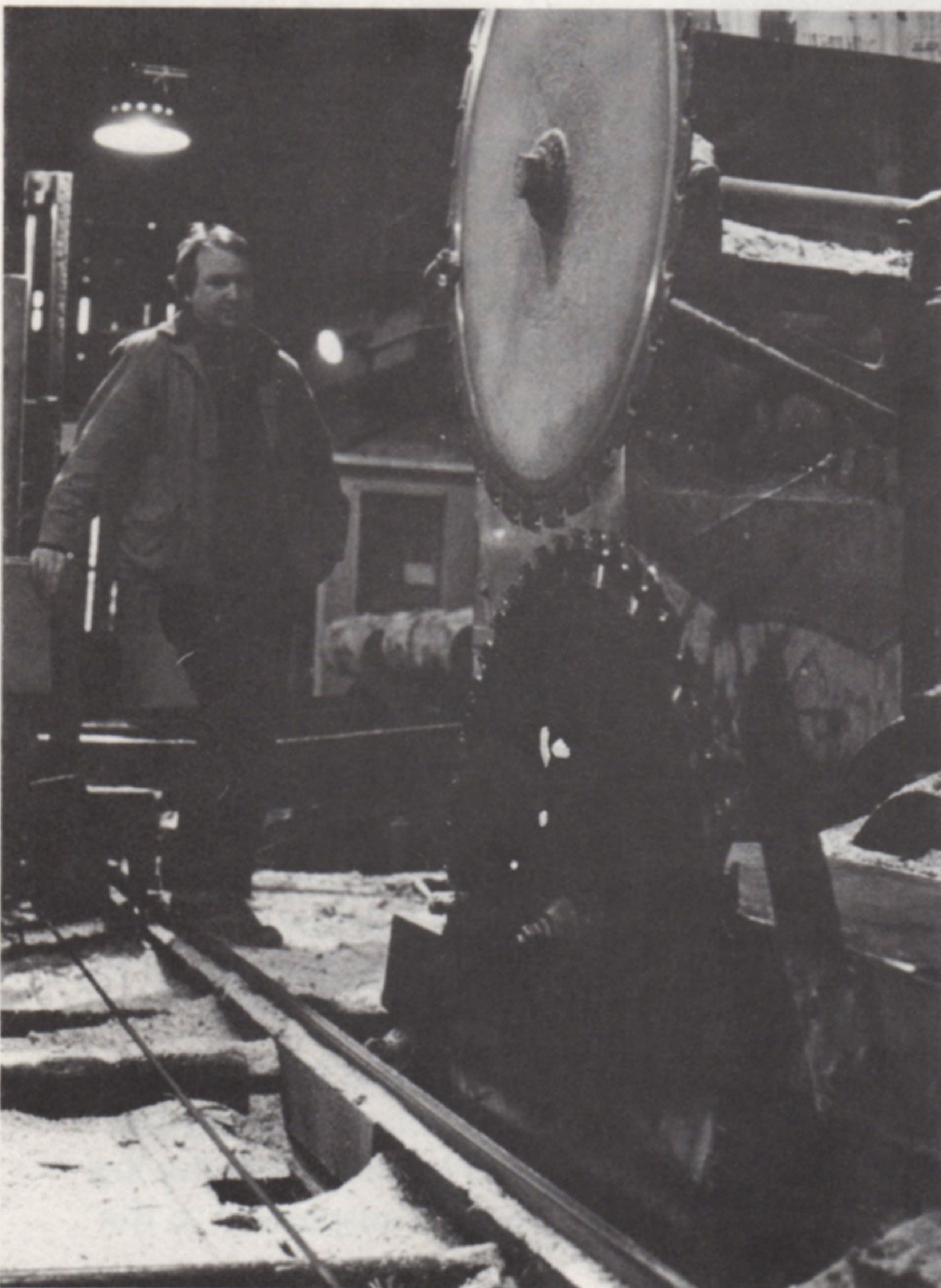
Lynn adds that the call for lumber for furniture manufacturers also is off. "Without new housing going up," Lynn explains, "not much furniture is sold. And, in addition, the northern mills can't compete with the southern furniture manufacturers." Consequently, the market for lumber for furniture is slack now.

The claw arcs out of the sky, pinches a log and effortlessly swings it off the truck to the pile growing on the ground.

The logs themselves may have come from a wood lot that was acquired five or more years ago in anticipation of today's demand. Lynn always has a two and a half to three year supply of standing timber from which to choose. Two loggers are contracted to cut from wood lots scattered over a seventy-five mile radius.

The tines of the massive forklift skid beneath a log and scoop it up. Diesel smoke belches from the forklift's exhaust stack as it carries the logs to the sawing area.

Before the log can be cut it must be stripped of its bark. A de-barking machine rotates the log and chews the bark off from end to end. Then the log drops onto a conveyor which transports it to the sawyer for cutting.



The sawyer (often Lynn does the sawing himself) sits in a small, enclosed booth. Here, with the aid of a small computer, the sawyer manipulates the log into position for cutting.

The sawyer must get the optimum amount of useable lumber out of any given log in the least amount of time. The speed and accuracy of the sawyer is a key factor in the success of the mill.

The carriage assembly which the sawyer operates by remote control precisely aligns logs for cutting and then pushes the log through the saw like salami through a slicer. Within minutes, the log is converted into boards and sawdust and another log drops into place.

As the sawyer is in the middle of a cut, the lights dim, and the sawyer looks up anxiously. Silence envelops the cutting area as the giant saw whirs to a stop.



Lynn bounds off to a shed which houses the diesel generator he uses to produce his own electricity. "The generator," he explains, "supplies the mill with enough power to light a small Vermont town."

The noise level returns to a steady roar as Lynn steps out of the shed.

Any optimism Lynn displays for the future of the lumber industry stems from the fact that right now the supply of raw materials (i.e., logs) is keeping even with demand. "When the demand increases (as the number of housing starts improves), the increased demand will create a shortage which will increase prices." Lynn is confident that when the economy springs back, the lumber business can get back on track. "Essentially," he says, "in the lumber business, if you can sell it, you can make money on it. In fact, that's true of any natural resource business."

"In this area the mills are doing well. However, in southern Vermont and New Hampshire the mills are shutting down." Lynn attributes the closings in southern Vermont and New Hampshire to a lack of orders. He says the mills in northern Vermont are older, more established, and know how to deal with the problems of a recessionary cycle as they have felt the pinch before.

Every operation, every machine, has been run by Lynn. In walking through the mill with him one senses that it is his love for the entire process which is the life blood of the operation. Lumber is piled everywhere, sorted and ready to be shipped to points as far away as Europe.

Lynn selects an especially fine piece from one of the piles. Tucked away overhead, it will be saved for later use, almost as a painter's best work might be saved for the artist's personal enjoyment. ©