

# Building Relationships On The Track

Railroad industry laid the foundation for a rewarding career for Branding Hammer recipient

Award Articles By Paige Townely

While some may stumble into a career path or industry, it didn't happen that way for Ed Sparks. He knew early on that he wanted to work in the railroad industry, and he did exactly what was needed to make it happen—starting with earning a degree in civil engineering from the University of Kentucky.

“I chose my major based upon what I thought would give me the best opportunity to get into the industry,” Sparks explained. “To me, the railroad industry is fascinating and has a tremendous history. Railroads helped build not only the United States but also North America. It’s a fulfilling thought to be a part of something that is so important and long lived.”

After graduating, Sparks got his foot in the door when he was hired at CSX as a co-op student. “At that time, railroads weren’t doing a lot of hiring,” Sparks added. “I was fortunate to be able to make it into the industry, and the rest is history.”

Sparks went on to serve in a variety of roles for CSX, moving into track design after participating in the co-op program. Eventually, he worked in track maintenance before moving over to bridge maintenance, bridge design, and standards. Almost 29 years later, Sparks is still at CSX, now



Matt, Jennifer, Ed and Danny Sparks.




Photograph by Mr. Bryn Pounds.

serving as chief engineer of bridges, design and construction. “What has kept so many in the railroad industry—one of the aspects that has kept me in the industry—is the shared sense of purpose,” he said. “There was something said to me early on that rang true: railroading gets in your blood, and if you stick around five years or so, you’ll make a career out of it. I have seen that a lot, and it certainly happened for me.”

While Sparks has thoroughly enjoyed the many projects he’s worked on over the years, stating that “there have been so many great ones it’s hard to pick one out,” what has stood out to him overall has been the relationships formed and comradery he’s experienced while being faced with new and unique challenges. “Every day is an adventure in the railroading business,” he said. “I learn on a daily basis. And

railroading is an outdoor team sport. When there is a difficulty, railroaders do a very good job of teaming up to overcome it. Together we rise to the challenge, and it’s good to be a part of that. It has created many great memories, and it’s something we try to carry on to this day.”

Part of what makes that possible, Sparks added, is the support of industry associations like the Railway Tie Association. “They are absolutely critical to the functioning of the railway industry,” Sparks said. “There is no substitute. RTA does a lot of work to keep the industry going and moving forward, and to receive an award from such a prestigious association is truly an honor. I’m so thankful to be in the railroad industry and be a part of something that has been around for generations. Hopefully, I will be around for many more.” ■



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# A Long Career Motivated By Colleague Connections For Broad Axe Winner

John Heller has spent practically his entire life in the railroad tie industry. While he's certainly enjoyed numerous successes and seen many changes over the last almost 40 years, it's the relationships he's built within the industry that have kept him going.

"Over the years, I've worked with some incredibly wonderful people," said Heller. "That has always been one of my favorite aspects of the industry—the relationships that develop with people. That's what really makes a job truly rewarding."

Heller started his career after graduating with a degree in forestry from the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point. At that time, his goal was just to find a job. "There weren't many jobs available, so I just took the first related job I found."

That first job was with Koppers, and the decision certainly paid off. After starting as a railroad tie buyer, he eventually moved up the ranks to railroad tie buyer, yard foreman and plant manager at Koppers in Superior, Wis. He then went on to serve as a plant manager at another Koppers plant in Galesburg, Ill., before being named operations manager for all of Koppers' treating plants and later as director of procurement.

"I have seen so many big changes within the industry, particularly with the sawmills.

Today, there are so many fewer sawmills than there used to be," Heller said. "The lumber markets have also changed so dramatically, and so has the speed at which they change. It used to be that a cycle in the lumber industry was five to 10 years, and now it can be just two to three months."

In addition to his career moves within Koppers—and changes within the industry in general—Heller has also seen many location changes. The Wisconsin native eventually made the move to Pittsburgh, Koppers' headquarters city, where he has been for the last 27 years. With retirement in the near future, Heller said he foresees much more time available to enjoy some of his favorite hobbies back in the Badger State.

"There will be more golf, fishing, hunting, and time to get together with friends coming soon for me," he said. "It's exciting to be looking at retirement. It's going to be different. It's a new journey after many years of work. But I look forward to it and having the opportunity to spend more time at my cabin in Wisconsin and partaking in some of the hobbies I enjoy."

Before he is officially retired from Koppers, Heller said he is taking the opportunity to reflect on his career—including being this year's recipient of the



Broad Axe award—and the many people he's met along the way. "I've had some luck in making friends in the industry, and I'm grateful for that," he said. "There are so many wonderful people within the industry and within the RTA. They are truly dedicated to the industry, and it makes a career in this industry a pleasure." ■

## Help NHLA Share Your Message

By Dallin Brooks

I have been on the road visiting National Hardwood Lumber Association (NHLA) member mills and finding out about their grading and product lines.

I was told the other day that "we can't give our red oak away." Wouldn't you like to get your hands on some of that oak put back together for a tie?

Consumer and export markets are changing fast, but infrastructure markets are more stable and often get funding during a recession. But an issue remains: ties and lumber are not the same lengths, so some mills don't cut ties.

The decision made back in the forest

determines, whether an 8'6" tie is cut or 8', 10', 12' lumber is cut. Is the mill willing to waste six inches of grade lumber to get the tie out of the cant? How is the value of the tie communicated to the hardwood mills? Can the mill drop out the ties from the line?

You have heard these questions before, and you have a relationship with your suppliers, but there are a lot more out there making pallet stock or cutting unsold lumber only because they don't know or understand the tie market and how to communicate it up the chain further.

NHLA is participating more with the RTA. We appreciate RTA's willingness to speak

at the 2022 NHLA Annual Convention and Exhibit Showcase, Sept. 21-23. We hope this will help lead to an industry effort to educate mills, ensure tie suppliers are in alignment, and not miss an opportunity to provide critical infrastructure.

Please consider joining members of NHLA at our upcoming convention. Learn more and register at [www.nhla.com/convention2022](http://www.nhla.com/convention2022). ■

*Dallin Brooks is executive director of the National Hardwood Lumber Association (NHLA.com) and may be reached at (360) 823-3898 or [dallin@nhla.com](mailto:dallin@nhla.com).*

# Founded On Family

Silver Saw recipient credits success to his family

For Ricky Fly, the writing was on the wall—or, perhaps more appropriately, on the timber pile—that he would find himself in the railroad tie industry.

“I was practically raised in the woods,” Fly explained. “My dad was a logger, and I was always out with him. It’s what I’ve always known to do.”

Spending time out in the woods watching his father prepared Fly for success when he started his career. After working for his father as a logger for a while, he eventually went out on his own in 1981 and started his own company, Fly Timber. At the time, he only had a logging crew, but he quickly made a name for himself within the timber industry. Just a couple of years later, and Fly had opened his first office, and then a few different sawmills.

In the early 2000s, he added a hardwood sawmill before expanding in 2014 and combining all of his efforts into one location

in Grenada, Miss., where he added railroad ties and lumber to his mix of products.

Today, Fly Tie & Lumber Co. is an industry leader in the production of sustainable, locally sourced hardwood, pulpwood, lumber, railroad ties, industrial timbers, cants, flooring and paneling.

All of the company’s lumber is locally sourced—within 200 miles of its sawmill—and it uses leading edge technology to produce its products. “Over the last 40 years, technology has come so far in this business,” Fly added. “It makes the process and the product a lot better—there’s no question about it.”

The company utilizes a variety of hardwoods: red oak, white oak, ash, poplar and hickory. It also produces railroad ties, primarily for Stella-Jones. “We are able to produce ties, put them on the rail, and ship them anywhere around the country,” Fly added.



While taking pride in the quality products Fly Tie & Lumber Co. has manufactured over the last 40 years, this year’s Silver Saw recipient said he also finds great satisfaction in the fact the company continues to be family run, providing exceptional customer service that keeps customers coming back time and again—hopefully for at least another 40 years. ■



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# Scholarship Winner Pushes For Accessible, Affordable Forest Resources

Scholarship Articles By Kristen McIntosh

Donald Yealy of Oxford, Pa., is this year's recipient of the Railway Tie Association's Paul Webster Scholarship. Yealy graduated with his associate degree from Penn State Monto Alto in May and is pursuing a bach-



elor's degree in Forest Ecosystem Management from Penn State University Park.

He has earned a variety of recogni-

tions during his academic career, including Eagle Scout, Boy Scouts of America's Order of the Arrow, Penn State's Academic Achievement Award in his second year of ForestTechnology, and the North American

Forest Technician Honor for Superior Academic Achievement.

He has participated in numerous student organizations such as the Society of American Foresters, Boy Scouts of America and Venturing BSA, Sacred Heart Basilica and Penn State's Woodsmen's Team.

While pursuing his degree at Penn State University Park, Yealy is seeking a minor in Wildlife and Fisheries Science and plans to graduate Magna Cum Laude upon completion. Following graduation, he will seek a career with either Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources or the U.S. Forest Service. "My career goal is to become a district forester. I would also like to work as a wildland firefighter for at least one season in the western United States."

Yealy said his love of forestry began while pursuing a forestry merit badge as a

Boy Scout. "I enjoyed talking with the local foresters and was fascinated by the practices they implemented in nearby state forests. I also enjoyed hearing their stories on wildland firefighting in the West," he said. "I chose forestry as my career because it fit seamlessly with my lifestyle and interests."

Yealy said his career as a forester will serve railroads by ensuring wood supplies, advanced manufacturing technology and sustainable forest practices will be put to effective use in the future. "When forest workers are well-educated, they can improve forest practices and make forest resources more accessible. Plentiful forest resources benefit the railroad tie and other wood products by providing a high quantity of supply while keeping costs low. Lower costs and abundant supplies make it easier for these businesses to generate revenue and expand." ■

## Fighting Wildfires Is On This Scholarship Recipient's Resume

The Railway Tie Association awarded its coveted John Mabry Scholarship to Garrett Beal of Elko, Nev.

A student at Clemson University with



an expected graduation of May 2023, Beal is vice president of the Clemson Wildlife Society and president and conclave

chair for the Clemson Forestry Club. He also participates in the National Wild Turkey Federation and is a Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Youth Ambassador.

Beal is pursuing a dual major in Forest Resource Management and Wildlife and Fisheries Biology. His most recent class schedule included courses in wood and paper products, forest resource management, natural resources, wildlife conservation, remote sensing, technical writing, behavioral ecology, silviculture,

harvesting processes, forest policy and administration, GIS for natural resources, wildlife management techniques, wildlife damage management and more.

Last summer, Beal worked in Elko, Nev., for the Bureau of Land Management and also worked on a helitack crew fighting wildfires. At the time of this application, Beal was planning a trip to Alaska to assist with fighting wildfires there. "I plan to work for the BLM again for another year or two until I pay off my student loans. I will then

decide what I want to do with the rest of my life, but I think I want to take over my dad's tree service and logging company, Ian Beal Tree Service, and try to expand it."

Beal was highly recommended for the scholarship by Patrick Hiesl, Ph.D., assistant professor of forest operations for Clemson University's College of Agriculture, Forestry and Life Sciences. "I have no doubt he will uphold the standards of your organization and become a shining member of your community." ■

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