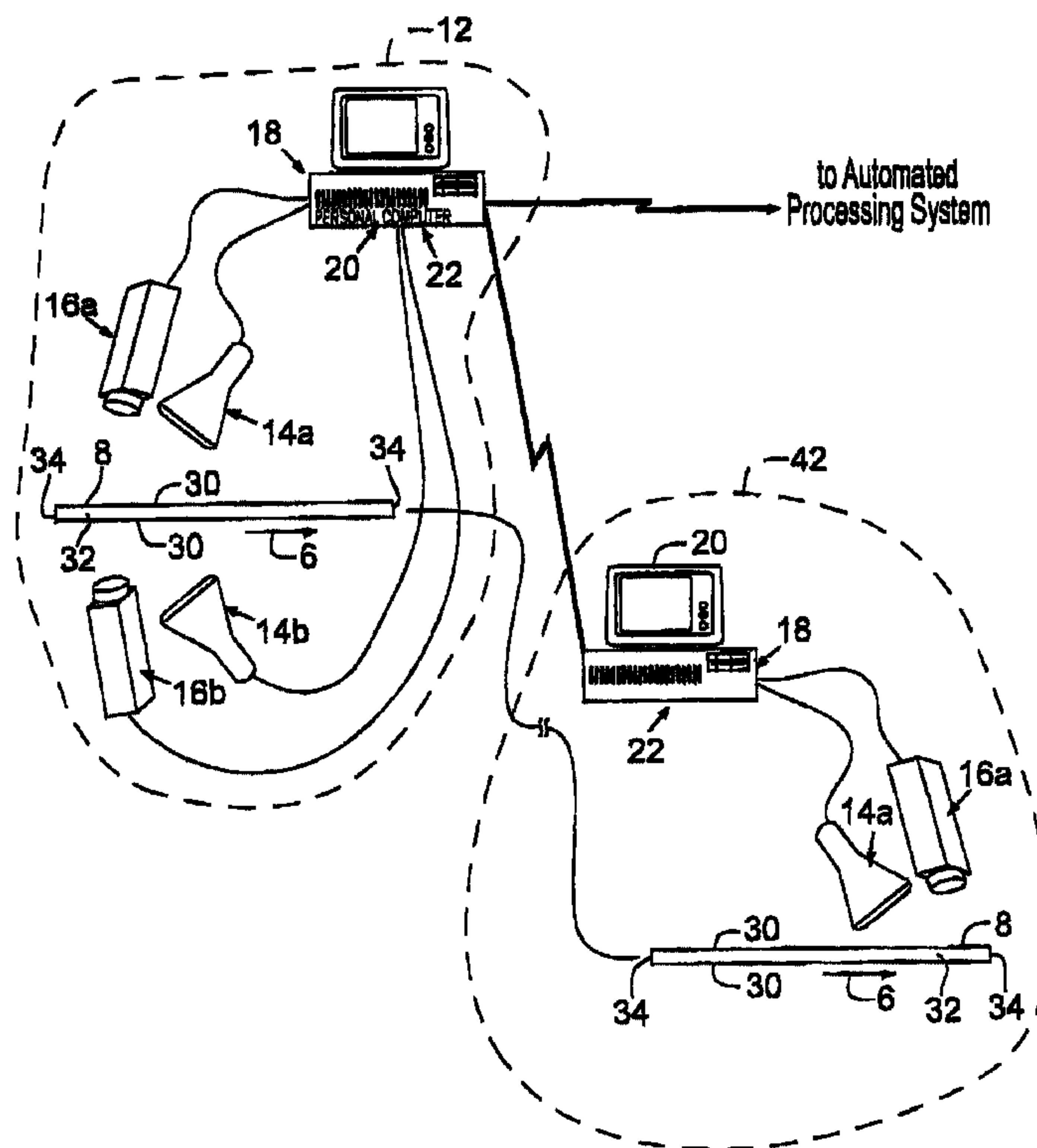




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(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

A "Woodprint™" characterization and identification technique employs cameras (16), lighting (14), camera interface hardware (18), a computer (20), and/or image processing software to collect and analyze surface characteristics of pieces of wood (8) to track them through an automated production process in real-time with information that is specific to each wood piece (8), such as what machining is required, its value, and/or its destination. When a wood piece (8) reaches a point in the production process where a decision is required, its unique identity is used to retrieve appropriate information previously determined and assigned to the wood piece (8).

WOOD TRACKING BY IDENTIFICATION OF SURFACE CHARACTERISTICS

Abstract of the Disclosure

A "Woodprint™" characterization and identification technique employs cameras (16), lighting (14), camera interface hardware (18), a computer (20), and/or image processing software to collect and analyze surface characteristics of pieces of wood (8) to track them through an automated production process in real-time with information that is specific to each wood piece (8), such as what machining is required, its value, and/or its destination. When a wood piece (8) reaches a point in the production process where a decision is required, its unique identity is used to retrieve appropriate information previously determined and assigned to the wood piece (8).

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WOOD TRACKING BY IDENTIFICATION OF SURFACE CHARACTERISTICS

Technical Field

[0003] The present invention relates generally to lumber or board tracking and, more particularly, to using unique surface characteristics ("woodprints") for identifying individual pieces of wood and tracking them through an automated production process with real-time information specific to the pieces or wood such that when a board or other piece of wood reaches a machining operation or decision point, its predetermined characteristic information, such as processing information, value, or destination, can be automatically retrieved to influence how such piece of wood is handled.

Background of the Invention

[0004] Conventional board tracking devices rely on spraying or imprinting an identification code or symbol on each board and reading the information with a sensor after the board has traveled to a subsequent machining station. The printing and reading processes are preferably performed at high speeds and may be

physically difficult to reliably achieve because of the dynamic nature of the boards themselves.

[0005] If wood is missing from an area where the board is printed, the board's identification code can be illegible to the reader. A twisted board, or one with bark or some other defect in the print zone, can also be difficult to reliably mark and identify. A board may also turn over during travel between stations, requiring that either both sides be marked, or both sides be read.

[0006] Another problem with conventional board tracking devices is that printing systems contain print media, such as ink or paint, and moving parts that contribute to decreasing reliability. Ink jet and/or spray systems require constant maintenance to keep them working properly. Most require compressed air, are adversely affected by temperature extremes, and are very sensitive to variations in the ink or paint quality. For example, unless the print media is continually circulated when the system is not in use, the print media can freeze, its pigments can separate, and print nozzles can become plugged. The required maintenance can cost thousands of dollars annually beyond the cost of replacement parts and the original equipment itself. When a marking system fails, the failure is typically not detected until the boards reach the next machine center, potentially meaning that a hundred or more boards must be physically removed from the process and either reintroduced ahead of the marking system or manually processed.

[0007] Marking boards with ink or paint can reduce their value as potential appearance-grade products destined for exposed applications. Boards typically processed through a marking system have been previously planed and are ready for immediate use. Some uses include wall paneling or exposed ceilings and floors. If the final finish will be a non-opaque stain or paint, any non-natural marking will not be acceptable. Furthermore, print media typically contain or are mixed with a fluorescent pigment or dye to provide better contrast to improve mark-reading performance. Such pigments may be invisible in normal lighting, but the marks will glow under an ultraviolet (black light) source. The ultraviolet marks are, therefore, unacceptable for applications where the surfaces are inadvertently illuminated by a lighting source that emits UV light.

[0008] While existing board tracking systems may be suitable for some specific purposes, a more universal method for tracking boards, regardless of their condition or their final application, is desirable.

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Summary of the Invention

[0009] An object of some embodiments of the present invention is, therefore, to provide an improved wood tracking system.

[0010] Another object of some embodiments of the invention is to provide a surface "woodprinting™" system and/or method for tracking pieces of wood.

[0011] An alternative object of some embodiments of the invention is to employ such woodprinting™ capabilities to identify individual pieces of wood using their unique inherent surface characteristics in order to track the wood in real-time through an automated production process.

[0012] Another alternative object of some embodiments of the invention is to provide woodprinting™ capabilities that identify each piece of wood by its unique grain characteristics.

[0013] A further alternative object of some embodiments of the invention is to provide woodprinting™ capabilities that do not mark or modify the wood surface or its appearance.

[0014] Yet another alternative object of some embodiments of the invention is to provide woodprinting™ capabilities that can be used on any face, edge, and/or end of surfaced or unsurfaced wood of any moisture content.

[0015] Still another alternative object of some embodiments of the invention is to provide woodprinting™ capabilities that are relatively insensitive to lighting or positioning differences during image data collection.

[0016] As with human fingerprints and snowflakes, wood cells in trees develop in distinct manners as a result of many factors, including genetics, environment, weather, soil, local life form effects, and many other contributing elements. The surface of an individual board or piece of wood can also be cut from a tree in an infinite number of angles. Accordingly, the resulting exposed grain structure of any given surface will be unique when compared to that of any

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other surface of any other piece of wood. Even boards taken from the same tree and cut at similar angles will have unique grain structures. Furthermore, if the piece of wood is twisted, has some bark, is missing wood, has other physical shape defects such as wane defects, or has other defects such as knots or pitch, 5 within an area of interest, these features become additional characteristics that can be used to uniquely identify the piece of wood.

[0017] Some embodiments provide a surface "Boardprint™" or "Woodprint™" identification technique for identifying individual pieces of wood using their inherent unique surface characteristics to track them in real time 10 through an automated

production process. Such embodiments overcome many of the disadvantages of conventional board tracking devices. The improved tracking technique permits information specific to a piece of wood, such as proposed machining information, value, destination, and/or other characteristics, to follow the individual piece of wood through an automated process. Thus, when the piece of wood reaches a point in a production process where a decision is desired, the unique identity of the wood piece can be used to retrieve the appropriate information already associated with it.

[0018] Some embodiments employ cameras, lighting, image acquisition hardware, a computer, and image processing software. Preferred processing algorithms reduce effects from random or varying angles of image collection and/or from fluctuations of lighting sources. Statistical parameters, conceptually similar to those used for human fingerprint matching technology, provide a certain amount of flexibility in the analytical process. So, as long as a piece of wood meets desired statistical requirements for a match, the wood piece is considered to be a match. An adjustable tolerance for accuracy can be employed to compensate for fluctuations in the readability of wood grain characteristics, for example. These techniques are unlike conventional wood tracking techniques that attempt to find an exact match for a printed code.

[0019] Preferred image processing techniques of the invention can be used on any face, edge, and/or end of surfaced or unsurfaced wood of any moisture content, such as green (uncured) or dry wood, and the image processing techniques are relatively insensitive to defects on the surfaces. So, unlike convention tracking systems which cannot track relatively green or unsurfaced boards that do not facilitate the use of print media, embodiments of a woodprintTM identification system can be used anywhere in a sawmill and/or planer mill process where a wood surface can be imaged and is not limited to use with dry, surfaced boards. Furthermore, since printing or stamping the boards can be eliminated and the image acquisition sensors do not need to contact the wood surfaces, the wood is left with no additional markings that could degrade its appearance or adversely affect its value or merchantability.

[0020] Preferred embodiments of the invention can be employed to work in conjunction with an automated wood grading system. Because the scanning and computer processing associated with automated board or lumber grading may take several seconds, boards may travel away from the scanner and be mixed in with

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subsequent or previous boards without adversely affecting throughput. The woodprint™ identification techniques therefore facilitate automated matching of grade solutions with correct boards or other pieces of wood when they are presented later for further machining.

5 **[0021]** Some preferred embodiments can be implemented without adding appreciably to the production cost of wood products. Some preferred embodiments employ no moving parts and utilize components that are easily protected from temperature fluctuation and other environmental concerns. Some preferred
10 embodiments can also utilize existing scanning hardware for initial image acquisition in existing systems, merely adding a software element to the scanning system. Off-the-shelf lighting, cameras, and/or other sensing hardware can be added downstream at various points in the automated production system. The expected maintenance, such as keeping the camera viewing ports free from debris, and occasionally replacing of light sources, would also be minimal. Accordingly, the preferred surface
15 woodprinting™ techniques for tracking wood pieces is highly reliable.

[0021a] An aspect of the invention relates to a method for tracking multiple pieces of wood, each piece of wood having multiple surfaces and at least an end surface, while inhibiting misidentification of wood having received an alteration to its end surface, the method comprising: obtaining first inherent wood characteristic
20 information from at least a first portion of at least a first surface of each of the multiple pieces of wood as they move through a first station, the multiple pieces of wood including a first piece of wood, and the first portion including a first area that is located away from the end surface that is positioned to be altered in its appearance at a time after the first inherent wood characteristic information is obtained;
25 converting at least some of the first inherent wood characteristic information concerning the first area for each of the multiple pieces of wood into respective first data packets; obtaining, based on a location of the end surface, second inherent wood characteristic information from at least the first area of each of the multiple pieces of wood as they move through a second station so that the second inherent
30 wood characteristic information is free from effects of alterations; converting at least

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some of the second inherent wood characteristic information for the multiple pieces of wood into respective second data packets; and comparing a second data packet to a first data packet of the first piece of wood to make a first evaluation of similarity between the first and second data packets to determine whether a given piece of wood that has traveled through the second station is the first piece of wood.

[0021b] Another aspect of the invention relates to a method for tracking multiple pieces of wood, each piece of wood having multiple surfaces, by providing unstricted transport of wood pieces undergoing surface characterization, the method comprising: moving multiple pieces of wood in a first direction of travel through a first station in a manner that permits the multiple pieces of wood to move in a direction transverse to the first direction of travel; obtaining first inherent wood characteristic information from at least a first portion of at least a first surface of each of the multiple pieces of wood as they move through the first station while automatically compensating for movement in the direction transverse to the first direction of travel, the multiple pieces of wood including a first piece of wood; converting at least some of the first inherent wood characteristic information concerning the first portion for each of the multiple pieces of wood into respective first data packets; obtaining second inherent wood characteristic information from at least the first portion of each of the multiple pieces of wood, including the first piece of wood, as they move through a second station; converting at least some of the second inherent wood characteristic information for the multiple pieces of wood into respective second data packets; and comparing a second data packet to a first data packet of the first piece of wood to make a first evaluation of similarity between the first and second data packets to determine whether a given piece of wood that has traveled through the second station is the first piece of wood.

[0022] Additional objects and advantages of this invention will be apparent from the following detailed description of preferred embodiments, which proceeds with reference to the accompanying drawings.

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Brief Description of the Drawings

[0023] FIG. 1 is a pictorial representation of exemplary desirable components of one embodiment of a wood tracking system.

[0024] FIG. 2 is a flow diagram of an overview of exemplary wood tracking events that occur in one embodiment of a wood tracking system.

[0025] FIG. 3 is a flow diagram detailing exemplary image analysis executed at an exemplary characterization station in one embodiment of a wood tracking system.

[0026] FIG. 4 is a flow diagram detailing exemplary image analysis executed at an exemplary identification station in one embodiment of a wood tracking system.

10 Detailed Description of Preferred Embodiments

[0027] FIG. 1 shows an exemplary wood tracking system 10 for characterizing and identifying pieces of wood 8 in a production line as they move in a direction of travel 6 through an automated production process to downstream processing centers and/or sorting bins. FIGS. 2-4 show general and specific flow diagrams of wood

tracking events and analysis employed in some embodiments of wood tracking system 10.

[0028] With reference to FIG. 1, a characterization station 12 captures and processes an image of at least a portion of each piece of wood 8 and then coordinates the tracking of the specific pieces of wood 8 with the automated processing system (APS) as they travel to common or different machining centers for the sawing, grading, and/or subsequent sorting. The pieces of wood 8 can flip over during travel or arrive at the machining centers out of sequence. A downstream identification station 42 at one or more of such machining centers eventually captures and processes the images of most, if not all, the pieces of wood 8. Then image data obtained at the identification station 42 is compared to image data obtained at the station 12 to identify each piece of wood 8 and report its location to the automated processing system. Each piece of wood 8 is then processed or sorted according to wood piece-specific instructions from the automated process system. After being processed, each piece of wood 8 may be re-characterized by the original characterization station 12 or another characterization station 12 that is downstream of such processing or machining center.

[0029] General embodiments of a wood tracking system 10 include one or more wood characterization stations 12 having one or more light sources 14a and 14b (generically light sources 14) and corresponding image acquisition hardware 16a and 16b (generically image acquisition hardware 16) that are directly or indirectly in communication with camera interface hardware 18 that is in turn directly or indirectly in communication with a computer 20. A typical wood characterization station 12 also preferably employs image processing software 22 having customized image processing algorithms designed to analyze video, frame, or other captured image information using various data manipulation techniques described later in detail.

[0030] Enough unique inherent information can be extracted from a small surface portion of each piece of wood 8 as it travels at a high speed through the characterization station 12 to successfully characterize each piece of wood 8 uniquely. Typically, pieces of wood 8 travel (with their major axis in the direction of travel 6 (lineally)) through station 12 at speeds of about 91 to 915 meters (300 to 3000 feet) per minute and more typically at speeds of at least 366 meters (1200 feet) per minute and less than about 610 meters (2000 feet) per minute. These speeds can be increased when the pieces of wood 8 are more homogeneous and when

material handling challenges are solved. In some embodiments, a roughly 61-centimeter (two-foot) surface portion that is about one meter (three feet) from the end of each piece of wood 8 is imaged at station 12. In other embodiments, two or more portions are collected from one or more surfaces of each piece of wood 8 that is imaged at station 12.

[0031] For convenience, the terms “wood,” “pieces of wood,” or “wood pieces” may refer to pieces of timber, lumber, logs, flitches, cants, beams, posts, studs, boards, veneer, and/or any other pieces of wood smaller than the whole tree and larger than sawdust. The surfaces characterized may be one or more faces 30, sides 32, and/or ends 34 of the wood pieces 8. Skilled persons will appreciate that curved or intersecting surfaces may additionally or alternatively be characterized at station 12. Skilled persons will appreciate that the minimum area that is imaged should be an amount of area sufficient to yield a unique recognizable vector file or image packet as later described. Skilled persons will further appreciate that the minimum area imaged may be different for different wood products or may be different for wood pieces having different shapes or sizes. Alternatively, any additional amount of any wood surface can be imaged, including up to all portions of all surfaces. Skilled persons will also note that any combination of surfaces may also be imaged.

[0032] In some embodiments, the image captured comprises a high contrast image of grain and/or growth ring characteristics of a portion of each piece of wood 8. These features are relatively insensitive to differences in lighting, position, and contrast, but other wood characteristics such as tracheid patterns and/or wood defects could be used for identification purposes. Such defects might include, but are not limited to, physical shape defects such as cups, crooks, cracks, knots, wane, twists, bark, and/or pitch.

[0033] In some embodiments, images or other inherent wood characteristic information is obtained from at least two or more discrete portions of each piece of wood 8 at station 12. This additional information could be useful when a piece of wood 8 is cut into shorter pieces, some or all of which could then be identified downstream. This additional information could also be used as additional data set for a given piece of wood 8 to increase identification accuracy downstream.

[0034] Although for some embodiments only one or more portions of one surface of each piece of wood 8 may be used for analysis at the characterization station 12,

images of one or more corresponding portions of opposite surfaces can also be collected at the characterization station 12 so that opposite surface information is available in the event that a piece of wood 8 is turned over in transit between the characterization station 12 and the identification station 42. Accordingly, the image acquisition hardware 16 and the respective lighting sources 14 can be mounted in such a way as to obtain images of portions of opposing surfaces of each piece of wood 8 as it travels through station 12.

[0035] Appropriate gaps may be provided between conveyor belts or other wood conveying means to permit viewing of the bottom surface of each piece of wood 8. In alternative embodiments, the sets of image acquisition hardware 16 and light sources 14 may be symmetrically positioned about opposite surfaces of wood pieces 8 to characterize opposite surfaces simultaneously or may be positioned at a distance so that the opposite surfaces are characterized sequentially. Alternatively, pieces of wood 8 may intentionally be flipped over and re-sent through a station 12 having only a single set of lighting sources 14 and image acquisition hardware 16 to characterize an opposite surface, or the image acquisition hardware 16 could be moved such that its field of view changed to include the opposite surface. However, such embodiments might entail additional safeguards to ensure that images of the opposite surfaces are properly correlated with each other. The images or image data collected at station 12 from some or all of the surfaces may be communicated to the same computer 20 for processing.

[0036] In one embodiment, process blocks 110a and 110b employ image acquisition hardware 16 that comprises one or more monochrome array cameras with at least about a 1024 x 768 pixel addressability. Such camera(s) can be configured to be electronically shuttered up to at about at least 7.5 frames/second with an adjustable integration time to include 500 microseconds, or such camera(s) can be configured to work with a strobed light source 14 having similar strobe frequencies. In an exemplary embodiment, a camera is positioned a minimum of 61 centimeters (24 inches) over a face 30 of a target piece of wood 8 to provide a minimum field of view of 36 centimeters by 61 centimeters (14 inches by 24 inches) using a fixed lens. Skilled persons will appreciate that the camera speed and resolution can vary depending on the speed of the production line and the maximum field of view desired.

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[0037] In some circumstances, the area toward the end of a piece of wood 8 may not be ideally suited for identification analysis because it may be used by operators to add additional information using crayon marks, for example. If so, the crayon marks could possibly reduce the success of identification analysis as such marks could mask significant surface characteristics on the piece of wood 8 and/or this area may be cut before the piece of wood 8 arrives at station 42. Therefore, even though an image or characteristic information can be obtained from any location along the surfaces of the piece of wood 8, some embodiments are configured at both stations 12 and 42 to use an area at least 30 cm (12 inches) away from the end of the piece of wood 8, more preferably at least 61 cm (24 inches), and most preferably at least 760 cm (30 inches).

[0038] In some embodiments, however, it can be more advantageous to take images at the station 42 that include the end of the board. The video processing software can then reposition the image with respect to the end of the board. In particular embodiments, the camera and lighting are configured to take an image of the top face of the board at the even-ended end (the lumber line end) and include in the image approximately one inch past the end of the board. The image is then analyzed to not only find the edges of the board, but to also find the end of the board, and then the part of the image that is actually used for image data analysis starts at a specific distance from the end of the board, such as ten centimeters (four inches), to allow for aberrations in the even-ending process.

[0039] For most embodiments, it is desirable that the positions of images taken at both of the stations 12 and 42 match with each other since most techniques used for matching work better when the relative locations of the characteristics are known. Accordingly, it is desirable for the position of the piece of wood to be accurately located at both stations 12 and 42.

[0040] In some embodiments, the piece of wood 8 may be traveling linearly at station 12, so an encoder can be used to track the position of the piece of wood 8 and reference the image(s) taken. The pieces of wood 8 are preferably allowed to "float" through station 12 such that they can move sideways (transverse) a several inches, but create no image processing difficulties since such movement is accommodated in a normalization process described later. At station 42, the pieces of wood 8 may be traveling in the transverse direction, and the piece of wood 8 can be brought against a fence using even-ending rolls. Their position in the width

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direction can also be tracked with an encoder, and although the normalization process described later can account for some movement in this direction, the lineal position of the board is more preferred, so even-ending rolls and a fence are employed.

[0041] Selective use of one or more color channels or one or more filters (not shown) may reduce or eliminate infra-red energy and all visible wavelengths except green because most wood features of interest provide better visible contrast in green wavelengths. One or more filters may also be added to reduce or eliminate other unwanted characteristics of ambient lighting to enhance desirable effects of the light source(s) 14. The image acquisition hardware 16, and/or any other sensitive components as appropriate, may be housed in a NEMA 12/13-rated enclosure to protect it from temperature extremes, dust, and dirt. All of the components described above are commercially available.

[0042] In an alternative embodiment in which the wood piece 8 is a board, a Sony™ XCD-X700 monochrome camera or a color camera is mounted about 1.5 meters (five feet) above the face 30 of the board and is preferably oriented substantially perpendicularly to the board. The camera is installed in a NEMA 12/13-rated enclosure. The camera has a Fire Wire serial communication port, and a Fire Wire extender converts the Fire Wire signal to propagate through a fiber optic medium over a longer distance than the camera's own circuitry permits. Filtering can be implemented to allow only green energy to reach the camera or selective channels can be used if wavelength discrimination is desirable, and the background behind the board is preferably dark to facilitate image collection. In some embodiments, the image acquisition cycle is triggered by a photoeye proximity transition sensor that detects the end 34 or edge 32 of the board, depending on the orientation of the board as it travels through the station 12. Software running in the camera automatically transmits the acquired data to a personal computer 20.

[0043] In another embodiment, one or more color high-speed line scan cameras, having separate red, blue, and green channels, capture an image from a surface as a piece of wood 8 moves through station 12. The image data from the green channel is pieced back together to create an array image for subsequent analysis with software tools. In another embodiment, a single 768 x 768 pixel monochrome camera is employed to capture an image of an end 34 of a piece of wood 8 in a field of view of approximately 36 centimeters by 36 centimeters (14 inches by 14 inches)

at the first station 12. It is desirable to capture a high quality image, but the particular method of image data capture employed may not be particularly relevant. Skilled persons will appreciate that successful image collection is not limited to using imaging techniques described above and that numerous types of image acquisition hardware are commercially available and numerous configurations and positions could be employed. For example, other color or black and white image data may be obtained, or even radio or other frequency data may be obtained and used for "image matching." In addition, since image data can be available from any location along any surfaces of the piece of wood 8 as described in this embodiment, any or all portions of the board surface can be used for image matching.

[0044] Skilled persons will appreciate that image acquisition hardware may take on many other forms. In one embodiment, photodiodes are employed to capture inherent characteristic information obtained from exposing the wood pieces 8 to x-ray radiation. In another embodiment, antennas are employed to capture inherent characteristic information obtained from exposing the pieces of wood 8 to radio waves. Skilled persons will also appreciate that that more than one imaging technique can be used at the same time, combining multiple sensors and/or energy sources to ultimately improve the success of the image data-matching task.

[0045] Light sources 14 may employ almost any commercially available lighting equipment or known lighting technique. Desirable light sources 14 provide wavelengths generally considered to be green light at sufficient energy to accommodate the integration time necessary to capture well-contrasted images. Too much light is not likely to be a problem since the camera aperture or integration time can be adjusted to compensate for excess intensity. Although light sources 14 with reflector and lens systems that project a visible intensity pattern onto a wood surface can be employed, lighting embodiments that do not project visible intensity pattern onto a wood surface are generally easier to implement. In one embodiment, station 12 employs one or more a broad-spectrum lamps, such as commercially available halogen or Xenon lamps that consume about 1000 Watts of direct current (DC) power to generate approximately 800 Watts of light energy. The lamp's self-contained lens and reflector cast a diffuse light over an approximate area of about 76 centimeters by 76 centimeters (30 inches by 30 inches). The visible energy produced by such a light source 14 is "white," including energy in green wavelengths that is in proportion to the energy in other visible wavelengths.

[0046] In another embodiment where the wood piece 8 is a board, two 1000 Watt broad spectrum stage lights are mounted about 1.8 meters (six feet) away from the face 30 of the board, generally in a longitudinal plane of the board that is perpendicular to the face 30 of the board and generally at 40 degree angle off the face 30, to reduce reflections and provide a fairly uniform illumination over a 0.6 meters square (two foot square) area of the board face 30. Such lighting and camera combination can be duplicated as necessary in order to capture more sections of a board's surface for analysis.

[0047] Skilled persons will appreciate that different lighting techniques can be employed to accommodate different image acquisition hardware 16. If a line scan camera is employed, the light source 14 should be bright enough in the green portion of the visible spectrum, for example, to provide for successful image integration. In another example, a strobe light source 14 is employed to control the camera's acquisition of the image instead of depending entirely on a camera's electronic shutter mode. Such light source should also generate sufficient light in the green wavelengths of the visible spectrum to acquire a successful image for processing. Skilled persons will appreciate that green laser or other coherent light sources 14 can be employed and may be preferred when the costs of such embodiments become comparable to the costs of more typical light sources such as those discussed above.

[0048] Process blocks 112a and 112b may employ camera interface hardware 18 that preferably resides in a computer 20 and may be a circuit board or card that captures the resulting image from the image acquisition hardware 16 for analysis in the computer 20 and that may also control activation of image data acquisition and/or strobe light timing. Such a circuit board is often referred to as a "frame grabber," is commercially available, and may be located in the computer's system bus. Preferred functions of such card include the capability to properly exercise real-time imaging functions of the image acquisition hardware 16, capture the resulting image data, and present the data to the computer 20 for analysis. For some embodiments, such a card is preferably capable of receiving an external signal to initiate each image capture, and then triggering the strobe and camera to initiate image capture.

[0049] Skilled persons will appreciate that if a different kind of camera is used, the camera interface hardware 18 will be changed appropriately. For example, if the

image acquisition hardware 16 were a line scan device, then the camera interface hardware 18 would collect image data in single scanned lines and present the data to the computer 20 for assembly into an array image for evaluation. Skilled persons will also appreciate that such card may facilitate only the data collection process and not control the camera. Another example can use a camera containing its own acquisition software and hardware, whereby the data is subsequently transmitted to the computer 20 via a serial communication link such as Ethernet, USB, or Fire Wire, requiring no special hardware to be installed in the computer 20.

[0050] Skilled persons will appreciate that camera interface hardware 18 may reside in image acquisition hardware 16 or in the personal computer or may be an independent device that is directly or indirectly interfaced to the image acquisition hardware 16 and/or the computer 20. As cameras and computers 20 are continuing to evolve and take on a more complete roles to ease integration, many or all of the functions camera interface hardware 18 will be incorporated into the image acquisition hardware 16, such that a high-speed communication port in the computer's motherboard will accept the data directly from the image acquisition hardware 16 so separate camera interface hardware 18 may be omitted entirely.

[0051] In some embodiments, computer 20 may be an off-the-shelf personal computer (PC) with commercially available hardware and software components. Such a computer 20 may have typical attributes, such as a processor speed of 2 to 3 gigahertz, minimum RAM memory 512 megabytes, hard disk, CD drive, keyboard (kbd), mouse, color monitor, Ethernet network card, Microsoft Windows operating system, an interface hardware card, and commercially available and/or customized image processing software and other application(s).

[0052] In accordance with process block 114a, the computer 20 processes the image data collected from the image acquisition hardware 16 associated with station 12, and in accordance with process blocks 116 and 118 then communicates the results via an Ethernet connection to other stations 42, production line equipment, an automated processing system (APS), and/or possibly other computers. The connections between the various components and stations can take on many forms, the most common being coaxial cable or shielded twisted paired cables. In addition, the communication medium could be via fiber optic (light energy) or radio frequency. The types of connections used may depend on the proposed communication method

desired and the ability to integrate with preexisting components of older wood processing systems, and numerous specific embodiments could be implemented.

[0053] The image or image data can be converted to an "image packet" (described later) to circumvent current technological limitations, such as cost constraints associated with communication bandwidth and computational power, that hinder the transmission of complete wood piece images and the use of direct image to image comparisons. In some embodiments, the image packet, and not the raw image data, is transmitted to the computer 20 to reduce communication time, and the image packet is what is compared, not the raw or compressed image. The image conversion and comparison preferably operates in "real-time," at least as fast as the production line to which the wood tracking system and method are connected.

[0054] The computer hardware employed is expected to be changed over time to incorporate higher speed components and interface devices, as well as increased memory capacity when appropriate as improved components become available. For example, an Ethernet 100/10 Base T network can be replaced by a Gigabit Network or other serial or parallel networks. These communication interfaces can also be integrated into the computer's motherboard, eliminating the need for adding a separate card for the communication function. Fiber optic or radio frequency mediums are also potential methods for this function. The computer 20 is connected to a power source that is preferably protected from voltage or current fluctuations. The image acquisition hardware 16 and light sources 14 may be connected to the same power source as the computer 20 or may be connected to separate power sources.

[0055] With the same or different sensors and image processing equipment, the automated processing system examines each piece of wood 8 to determine the most beneficial use of each piece of wood 8, such as grade and dimension, and to provide the corresponding processing instructions, such as where to cut. Such examination may be accomplished concurrently with characterization for identification, or such examination may occur before or after ID characterization or at a separate location. Conventional automated processing systems may employ some or all of the techniques disclosed in any one of U.S. Patent Nos. 6,757,058; 6,756,789; 5,703,960; 5,644,392; 5,524,771; 5,412,220; 5,254,859; 5,252,836; 4,992,949; 4,926,350; 4,916,629; 4,879,752; 4,867,213; 4,831,545; 4,827,142; 4,606,654;

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4,301,373; 4,286,880; 4,221,974; 4,207,472; 4,086,496; or combinations thereof.

[0056] With reference again to FIGS. 1-4, an identification station 42 that is later or downstream of the characterization station 12 may employ types and embodiments of light source(s) 14, image acquisition hardware 16, camera interface hardware 18, and/or computer(s) 20 that are identical to, or different from, those employed in the previous station 12. Skilled persons will appreciate that in most cases identical types and embodiments of these components are preferred to facilitate ease in matching the image data of wood surface characteristics obtained at stations 12 and 42.

[0057] An image may be captured of an entire surface or from only a specific area on the piece of wood 8 at both stations 12 and 42, and/or identification station 42 may capture fewer and/or smaller images of portions of wood pieces 8 than those captured at the characterization station 12. Skilled persons will appreciate that if station 12 obtains image data from both of the opposite surfaces of each piece of wood 8, then station 42 will preferably obtain image data from only one of the opposite surfaces in order to establish a match. In some embodiments, pieces of wood travel through station 42 in an intentionally different orientation than the orientation in which they travel through station 12. For example, instead of lineal travel through stations 12 and 42, pieces of wood 8 may have their major axis oriented transversely to, and preferably perpendicularly to, direction of travel 6 at one or both stations 12 and 42. Skilled persons will also appreciate that transverse travel speeds may be different from lineal travel speeds. Thus, the processing of the images from stations 12 and 42 preferably take into account speed differences as well as different image acquisition techniques in order to successfully support a Boardprint™ matching schema.

[0058] Preferred embodiments employ a computer 20 at each downstream identification station 42. Each computer 20 is preferably capable of performing the same tasks concerning collecting image data of wood surface characteristics from its respective image acquisition hardware, with either computer 20 being able to make the final comparison decision. Alternatively, downstream computers 20 may be adapted to perform only some or all of the image characterization, but leave the comparison processing to a central computer (not shown) or a computer 20 at a

previous station. The computers 20 preferably communicate with each other and the automated processing system via an Ethernet or other high-speed communication network such as those described above.

[0059] Skilled person will appreciate that a single high-speed computer 20 may perform the image characterization and comparison tasks associated with two or more stations 12 and 42. Such a computer 20 would preferably contain the camera interface hardware for the image acquisition hardware of each station 12 and 42 and would be configured to multitask between the demands of each. Some pre-existing wood processing systems already have, for example, a complete scanning system in place that includes its own light sources 14, cameras, and computers 20 with a software architecture that facilitates image acquisition in one computer, image processing in another, decision logic in a third, and communication to the production equipment in another. Skilled persons will also appreciate that the image data collection, processing, and decision process can be implemented in multiple computers 20 that are remote from the stations 12 or 42 where the image acquisition hardware is located. Skilled persons will further appreciate that station 42 may be at a remote location from station 12 such as a separate milling site or customer plant with data sent over the internet or other means, and station 42 may be operated shortly after or at a much later time from when station 12 acquires the image data of a wood piece 8. The physical location and configurations of the data collection and processing hardware can be varied greatly so long as such implementations are reliable and facilitate and desirable processing and communication tasks and speeds.

[0060] When a computer 20 receives an image from the image acquisition hardware 16, the image and/or data associated with it may be stored in a circular buffer by software running in the computer 20 at least until the image data is received and/or acknowledged by the respective decisions block 120a or 120b of the image processing hardware. Customized image processing algorithms may be employed to analyze image data with various data manipulation techniques. Such software is preferably adapted to operate in the WindowsTM environment and integrate with communication applications in order to share data and results with other computers 20. The software is preferably adapted to take advantage of Intel's Image Processing Library (IPL), Integrated Performance Primitives (IPP), and/or other available libraries that feature specialized software routines that take

advantage of specific processing hardware of the computer 20. One advantage of using these libraries is speed. A function call to an IPL routine typically runs much faster than improvised dedicated C++ code. In one embodiment where the wood pieces 8 are boards, the image processing software includes C++ libraries and/or Visual Basic® OCX / DLL software provided by a company called Imaging Control of Charlotte, North Carolina. Another software application resident in the computer 20 moves the image out of the buffer to a separate memory location so it can be easily accessed by the image processing software.

[0061] The software is preferably adapted to perform one or more of the following applications, more preferably two or more of these applications, and most preferably all of these applications: image warping; Fast Fourier Transformation and/or other transformation techniques such as wavelet analysis; interim solution communication; woodprint matching; and/or final solution communication. A description of each of these applications is described below.

[0062] With reference to process blocks 114a and 114b, image warping addresses differences between the images taken by the image acquisition hardware 16 at each station 12 or 42. Such differences include, but are not limited to: the position of where each piece of wood 8 ends up in the field of view; resolution differences between the individual image acquisition hardware 16 at different stations 12 and 42; and image contrast. The software will take the image received from the image acquisition hardware 16 and scale it to correspond to a pre-determined pixel/inch value in accordance with process blocks 124a and 124b. The software will also adjust the orientation of the piece of wood's image to compensate for any skewing or offset in accordance with process blocks 122a and 122b. The scaling and orientation adjustments can be done in either order. A calibration procedure at installation using a target with known size and orientation defines the reference points and adjusts for differences in focus, pixel size, lighting, and skew using a calibration target with known size, orientation, and/or other features.

[0063] In an exemplary system, where the images taken at stations 12 and 42 are adapted to be appear as similar as possible, the focus, illumination, and spatial alignment are precisely adjusted. Such calibration can be entirely manual or can be partially automated. In an exemplary calibration process for such a system where the piece of wood 8 is a board, after the camera and light sources are mounted, a calibration target is placed under the camera. This target may be a board with lines

drawn on it using a green or black marker that border a region of interest. The camera is placed in a mode that makes it continually acquire images. The focus, aperture, and speed (acquisition time) are adjusted to produce a clear image. The position of the camera is then manually adjusted at both stations 12 and 42 so that the cameras produce nearly identical images. Focus is readjusted as needed.

[0064] In an exemplary image warping application that addresses scaling wherein the wood piece 8 is a board, the computer software thresholds multiple (or each) horizontal video lines across the image to find the edges of sides 32 of the board. In some embodiments, the image analysis techniques used to find one or more of the edges 32 of the image of boards automatically compensate for side-to-side movement while the boards travel through station 12. Accordingly, the boards do not have to be tightly controlled as they move linearly through station 12, such as by using a guide system such as an anvil or constricting fence along a second side. The same imaging techniques can be used for the station 42, and thereby also reduce the dependence of the system on knowing the lateral position of the board.

[0065] The data from the longest lines (representing the widest part of the board) are used in a least-squares fit calculation to create an artificial border that represents the edges of the board. Using the longest lines helps eliminate areas of missing wood and dark fiber that can make the board appear narrow. The calculation results in a border rectangle that corresponds to the edges of the board and the portion of the field of view that was calibrated for both stations 12 and 42. The image is then scaled to a size compatible to both stations 12 and 42 using a bi-linear transformation. The area within the border rectangle is next divided into two grids: a fine grid and a coarse grid. In an example employing a 25.4-cm (ten-inch) wide board, the fine grid comprises 100 rectangles or cells and the coarse grid comprises 25 rectangles or cells. In some embodiments, each fine cell may, for example, represent a 64 x 64 camera pixel area.

[0066] In an exemplary image analysis process, each cell may be represented by a set of values determined by a Fast Fourier Transform algorithm in accordance with process blocks 126a and 126b. Exemplary values of interest include the most often found frequency in a grain pattern or growth ring pattern, a representation of such frequency's energy or abundance (magnitude of predominant spatial frequency) compared to those of any other frequencies, and an indication of the grain direction and/or grain direction confidence. Other inherent wood characteristics that may be

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evaluated include, but are not limited to, contrast, density (as obtained by radio wave or x-ray analysis), or wane characteristics.

[0067] Values describing two or more of these features are determined for each cell within both the fine and course grids of the image. Two currently preferred values are grain direction and magnitude of its spatial frequency because these values tend to be fairly insensitive to light intensity and contrast. The actual numbers resulting from the transformation may then be thresholded dynamically to compensate for brightness differences between stations 12 and 42, if desirable. In one example, both grain direction and predominant spatial frequency are allocated numbers between 0 and 255. The collection of the resulting numbers for some or all of the cells for each piece of wood 8 is called a vector file or "image packet."

[0068] Other well-known transformation methods such as wavelet analysis may additionally or alternatively be utilized to render the image data. Some examples of wavelet transforms and their use in image storage and analysis are described in detail in U.S. Pat. No. 5,710,835.

[0069] These techniques take advantage of grain patterns of wood, which like human fingerprints are unique to each individual. In accordance with process blocks 128a and 128b, additional imaging, filtering, and analytical techniques can also be employed for identifying repeating or non-repeating features of each piece of wood 8 and/or modifying image packet for the purpose of characterizing and later identifying a piece of wood 8. These include any characteristics captured or analyzed by the automated processing system or characteristics scanned and analyzed as disclosed in any one of U.S. Patent Nos. 6,757,058; 6,756,789; 5,703,960; 5,644,392; 5,524,771; 5,412,220; 5,254,859; 5,252,836; 4,992,949; 4,926,350; 4,916,629; 4,879,752; 4,867,213; 4,831,545; 4,827,142; 4,606,654; 4,301,373; 4,286,880; 4,221,974; 4,207,472; 4,086,496; or combinations thereof.

[0070] In accordance with process blocks 116 and 118, the image packets are sent to the automated processing system and associated with a wood piece number and sent to the computer 20 that will later perform the identification comparison. In some particular embodiments, the image packets may be save in a first-in/first-out (FIFO) packet queue before they are associated with a wood piece number as indicated in process block 130. The interim solution communication involves the destination and application(s) for the image data once it has been transformed to an

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image packet. Typically, an image packet's destination will be determined by which station 12 or 42 collected the image. If the image data is collected by a station 12 and an initial characterization image packet is created, a sequential wood piece number (WPN) or code is assigned to the image packet, and the information is sent to a computer 20 in communication with a downstream station 42 via the Ethernet connection in accordance with process block 116. In accordance with process block 118, the wood piece number is also made available to the automated processing system so it can relate the wood piece number to its own information about the piece of wood 8. Alternatively, skilled persons will appreciate that the wood piece number could be generated by the automated processing system and communicated to station 12.

[0071] In accordance with decision block 140, the computer 20 associated with station 42 waits to receive the characterization image packet and may store it in a buffer memory in a sequential queue of image packets as indicated in process block 142 to associate it with a wood piece number. In a particular embodiment with reference to FIG. 3, the software at one of the computers 20 waits to receive a wood piece number from the automated processing system in accordance with decision block 150 and saves the wood piece number in a first-in/first-out queue in accordance with process block 152. In accordance with a decision block 154, the software then checks whether a reset has been received from the automated processing system or an operator keyboard. If a reset has been received, then the wood piece number first-in/first-out queue may be reset to zero in accordance with process block 156. If no wood piece number reset is indicated, then the software checks for an image packet reset from the automated processing system or an operator keyboard as indicated in decision block 158. If a reset is indicated, then the image packet queue may be reset to zero as indicated in process block 160. If no reset is indicated, then the software checks to determine whether an image packet is available in accordance with decision block 162.

[0072] If an image packet is available, the software confirms in accordance with decision block 164 that a valid wood piece number is available, and if so, the software assigns the wood piece number from process block 152 to the image packet from process block 130 in accordance with process block 166. The software also transmits the wood piece number to the automated process system and increments the wood piece number queue. Finally, in accordance with process block

168, the software transmits the wood piece number and the image packet to the computer 20 at station 42 and increments the image packet queue.

[0073] If the image packet is collected at station 42 and a downstream or identification image packet is created, the software proceeds with woodprint matching in accordance with process block 144. In one embodiment, the software at a downstream computer checks to determine whether a wood piece number and image packet have been received from station 12 in accordance with decision block 170 and saves this data to a first-in/first out packet queue in accordance with process block 172. Then the software checks for a reset from the automated processing system of an operator keyboard in accordance with process block 174. A reset is performed if indicated in accordance with process block 176, or the upstream characterization image packet is compared to a downstream identification packet as described later in greater detail.

[0074] The downstream image packet is then compared to the available characterization image packets in memory to find a match. The wood piece number and its location in memory allow the software to search forward and backward in a logical fashion to look for the image packets of pieces of wood 8 where they are most likely to be, and then widen so as to find those that have moved out of order. Initial image packets concerning pieces of wood 8 whose identities have already been confirmed by the downstream station 42 can be tagged accordingly or discarded so they do not have to be compared. The matching comparison preferably uses a weighted statistical method to compare a downstream image packet to initial image packets in memory. Typically two or more data values for each cell of an image are compared to corresponding data values of cells in an image packet in memory to look for the numbers to match within a predetermined tolerance. If enough matches are successful for a specified number of cells, a successful piece of wood identity is assumed. If there are not enough matches, then the next image packet in memory is considered. This process continues until a match is found, a time limit is reached, or the availability of untested initial image packets is exhausted.

[0075] In one embodiment, the comparison process may be driven by the expected flow of wood pieces 8. If the wood pieces 8 are expected to stay in order as they travel from one station 12 to one station 42, then it may be reasonable to only confirm that the wood piece 8 arriving at the identification station 42 is the

expected wood piece 8. In a rudimentary embodiment, a simple accept/reject decision might be sufficient and may be obtained by thresholding the results, and a reject result might be sent directly to the automated processing system in accordance with process block 184a and/or examination or intervention by an operator might be requested.

[0076] An exemplary image packet comparison technique described below employs a cell-by-cell comparison scheme that awards points in accordance with the cell test results. The grain direction number from a specific cell derived from the image taken at station 12 is compared to the corresponding cell derived from the image taken at station 42. If the numbers match within a very tight tolerance, such as ± 1 or up to ± 5 , then 3 points are awarded for the test, for example. If they match within a wider tolerance, such as + 6-10, then 2 points are awarded, for example, etc. The numbers representing the magnitudes of the spatial frequencies or other wood piece characteristics can be similarly evaluated.

[0077] If multiple tests, such as for grain direction and frequency magnitude, for a cell achieve 2 or more points, for example, an additional point can be awarded to the cell score. Furthermore, if adjacent cell scores are high, an additional point can be added to the cell score. If the number or vector values of individual cells are low because the original image had very little grain contrast or the imaged area was very irregular, the scores for these cells could also be increased to increase their importance. The total cell scores for each image packet can then be normalized to a 100% scale. The host computer 20 uses the normalized test cell scores to determine if the piece of wood 8 is indeed the same piece of wood seen at both stations 12 and 42. In one embodiment, the normalized test cell scores are converted to an overall confidence level for the piece of wood 8 being identified, and such confidence level may also be affected by the confidence level of the pieces of wood 8 that surround the piece of wood being identified.

[0078] In more advanced embodiments, the process may be designed to automatically recover from a problem. For example, if the identification image packet of the wood piece 8 undergoing identification does not present a high confidence match to the image packet of the expected wood piece 8, then the software may check for the presence of additional image packets in accordance with decision block 186, and an image packet for an opposite or other surface of the expected wood piece 8 may be compared to the identification image packet. If a

high confidence match is still not found, then it is possible that the piece of wood 8 may have gotten out of position by trading places with its neighbor. Then the software may check for the presence of additional image packets in accordance with decision block 186, so a comparison can be done between the expected wood piece's image packet and its neighbor's image packet(s). These multiple-comparison results could be then further compared using probability techniques well known to skilled practitioners to compensate for process particulars. For example, the software may look for and react to changes in confidence level patterns.

[0079] Skilled persons will appreciate that each piece of wood 8 may be associated with two or more image packets if separate packets are desired for each opposite surface or for each face, side, and/or end surface or that each piece of wood 8 may be associated with a single image packet containing characteristic image data for some or all of the wood's surfaces for which an image is collected. The additional image packets associated with each piece of wood 8 can be used for comparison before the image packets concerning other pieces of wood 8 are compared to allow for possibilities of a piece of wood being turned over in its travel between stations 12 and 42. Skilled persons will appreciate that initial and downstream image packets may include data from one or more entire surfaces of a piece of wood 8 or from only portions of one or more surfaces. In some embodiments, stations 12 convert larger portions of wood piece surface images into image packets and stations 42 convert smaller portions of wood piece surface images into image packets. Preferred minimum areas converted into image packets should have sufficient size to reduce inaccurate identifications.

[0080] In alternative embodiments, characteristic information from multiple portions of one or more surfaces can be used to increase the confidence of a correct match and thus improve tracking success. For example, using two portions of a board's surface for matching can be superior to using one portion alone, and three portions more successful than two portions, etc. Similarly, using multiple sensing techniques can improve tracking success. For example, using color content along with grain characteristics can improve tracking success, and this can be accomplished using the same hardware. Another example is that of using a radio frequency sensor to capture dielectric information in combination with a monochrome camera for grain characteristics. Some of the many possible techniques that could be mixed and matched include board geometry, tracheid effect from laser radiation,

moisture content, ultrasonic response, weight, and density patterns from x-ray energy analysis. The addition of any information will have an overall effect of making the identification system more accurate.

[0081] Once a match is, or is not, found, in accordance with decision blocks 180a and 180b, the final solution communication involves making the information available to the automated process system. A successful match is signaled by presenting the matching sequential board number to the automated processing system via Ethernet connection in accordance with process blocks 182a and 182b. A non-match is communicated by presenting a specific failure code in accordance with process blocks 184a and 184b. Additional algorithms can be used to complement those described. Some wood piece surfaces will be darker or offer less contrast. Sometimes these can be enhanced using additional filtering methods. It may be desirable to modify the image processing algorithms by adding other filtering techniques in order to make the system more robust to accommodate such variables. Additional sensor types and image acquisition hardware configurations at both stations 12 and 42 can be implemented along with modifications for processing the image data.

[0082] For example, if the data collected by the image acquisition hardware 16 is presented to the computer 20 or its image collection hardware 18 in a manner inconsistent with existing equipment and processing software, the image processing software can be adapted to integrate with it. As computers continue to evolve, there will be more options available for image processing, communication, and other software tasks. Skilled persons will appreciate that the software will evolve with the computer platform hardware as the resulting architecture or speed and memory enhancements make other software techniques favorable.

[0083] In some embodiments, all or major portions of the image processing software reside in a single computer 20. In other embodiments, all or major portions of the image processing software reside in each computer 20. In yet other embodiments, specific image processing tasks may be allocated to specific computers 20 or spread out over multiple computers 20. In a further embodiment, some computers 20 may contain all or major portions of the image processing software while other computers 20 may perform only minor tasks. Another specific example includes taking the image acquisition and processing tasks that would be done in station 12 and integrating them into a scanning system that acquires wood

piece images for other purposes. The scanning system would produce the image packet information along with its own tasks and either keep such information for later comparison to the downstream identification images, or pass the image packets along to station 42 with a sequential wood piece number.

[0084] In systems with a single computer 20, the image acquisition hardware 16 from both stations 12 and 42 are connected directly or indirectly to the computer 20 and processed with the image processing software installed on the computer 20. This computer 20 would also be connected to the production equipment and possibly other computers 20. Additional cabling configurations are possible that connect the computer 20 with a separate image collection/processing system.

[0085] In addition, preferred embodiments employ quality control components that can be incorporated into or communicate with pre-existing active self-checking capabilities of existing systems, such that if the system fails, very few boards could pass before a problem is discovered.

[0086] An exemplary application of the Boardprint™ technology is described below in the context of a system used to automatically grade wood pieces 8 in a planer mill. The wood pieces 8 are graded boards that vary in thickness and width from 2.5 x 10 centimeters to 5 x 30 centimeters (1 x 4 inches to 2 x 12 inches) and vary in length from 2.4 to 6 meters (8 to 20 feet) long. The boards are kiln dried and pass through a grading system during the planning, trimming, and sorting process. The grading system determines the board grade based on rules applied to geometric and biological characteristics of the boards. Those familiar with the industry will know that there are many lumber grade rule sets that depend on the specie and end use of the material, and some of these grade rule sets are designated for products such as Dimension, Shop, Boards, Timbers, Decking, Stringers, and Machine Stress-Rated lumber. Several organizations exist that describe and authorize the use of different grade rules, and many lumber producers use a combination of standard grade rules as well as define their own custom grades based on customer demand. Two of the most well recognized authorities in this industry are the American Lumber Standards and the Canadian Lumber Standards.

[0087] The boards travel through a planer at lineal speeds averaging 47 meters/minute (1800 feet/min.), immediately pass through the grading scanner, and land on a deck from where chains transport the boards as they are oriented in a transverse direction. At this stage in the process, the boards are not completely

controlled, and do not necessarily stay in queue. After a few seconds, the boards are physically separated into the individual sections of a lugged chain. It is then desirable to match a board identity with the information collected at the grading scanner because the board will next be trimmed and sorted into a package by automated equipment. Accordingly, a station 42 is preferably located at a position where boards can be identified before they are trimmed and sorted.

[0088] When a board passes through the grading scanner, several small halogen lamps can be used to provide lighting for line scan cameras to collect image data for the top wide faces 30 and optionally the bottom wide faces 30 of the board. Skilled persons will appreciate, however, that preferred embodiments take advantage of existing multiple-sided scanners at station 12 to collect data from the bottom and other surfaces, so that at station 42 bottom face scanning can be omitted. This embodiment avoids the costs of adapting and positioning a scanning system to accommodate the limited openings that the steel structure provides between chains, chain races, and supports in order through which a picture of a board bottom can be obtained downstream of station 12.

[0089] The board position may be tracked lineally as it travels through the scan zone at station 12 using an encoder. However, in preferred embodiments, the board is allowed to "float" perpendicularly (sideways) to the direction of travel because the image processing is capable of finding the edges of the board and ignoring the background. This floating allows the system to be more forgiving of miss-shaped boards as it does not require the use of side rolls or anvils to guide the boards. Also, by not forcing the board to assume a specific shape, preferred embodiments at stations 12 and 24 allow the boards to be fully relaxed so the normalization steps can produce similar results to facilitate a higher likelihood that the board will indicate a match when it arrives at station 24.

[0090] The data is collected by one or more of a set of computers 20 containing hardware and software for controlling the acquisition and data collection process, and the board is assigned a sequential board number. The primary use of the image data is for grading the board, however, one or more portions of the image data are also processed in the computer 20 for its Boardprint™ information. This means that the data be warped for size and orientation, FFT values will be generated, the resulting data will be adjusted to compensate for brightness; and the data will be placed in the vector image packet. The image packet is then sent to a host

computer 20 where it is stored for the matching process later. This image packet contains information for both the top and bottom wide faces 30 of the board, plus the sequential board number. The sequence number and image data for this board is sent to one of the computers 20, each computer 20 preferably containing the same hardware and software dedicated to image processing. The next board that is scanned will be assigned the next number in sequence and its image data is passed to another one of the computers 20.

[0091] After the board finally gets singulated onto the lugged chain, the automatic processing system controlling the production line activates a camera at the identification station 42 and an image is acquired of the top face 30 of the board, which may be oriented transversely to the direction of travel 6. The position of board can be preferably controlled in two ways. The end of the board can be brought up against a fixed fence using a set of canted or lobed rolls under the board before the board gets to the camera. This even-ending process ensures that the board image position is reasonably well guaranteed to be taken at the same position along the length of the board for every board. Additionally, an encoder tracks the lugged chain and thus the transverse position of the board is known well enough to reliably be used to activate the camera to acquire the image. The encoder is physically connected to the lugged chain and provides signals to the automatic processing system allowing it to follow any movement of the lugged chain. The lugged chain position is therefore known, from which the board position is assumed and used for triggering the camera.

[0092] The camera sends the image data via Fire Wire serial format to an external conversion device where the signal is converted to a fiber optic medium and sent to a dedicated board print™ computer 20. When it arrives at the computer 20, external hardware converts the data back to Fire Wire serial format and stores the information in a circular buffer. Software in the computer 20 pulls it out of the buffer and processes it as previously described with an additional step of reorienting the image. Then, the computer 20 relays the data to the host computer 20 via an Ethernet connection for the comparison as previously described.

[0093] The host computer 20 compares the vector image packet just received from the station 42 with the image packets from eleven boards for example, such as five boards in the queue ahead of this board, and five boards after this board. Skilled persons will appreciate that the finite number in such grouping for this or

other embodiments may be changed as desirable for statistical purposes, processing time constraints, application particulars, or other variables. An exemplary alternative number may include ten pieces of wood 8 up and/or downstream, or different numbers of boards upstream and downstream, such five boards upstream and ten boards downstream. Comparison steps are employed as previously described except as modified by the specific embodiment hereinafter described.

[0094] Once the comparison scores are generated, the host computer 20 the host computer 20 may attempt to match the queue that passed through the scanning station 42 with the queue that passed through station 12. If the board score for the expected match is equal or higher than the scores for the adjacent boards, it is considered a match. In some embodiments, the comparison scores between the board at station 42 and the nearest expected 20 boards in the queue from station 12 are compared and the highest score determines the most likely order. This scoring scheme can result in re-labeling of the order of the queue at station 42. The technique can cause rejection of board matches that score below a specified threshold, and can also look backward to reevaluate boards, just in case a better sequence becomes evident. This self-correction capability can accommodate most cases of missing boards as well as boards that break. The matching criteria can also be set to reject boards that are introduced at station 42 that have not passed through station 12, when the scores are low enough.

[0095] In some exemplary embodiments, if the board score for the expected match is up to 20% lower than the scores for any adjacent boards, then the board is considered a match. However, a probability weighting may require that the next board have at least a 10% higher score than that of adjacent boards or be rejected. If the board score for the expected match is more than 20% lower than scores for the adjacent boards, both boards are rejected. Once three boards are rejected in a row, the program will automatically adjust to realign the queue. The software does this using data from the last three board comparisons to determine whether there is a trend for one specific board position that is higher than or equal to the scores for adjacent boards as described above. If no trend can be detected in the ten adjacent positions, the host computer 20 instructs the automatic processing system to stop the material flow so the boards can be manually sorted by an operator.

[0096] In some applications there will be pieces of wood 8 that have not passed through station 12 but appear at station 42. In many cases these pieces of wood 8

will be manually graded, so this information is preferably passed to the Boardprint™ system so as to reduce the risk that a piece of wood 8 will be rejected, or possibly misidentified. The automatic processing system may first learn of such piece of wood 8 at some point in the process that may even be after the piece of wood 8 has already passed through station 42. The automatic processing system preferably sends such information to the computer 20 and the computer 20 then identifies the piece of wood 8 as a special case so it's comparison scores will be exempt from further processing. This capability makes the system much more robust in cases where a large percentage of pieces of wood 8 regularly bypass station 12.

[0097] Once an identity decision is made, the host computer 20 transmits the corresponding sequential number and relevant process information (grade and trim decision) to the automatic processing system so it can trim and sort the board accordingly.

[0098] In some embodiments a piece of wood 8 may be processed, affecting its length or even its surface before reaching station 42. In some examples, the processing does not significantly affect grain characteristics, such as planing or sanding processes, so that various grain characteristics can still be employed in the identification process. In other examples, the piece of wood 8 is trimmed to a different length between station 12 and station 42. As long as the same areas of the piece of wood 8 are used for data capture at both stations and as long as enough surface area remains with which to effect a matching identification, the wood pieces 8 can still be tracked.

[0099] In yet another embodiment, a grading system or the automated processing system determines a cutting solution for the pieces of wood 8 that recommends that they be cut into multiple smaller pieces of wood. The image characterization system collects or sorts image data such that an image packet is created for each of the forecast smaller pieces. Skilled persons will appreciate that some embodiments may not provide image packets for all forecast pieces of wood 8. An identification station can create image packets for the recommended multiple smaller pieces of wood after they are cut to confirm the identity of some or all of them.

[00100] Skilled persons will appreciate that variations in size, materials, shape, form, function, manner of operation, assembly, and use may impact optimum dimensional and positioning relationships, hardware components, software applications, and system connectivity.

[00101] It will be obvious to those having skill in the art that many changes may be made to the details of the above-described embodiments without departing from the underlying principles of the invention. The scope of the present invention should, therefore, be determined only by the following claims.

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CLAIMS:

1. A method for tracking multiple pieces of wood, each piece of wood having multiple surfaces and at least an end surface, while inhibiting misidentification of wood having received an alteration to its end surface, the method comprising:
 - 5 obtaining first inherent wood characteristic information from at least a first portion of at least a first surface of each of the multiple pieces of wood as they move through a first station, the multiple pieces of wood including a first piece of wood, and the first portion including a first area that is located away from the end surface that is positioned to be altered in its appearance at a time after the first
10 inherent wood characteristic information is obtained;
 - converting at least some of the first inherent wood characteristic information concerning the first area for each of the multiple pieces of wood into respective first data packets;
 - obtaining, based on a location of the end surface, second inherent
15 wood characteristic information from at least the first area of each of the multiple pieces of wood as they move through a second station so that the second inherent wood characteristic information is free from effects of alterations;
 - converting at least some of the second inherent wood characteristic information for the multiple pieces of wood into respective second data packets; and
20 comparing a second data packet to a first data packet of the first piece of wood to make a first evaluation of similarity between the first and second data packets to determine whether a given piece of wood that has traveled through the second station is the first piece of wood.
 2. The method of claim 1 in which the first area is located at least two feet
25 away from the end surface.
 3. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

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obtaining third inherent wood characteristic information from at least a second portion of at least the first surface of each of the multiple pieces of wood as they move through the first station, the multiple pieces of wood including the first piece of wood, the second portion including a second area that is located away from the end surface, and the second area being different from the first area;

converting at least some of the third inherent wood characteristic information concerning the second area for each of the multiple pieces of wood into respective third data packets;

obtaining fourth inherent wood characteristic information from at least the second area of each of the multiple pieces of wood, including the first piece of wood, as they move through the second station;

converting at least some of the fourth inherent wood characteristic information for the multiple pieces of wood into respective fourth data packets;

comparing a fourth data packet to a third data packet of the first piece of wood to make a second evaluation of similarity between the third and fourth data packets; and

using the first and second evaluations to determine whether a given piece of wood that has traveled through the second station is the first piece of wood.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein:

the step of obtaining first inherent wood characteristic information comprises capturing a first image of at least the first area of each of multiple primary pieces of wood as they travel across the first station, wherein the multiple primary pieces of wood being the multiple pieces of wood moving through the first station;

the step of converting at least some of the first inherent wood characteristic information comprises:

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dividing the first areas into respective similar first virtual arrays of respective multiple first corresponding cells; and

5 assigning for some or all of the multiple first corresponding cells one or more characteristic values based on an inherent wood surface characteristic as it appears in the respective multiple first corresponding cells;

the step of obtaining second inherent wood characteristic information comprises capturing a second image of at least the first area of a secondary piece of wood as it travels across the second station, the secondary piece of wood being one of the multiple primary pieces of wood moving through the second station;

10 the step of converting at least some of the second inherent wood characteristic information comprises:

dividing the first area of the secondary piece of wood into a second virtual array of multiple second corresponding cells corresponding to respective similar multiple first corresponding cells; and

15 assigning for some or all of the multiple second corresponding cells a characteristic value based on the inherent wood surface characteristic as it appears in the respective multiple second corresponding cells; and

the step of comparing a second data packet to a first data packet comprises:

20 comparing the characteristic value of the inherent wood surface characteristic for some or all of the multiple second corresponding cells to the characteristic value of the inherent wood surface characteristic for some or all of the corresponding multiple first corresponding cells associated with any given primary piece of wood; and

25 determining whether a sufficient number of the respective multiple first and second corresponding cells have sufficiently similar characteristic values to

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indicate that the secondary piece of wood and the given primary piece of wood are the same or have sufficiently different characteristic values to indicate that the secondary piece of wood and the given primary piece of wood are different.

5. The method of claim 1 in which the inherent wood characteristic information is obtained from an image and in which the data packets comprise only a portion of the data available from the image.
6. The method of claim 1 in which the multiple pieces of wood each have at least first and second surfaces and the inherent wood characteristic information is obtained from both the first and second surfaces, and in which the inherent wood characteristic information of only either one of the first or second surfaces of the multiple pieces of wood is obtained at the second station to uniquely identify the multiple pieces of wood at the second station.
7. The method of claim 1 in which the first station includes a first light source and a first image sensor, in which the second station includes a second light source and a second image sensor, in which the steps of converting employ characterization software in communication with the image sensors, and in which the step of comparing employs processing circuitry including comparison software in communication with the characterization software to create comparison scores of the second data packets with respect to the first data packets.
8. The method of claim 3 in which the inherent wood characteristic information is obtained from an image and in which the data packets comprise only a portion of the data available from the image.
9. The method of claim 3 in which the inherent wood characteristic information comprises at least one of grain frequency magnitude, grain direction, or grain direction confidence.
10. The method of claim 3 in which the multiple pieces of wood comprise at least one of the following: timber, lumber, log, flitch, cant, beam, post, stud, or board.

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11. The method of claim 3 in which the multiple pieces of wood are unsurfaced.
12. The method of claim 3 in which the multiple pieces of wood are uncured.
- 5 13. The method of claim 3 in which the multiple pieces of wood each have at least first and second surfaces and the inherent wood characteristic information is obtained from both the first and second surfaces, and in which the inherent wood characteristic information of only either one of the first or second surfaces of the multiple pieces of wood is obtained at the second station to uniquely identify the
10 multiple pieces of wood at the second station.
14. The method of claim 3 further comprising cutting multiple pieces of wood into distinct first and second smaller pieces of wood after the first and third inherent wood characteristic information are obtained and before the second and fourth inherent wood characteristic information are obtained wherein the first and
15 second inherent wood characteristic information are obtained from the first smaller pieces of wood and the third and fourth inherent wood characteristic information are obtained from the second smaller pieces of wood.
15. The method of claim 1 further comprising altering the appearance of multiple pieces of wood after the first inherent wood characteristic information is
20 obtained and before the second inherent wood characteristic information is obtained.
16. The method of claim 1 further comprising employing image processing software to find an edge of the first surface.
17. A method for tracking multiple pieces of wood, each piece of wood having multiple surfaces, by providing unconstricted transport of wood pieces
25 undergoing surface characterization, the method comprising:

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moving multiple pieces of wood in a first direction of travel through a first station in a manner that permits the multiple pieces of wood to move in a direction transverse to the first direction of travel;

5 obtaining first inherent wood characteristic information from at least a first portion of at least a first surface of each of the multiple pieces of wood as they move through the first station while automatically compensating for movement in the direction transverse to the first direction of travel, the multiple pieces of wood including a first piece of wood;

10 converting at least some of the first inherent wood characteristic information concerning the first portion for each of the multiple pieces of wood into respective first data packets;

obtaining second inherent wood characteristic information from at least the first portion of each of the multiple pieces of wood, including the first piece of wood, as they move through a second station;

15 converting at least some of the second inherent wood characteristic information for the multiple pieces of wood into respective second data packets; and

20 comparing a second data packet to a first data packet of the first piece of wood to make a first evaluation of similarity between the first and second data packets to determine whether a given piece of wood that has traveled through the second station is the first piece of wood.

18. The method of claim 17, further comprising moving multiple pieces of wood in a second direction of travel through the second station in a manner that permits the multiple pieces of wood to move in a direction transverse to the second direction of travel.

25 19. The method of claim 17 in which the multiple pieces of wood travel through the first station with their lineal axis in a first orientation with respect to the first direction of travel through the first station and in which the multiple pieces of

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wood travel through the second station with their lineal axis in a second orientation with respect to the second direction of travel through the second station, the first and second orientations being transverse.

20. The method of claim 18 in which the multiple pieces of wood travel
5 through the first station with their lineal axis in a first orientation with respect to the first direction of travel through the first station and in which the multiple pieces of wood travel through the second station with their lineal axis in a second orientation with respect to the second direction of travel through the second station, the first and second orientations being transverse.

10 21. The method of claim 17 in which the inherent wood characteristic information is obtained from an image and in which the data packets comprise only a portion of the data available from the image.

22. The method of claim 17, wherein:

15 the step of obtaining first inherent wood characteristic information comprises capturing a first image of at least the first portion of each of multiple primary pieces of wood as they travel across the first station, wherein the multiple primary pieces of wood being the multiple pieces of wood moving through the first station;

20 the step of converting at least some of the first inherent wood characteristic information comprises:

dividing the first portions into respective similar first virtual arrays of respective multiple first corresponding cells; and

25 assigning for some or all of the multiple first corresponding cells one or more characteristic values based on an inherent wood surface characteristic as it appears in the respective multiple first corresponding cells;

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the step of obtaining second inherent wood characteristic information comprises capturing a second image of at least the second portion of a secondary piece of wood as it travels across the second station, the secondary piece of wood being one of the multiple primary pieces of wood moving through the second station;

5 the step of converting at least some of the second inherent wood characteristic information comprises:

dividing the second portion into a second virtual array of multiple second corresponding cells corresponding to respective similar multiple first corresponding cells; and

10 assigning for some or all of the multiple second corresponding cells a characteristic value based on the inherent wood surface characteristic as it appears in the respective multiple second corresponding cells; and

the step of comparing a second data packet to a first data packet comprises:

15 comparing the characteristic value of the inherent wood surface characteristic for some or all of the multiple second corresponding cells to the characteristic value of the inherent wood surface characteristic for some or all of the corresponding multiple first corresponding cells associated with any given primary piece of wood; and

20 determining whether a sufficient number of the respective multiple first and second corresponding cells have sufficiently similar characteristic values to indicate that the secondary piece of wood and the given primary piece of wood are the same or have sufficiently different characteristic values to indicate that the secondary piece of wood and the given primary piece of wood are different.

25 23. The method of claim 17 in which the multiple pieces of wood each have at least first and second surfaces and the inherent wood characteristic information is obtained from both the first and second surfaces, and in which the inherent wood

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characteristic information of only either one of the first or second surfaces of the multiple pieces of wood is obtained at the second station to uniquely identify the multiple pieces of wood at the second station.

24. The method of claim 17 further comprising altering the appearance of
5 multiple pieces of wood after the first inherent wood characteristic information is obtained and before the second inherent wood characteristic information is obtained.

25. The method of claim 17 further comprising employing image processing software to find an edge of the first surface.

26. The method of claim 17 in which the multiple pieces of wood are
10 surfaced.

27. The method of claim 17 in which the multiple pieces of wood are cured.

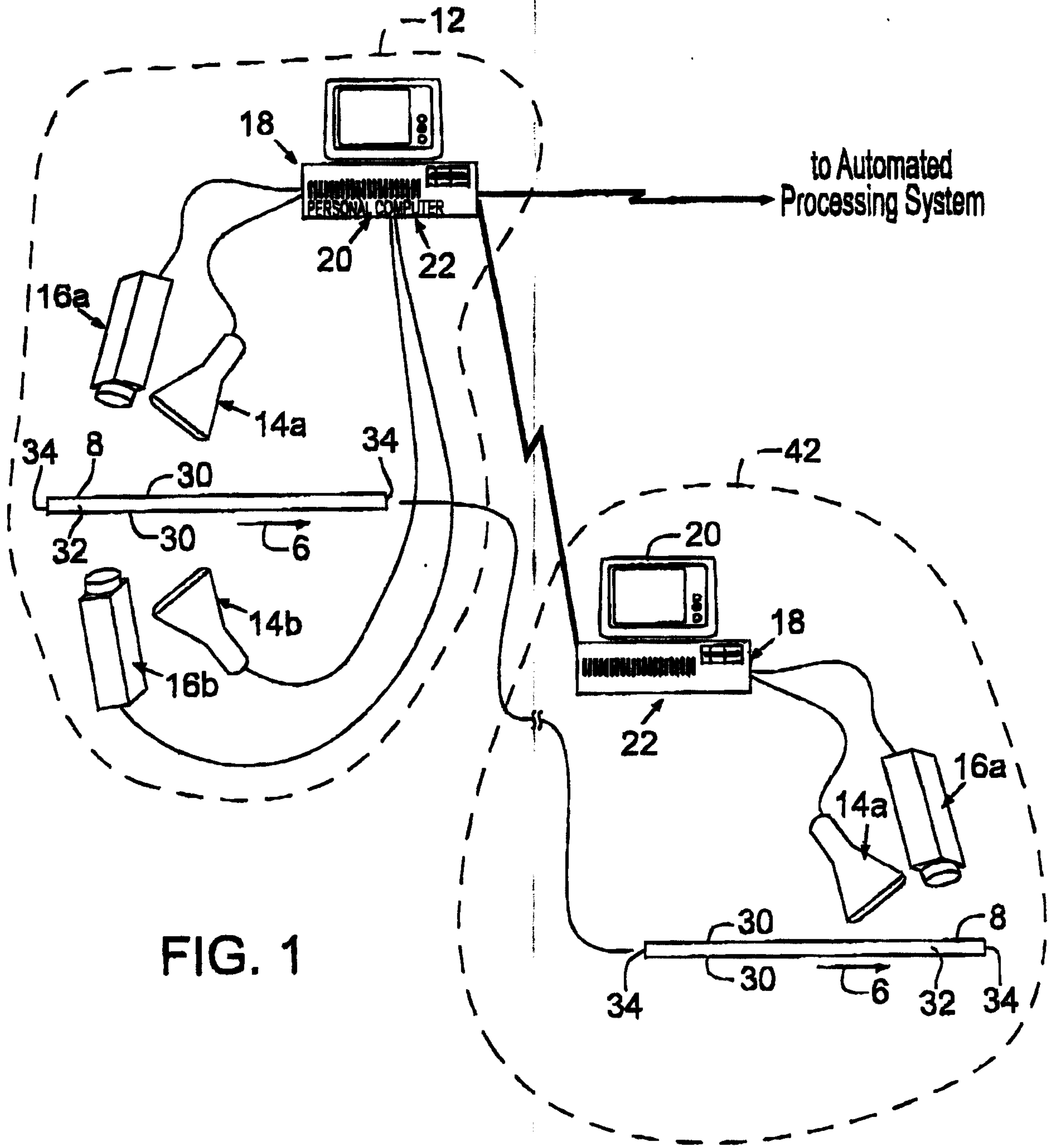


FIG. 1

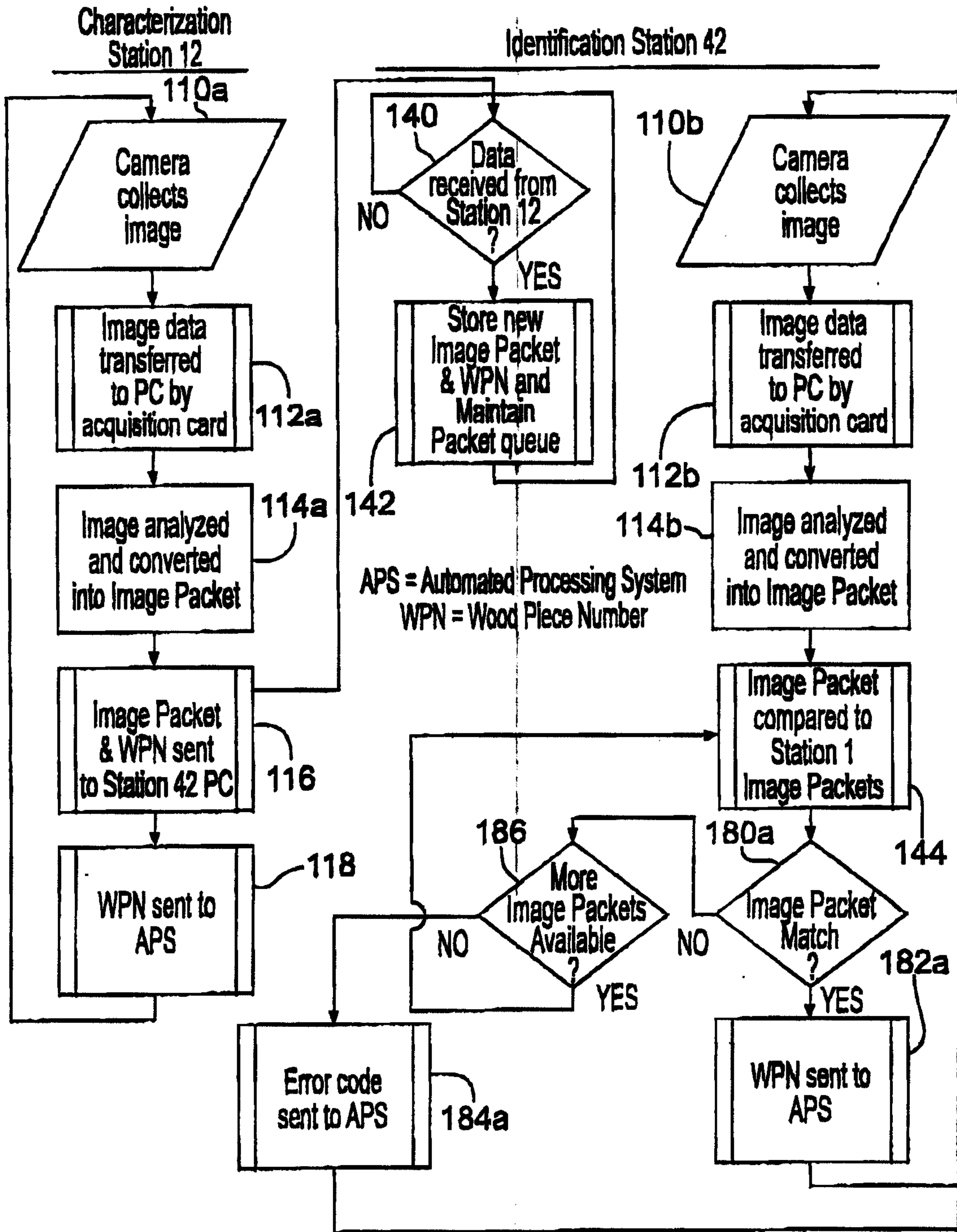


FIG. 2

Characterization
Station 12

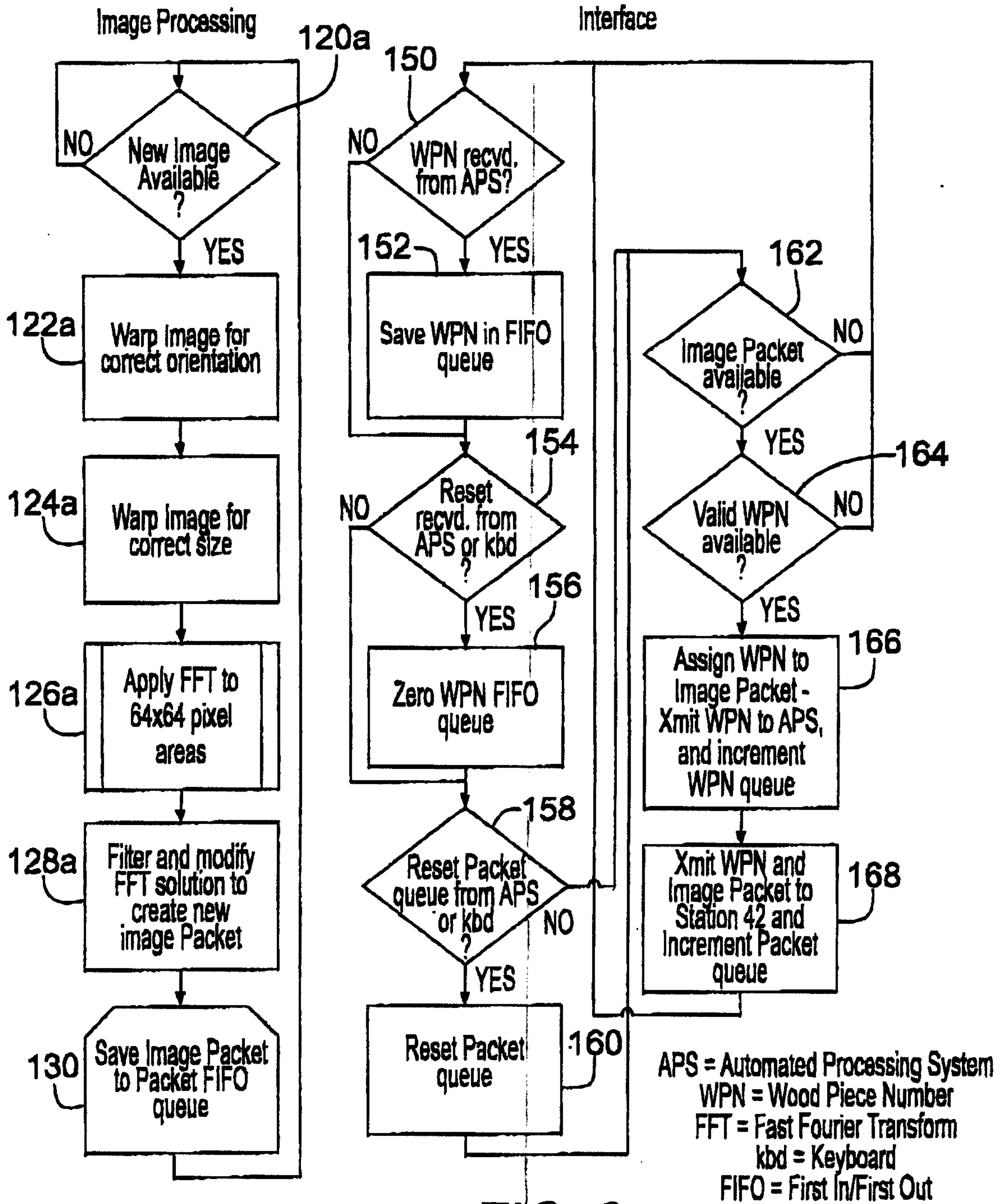


FIG. 3

Station 42

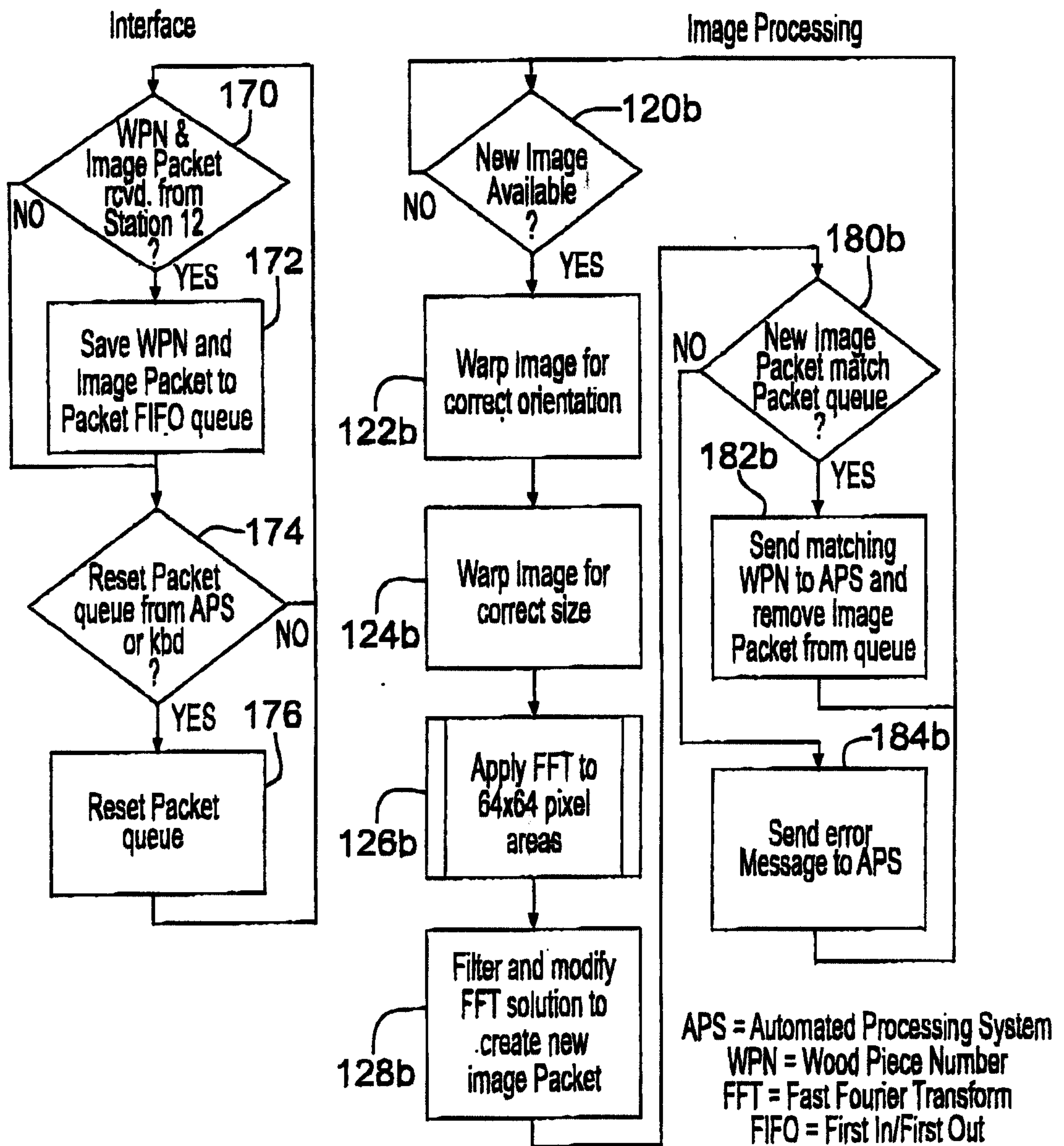


FIG. 4

