

# TIMBER PROCESSING

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**LUMBERMAN  
TO THE CORE:  
ERIC SCHOOLER  
LOOKS BACK**

**2022**  
**PERSON OF THE YEAR**



**SCHOOLER'S RULE:**

# INVEST

By **Dan Shell**

**Eric Schooler has been a big part of two Northwest-based companies' success in diverse products and markets.**





## WARRENTON, Ore.

**S**panning six decades and ongoing, former Collins President and CEO and current Hampton Lumber Chairman of the Board Eric Schooler's remarkable career tracks the development of modern North America sawmilling. Schooler started in the early 1970s in an industry just beginning to embrace widespread automation, with a digital revolution awaiting a decade later. As sawmill technologies and efficiencies developed, Schooler has implemented and applied systems to boost operations and profitability and seen the benefits of doing so.

However, it's the melding of technological prowess with insightful operations and people management—within the context of organizational goals and objectives pursued among capital concerns and market conditions—that sets Schooler apart. What's remarkable is his success at the two companies that have largely defined his career: 20 years as President and CEO of Collins until he stepped down a year ago, and two stints with Hampton Lumber as VP of Manufacturing prior to Collins and the ongoing role as Hampton Lumber's board chairman.

Both are successful, family-owned companies, but other than that couldn't be more different. Hampton Lumber is the larger of the two, the number seven North American lumber producer at 1.8 billion BF with 10 mills and a laser focus on dimension lumber markets and low cost production. Collins is smaller and more diversified, with three sawmills across hardwood and softwood lumber divisions plus particleboard and hardboard siding operations and even retail lumber yards and oil and gas interests.

Showing such innovative and successful leadership at both organizations and contributing to the lumber industry throughout his career is why Schooler is the 2022 *Timber Processing* Person of the Year. He's *Timber Processing's* 34th award winner, and it's enlightening to hear what representatives from both companies have to say about him.

Current Hampton Lumber President Steve Zika says Schooler has been a mentor during his career and understands that true success is more than just capital projects and cost control. To take operations

to the next level, Zika says, Schooler's approach emphasizes leadership and team development to foster a culture of continuous improvement; optimizes product mix for more revenue and customer satisfaction; seeks production solutions that enable 90%+ operational readiness; and

develops a culture of safety.

At Hampton, Zika says, Schooler was not only invaluable in driving the company's sawmill business, "But contributed in strategic decisions related to our fee timberlands, wholesale distribution and even our computer systems." Zika adds that in his current role as Hampton board chairman, Schooler is not only closely involved in capital project decisions, he's also mentoring the next generation of the Hampton family as the company nears its 100th anniversary.

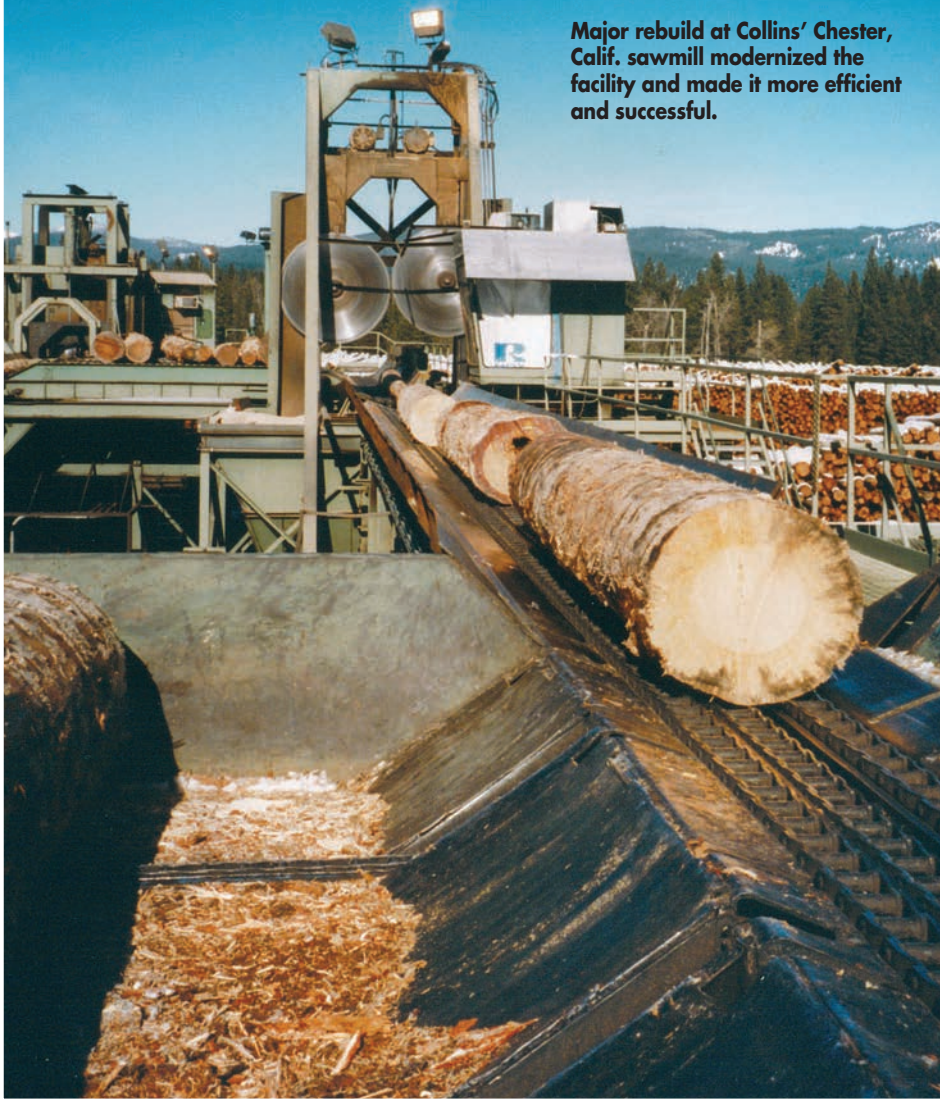
Collins Board Chair Cherida Collins Smith says Schooler provided 20 years of "exemplary leadership and service" through challenges that included economic, market and political uncertainty and issues such as forest fires and the COVID pandemic. Throughout, Smith says, Schooler "handled those with integrity and a steady hand, a clear perspective and a positive approach, always carefully considering the choices involved and both the short and longer term implications of each decision."

Smith adds that Schooler's close attention to mill design and technology advances improved efficiency and productivity of operations, and in pursuit of





**Major rebuild at Collins' Chester, Calif. sawmill modernized the facility and made it more efficient and successful.**



a continuous improvement culture he developed strong management teams and encouraged communication between mills.

“He held a comprehensive understanding of the big picture, as well as a detailed view of the workings of our operations, and a clear sense of the qualities of our people,” Smith says.

Just as important, she adds, “Eric also had a full grasp of the complexities of our family business, with various entities and ownerships involved, and was able to work very effectively with that structure and our family.”

## BACKGROUND

Born in Raymond, Wash. in 1950, Schooler grew up in what he calls an “interesting time” to be around the sawmill and lumber business, as his father, Weyerhaeuser employee Willard (Mickey) Schooler, moved the family around as his job required. Starting in Raymond, Eric also lived in Aberdeen, Raymond again, Marysville and Sumner.

“I went to a lot of different schools, and the moving around was probably

good for me in some ways, but I didn’t really enjoy it,” he remembers.

Mickey Schooler was a sales order entry and inventory specialist. Eric says he realized years later that his father actually functioned as a computer, optimizing sales and order fulfillment in relation to production and inventory. “He was an inventory computer before we had them!” Schooler exclaims, noting that at the end of his career his dad was working with multiple mills.

Growing up as his father moved the family around, Schooler says he worked a green chain one summer and liked the teamwork and physical aspects of it but it didn’t really light a fire under him for the industry.

A big kid and good athlete, Schooler, at 6-foot-4, was an all-state basketball player for the Sumner (Wash.) Spartans and attended Central Washington University on a basketball scholarship. His roundball career high point came in the 1969-70 season when CWU came up just short against Kentucky State in the NAIA National Tournament championship game.

Schooler says he wasn’t really sure

what he wanted to do in college besides play basketball when he started; he had a stint in pre-dental derailed due to a hatred of needles and ended up with a Business Administration degree.

Like a lot of folks at that age, Schooler recalls, “I was eager to do something, but didn’t know exactly what yet.”

## STARTING OUT

He got his start thanks to Wayne Holm, a former Weyerhaeuser employee who knew Eric’s father and knew Eric from a company softball team, and had moved on to the Publisher’s Paper sales staff based in Portland.

Schooler began as a Publisher’s Paper sales trainee at the Portland head office in 1972 during a Nixon price freeze. He remembers one of the first projects he worked on was how to work through and navigate such a sales environment. Soon he was assigned to the Publisher’s sawmill at Mollala to learn the business before he sold the product.

Somehow, that orientation assignment happened to turn into a multi-decade sawmill management career: The mill was going through some expansions and needed help in various areas. Within three years, Schooler had run a sawmill shift, started a third shift at the planer mill, oversaw night maintenance for a while, ran the shipping department for several months, among other duties.

“It seemed that wherever there was a supervisory role that needed filling, I was the step-in guy,” Schooler says. He remembers when he was told he was starting a third shift at the planer mill as a supervisor—and he had never even been in the planer mill.

“I had to bring these guys on, and my job was to train them to do jobs I didn’t know how to do,” Schooler says.

The experience stuck with him as learning the importance and dynamics of performance and training. “In my experience, it’s almost easier” without preconceptions Schooler says. “You have to know and watch the process but you don’t really have to know to push this or that button. So that was really educational for me.”

The career change came when Schooler accompanied a regional manager to Publisher’s Tillamook mill, and during the drive he told the young employee that sales was the wrong place for him and that if he wanted to get ahead he should go into manufacturing.

“I’m not sure he was right,” Schooler says with a laugh, “but that ended up being what I did and I never went back to sales.”

Schooler was learning a lot, having





Schooler, second from right, had just recently joined Collins in 2000 when the company celebrated the harvesting of the 2 billionth board foot from its sustainably managed northern California Almanor Forest.

fun, having successes. He remembers it as the “greatest learning exposure” he could have had in running all three shifts and learning all aspects of lumber manufacturing all the way through shipping in the three years he was there.

“I was able to have a real broad experience at Publisher’s and that helped me,” Schooler says.

He left Publisher’s in 1975 after Holm formed Oregon-Canadian Forest Products and needed a manager for a small mill in Lewistown, Mont. Schooler remembers it as another great learning experience: “I was 25 and in charge of everything yet I knew very little about anything,” he says with a smile. After less than two years a fire at the debarker led to a decision not to rebuild.

Schooler landed at Seaboard Lumber’s Seattle mill as a superintendent where he got in on several major mill improvements, plus worked with an early laser scanning system for a wide board edger optimizer and a tilted carriage installation. The mill was sold to the Port of Seattle in 1982—one of the best things that happened in his career, Schooler says.

Jim Quinn of Crown Zellerbach called and hired Schooler to manage the former Dant & Russell mill at Warrenton, Ore., where the company was going to do some export cutting tests with plans to build a new export mill in the future.

Schooler, 33 at the time, remembers meeting with a crew that was skeptical after going through a recent bankruptcy, “but they had some really good people, really good technical people,” he says.

Quinn recalls fondly, “They did really well under his management. He didn’t seem to welcome my intrusions into his management and so I left him alone.”

The mill became a top performer for Cavenham, but was sold off after the company was acquired by financier James Goldsmith. Schooler says one of the toughest meetings he was ever in was when the infamous “Chain Saw” Al Dunlap, hired by Goldsmith to disassemble the diversified company he had acquired, visited the mill and told the management team—that had improved operations in support of the export mill plan—their job instead was to improve cash flow and fatten the mill up for selling.

## HAMPTON, COLLINS

Hampton Lumber owner John Hampton came calling when Schooler was looking for a job after the Warrenton mill sold, and he was hired to manage Hampton’s Willamina, Ore. sawmill in 1986. Under Schooler’s leadership on the manufacturing side as Vice President of Manufacturing, Hampton Lumber grew into a major Pacific Northwest lumber manufacturer during his 14-year tenure.

He was closely involved with the Tillamook mill acquisition soon after he was hired (though he later found out Hampton had his mind pretty much made up on that one), and involved in major upgrade and modernization projects at both mills. Schooler was also involved in projects at the Morton and Randle mills after they were acquired in 1999.

Schooler says that in addition to operating efficiently and investing in productivity and recovery at the mills Hampton acquired, he’s also proud of working through and improving labor-management and union issues at several mills that led to better teamwork and overall operations.

When 2000 rolled around it was Jim Quinn on the phone again, this time as President and CEO of Collins. Quinn was ready to retire and he asked if Schooler would be interested in the job. Schooler was.

“I went back to Eric again,” Quinn recalls. “It worked out well. He never really need any indoctrination from me.”

Schooler embarked on a remarkable 20-year career with Collins, responding to multiple challenges and investing in people and processes across the company’s diverse operations.

While both Collins and Hampton are family-owned companies, Hampton is a low cost high production dimension producer continually reinvesting in new technology to drive growth, and Collins has smaller mills, including hardwood operations in Pennsylvania.

The big difference is timber access, Schooler says, with Collins’ two softwood mills in areas where long-term timber access is less certain due to mostly federal ownership. “The challenge is to be successful without high production,” Schooler says, which leads to more grade sawing in both hardwood and softwood products.

Schooler led a movement to upgrade and modernize all three of Collins’ sawmills, including a major rebuild at Chester, Calif. and a timely switch to small logs in Lakeview, Ore. that included working with the Forest Service and environmental groups to help provide a market for thinning programs.

One interesting chapter in Schooler’s time with Collins is the Upper Columbia Mill sawmill at Boardman, Ore. Greenwood Resources chose Collins to design, build, operate and handle sales for a sawmill at its eastern Oregon poplar fiber farm. The



mill, built in 2008, included an innovative curve-sawing gang and cogen-heated kilns.

In doing so, Collins created—literally—a brand new product: Pacific Albus.

“It was a completely new product,” Schooler says of the ultra-soft and tan-yellow hardwood lumber used in paneling and ceiling grids and a wide variety of aesthetic applications, much of it going to pallet wood as well.

“Our people did a great job actually creating a market for the products, and we sold all we could make,” he remembers. The mill operated until 2016, when it closed after Greenwood sold the tree farm acreage to a dairy operator.

Another testament to Schooler’s career is his role on Hampton’s board of directors since 2005. He was flattered when asked and it has been important to him, but he still discussed the appointment with Collins family members before taking it.

As part of being on the Hampton board, Schooler says he enjoys being able to keep his nose in the company’s many ongoing productivity investments across its 10-mill organization. He enjoys keeping up with technology and the activities made him more valuable to both organizations, he believes.

## INFLUENCES

Come June 2022, Schooler will have been working in sawmill management for 50 years.

As for those who have had the most influence on his career and professional development, Schooler cites Holm, with Publisher’s Paper who gave him his start; Quinn (himself a former *Timber Processing* Person of the Year in 1998)—“He hired me and gave me marching orders for people management,” Schooler says. John Hampton—“He’s at the top of the



list.” Mary Beth Collins—“As close to a saint as anyone I’ve ever known.” And Gordon King, who worked with Hampton Sales and knew Schooler’s father.

Schooler says he’s fortunate to have worked with and for a lot of successful and helpful people during his career. “It’s a very competitive industry, but there’s lots of great people—that’s probably the thing I’ve enjoyed most about this industry,” he adds.

Schooler has given back to the industry in multiple ways, serving on the boards of the World Forestry Center and chairing its Executive Committee, as a member of the Governor’s Sustainability Advisory Board in Oregon and as a recent past Chairman of the Western Wood Products Assn.

He says that during his time with the industry he’s excited to see it evolve from a “put-down industry” during the ’80s and ’90s old-growth and spotted owl wars to having a role in sustainable resource management. There’s also a high-tech reputation that’s growing among younger workers, he believes.

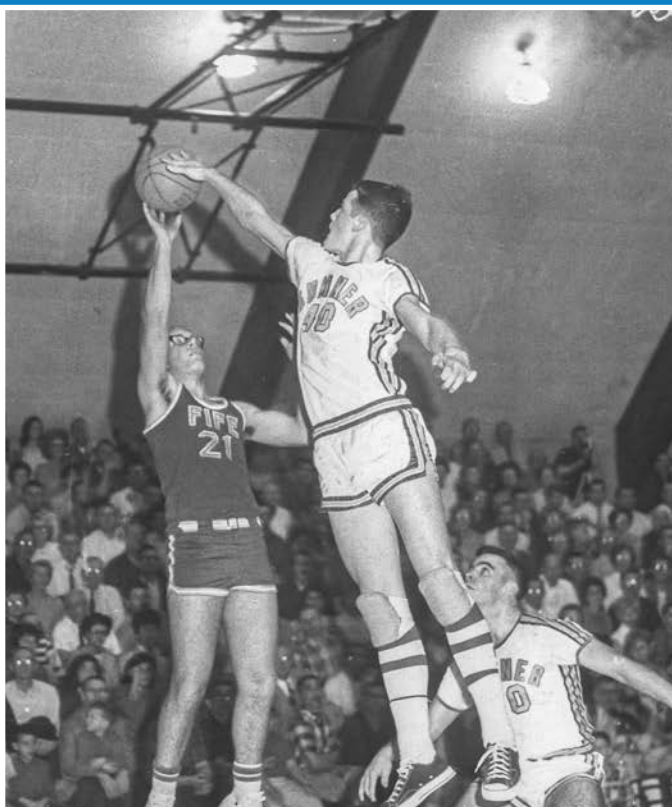
“We’re seeing more people coming into this industry with skills to use in our business,” Schooler says, adding that, “We’re becoming a bit of a high-tech draw because we are an applied technology business.”

And you can add in environmental awareness as the lumber industry is increasingly viewed as a tool in reducing fire dangers and the necessity of “managing instead of abandoning” the forest.

“We’ve come a long way in both the forest and the mills,” Schooler says, “and more people are seeing us as a great place to go to work.”

With leadership from individuals such as Eric Schooler, the lumber industry definitely is.

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Schooler set scoring records in high school basketball, and he wasn’t bad on defense either, as shown here.