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Running their own show

The Robichaud brothers—Quebecers who moved to Alberta—have finally achieved ownership of their own contract logging operation after years of running iron.

By Tony Kryzanowski

Alberta loggers Robert and Richard Robichaud will tell you that sometimes it feels like they just won the lottery. By taking a few risks and being at the right place at the right time, they've been able to fulfill their dream of purchasing an established logging company that operates year round, and within a reasonable distance from their families.

"I've been really far from home in places like the Northwest Territories, the Yukon, Fort Nelson and Fort McMurray all of my life," says Richard. "I'd usually leave in September and come back in April when the season was done. I think I'm pretty lucky now to find a place to log that's close to home."



Despite working in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, Westbound Logging is fortunate to be logging on relatively level ground.

From humble roots working with their father in Quebec—first with horses, then with chainsaws and cable skidders, and finally with mechanized logging equipment—the brothers recently purchased the forest equipment assets of Danny Hall Contracting.

The company they've founded is Westbound Logging Ltd, and they have also signed a highly desirable stump-todump logging contract with Edson-based Sundance Forest Industries. Home is just a couple hours away in St Albert.

Their company is harvesting and transporting 290,000 cubic metres—primarily lodgepole

pine—for Sundance Forest Industries from an area within the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains. They transport about 45 loads a day. For the time being, the area is still free of the mountain pine beetle.

Robert and Richard Robichaud moved to Alberta 14 years ago from Joliette, Quebec, knowing little more than how to answer “yes” and “no” in English. Being experienced equipment operators, however, they let their skills do the talking. The two brothers started out with a company called Rock Lake Enterprises, harvesting aspen for Alberta Pacific Forest Industries (Al-Pac).

They operated one of the first Tigercat 860 feller bunchers put to work in Alberta, and astounded Al-Pac with how much wood they were capable of harvesting per shift. Richard worked the day shift and Robert worked the night shift. They left Al-Pac and went to work harvesting wood in the Northwest Territories in areas only accessible by helicopter, making way for eventual roads. Their production was so unbelievable that the superintendent at the time insisted on surveying the area for himself before authorizing the contractor

payment.

The brothers then moved to Fort Nelson, BC to operate equipment and to look for a logging contract so that they could start their own business. However, only seasonal logging contracts were available. They were concerned that they’d lose too many operators and have to replace them every year.

Logger Danny Hall lured them back to Alberta, and for five years they worked for him before all the pieces fell into place—they purchased the company in May 2007. The prospect of being able to operate almost year round is what made the purchase of Danny Hall Contracting attractive to them.

They have purchased some of Danny Hall’s equipment but have also invested in a lot of new equipment. The brothers are strong believers in operating newer equipment whenever possible and replacing it on a regular basis once they achieve high operational

hours.

Unlike other logging contractors, Westbound Logging does not conduct major equipment overhauls during spring break-up, but instead focuses on keeping the equipment operating as much as possible and maintaining it on a regular basis throughout the year. Their method is to use their newest feller bunchers, skidders and processors to the maximum, and to keep older units for back-up to keep their operating hours down and to avoid expensive

downtime.

Given their forestry experience, Richard says arranging financing wasn’t a major issue. “When you ask for financing at the bank, they mostly look at how well you know the business,” he says. It also helped that Danny Hall was a long time contractor with Sundance Forest Industries and that the sawmill also has an established history.

At 47, Richard is older than Robert by 10 years and looks after the financial aspects and paperwork of the business. Robert spends most of his time in the cutblock ensuring that the harvesting, processing, and log delivery runs like clockwork.

Westbound Logging uses mostly John Deere equipment because of the sales, parts, and service support they have received from Brandt Equipment. “They are really behind us,” says Richard. “When we have a machine down, they will ship another machine the next day. All I have to do is deliver my low-bed.”



Richard (left) and Robert Robichaud earned their stripes working in some of Canada's toughest logging environments before finally achieving a dream, and purchasing a logging company

Their fleet consists of two John Deere 903 feller bunchers with FS22 harvesting heads and Loewen wrist attachments. Robert says this attachment gives the heads about 350-degree rotation, and is particularly handy for careful wood placement particularly along cutblock boundaries. The John Deere 903 feller buncher incorporates the undercarriage design and size of the old Timberjack 950 with the upper car body design of the old

Timberjack 850. So it has the rugged undercarriage of the larger feller buncher and the lighter weight of the smaller feller buncher car body.

The company uses three John Deere 748 GIII skidders and a Tigercat 625C grapple skidder with six-wheel drive to deliver wood to roadside. They use this skidder for longer skids and to reduce environmental damage because it has better flotation. They process logs using three John Deere 2054 carriers with Waratah 622B attachments.

As they are a stump-to-dump contractor, Westbound Logging also operates two John Deere 2554 log loaders with IMAC butt 'n top attachments. For road building and maintenance, the company has two John Deere 230 LC backhoes, a John Deere 772CH grader, and a Komatsu D85 dozer. They've also purchased three new Paystar 500 International trucks. The remaining logging trucks are contracted out. To manage and monitor log delivery, they have purchased the Logger Tracker computer program from BCS Woodlands Software.

In addition to providing stump-to-dump services, Westbound Logging also scarifies cutblocks in preparation for reforestation. When in full operation, they have 40 employees.

There are many differences and advantages to logging in the sandy loam landscape of Alberta versus the Canadian Shield environment of Quebec, says Richard. For example, there is a lot less wear and tear on equipment. It is sometimes necessary to conduct major repairs or replace a feller buncher in Quebec after 2,000 hours, whereas in Alberta, equipment can often operate efficiently for up to 10,000 hours.

Road building is a lot easier in Alberta because there isn't the rock and hilly environment to contend with. Despite being within view of the mountains, Richard adds that they are fortunate that the terrain where they are logging does not have a lot of steep hills. The logs are bigger and longer in Alberta, which was another reason to relocate to the West in the first place.

"We also don't pay as much tax on our paycheque as we did working in Quebec," says Robert.

Another major expense that Westbound Logging has avoided is having to frequently move camps and equipment. An established camp was included in the assets of Danny Hall Contracting, and its location will remain intact for at least another year or two.

Richard says the situation with a 20 per cent reduction in the annual allowable cut in Quebec

comes as no surprise to him. He says that as a young 18-year-old working in the province's forest industry, he knew of discussions that took place between forestry officials warning government forest ministry employees about the danger of not paying enough attention to reforestation. Forest company officials predicted then that a 20 to 25 per cent annual cut reduction would be necessary without immediate action. However, the excuse was always lack of money, and unfortunately the warning from the forest industry came true.



Westbound Logging has two John Deere 903 feller bunchers with FS22 harvesting heads and Loewen wrist attachments. The attachment gives the heads about 350-degree rotation and is especially handy for careful wood placement, particularly along cutblock boundaries.

Richard frequently gets phone calls from experienced francophone operators looking for work out West. He says being bilingual is a definite advantage when hiring employees—they've hired employees from all across Canada.

Despite the booming Alberta economy, Westbound Logging has no difficulty attracting workers, but they are particular in who they hire.

“Because of our experience operating equipment, that gives us an advantage when we hire operators,” says Richard. “We can tell the difference between those who talk about operating the equipment and those who can actually do it.” They have several long-term

employees who appreciate the stability of a regular paycheque. Richard says he knows from experience that a regular paycheque is not always guaranteed in the volatile oil and gas industry.

“Some people look for the big money and don't want to work too much, and some people prefer to work all year round and have some kind of budget,” he says. Realizing that employees come from different parts of the country and often have families, Westbound Logging is very flexible in negotiating work schedules with them.

Given the state of the forest industry in Canada, there are a lot of complaints being voiced by logging contractors about the inability to negotiate better contract rates. However, after working so long for other contractors, Richard and Robert Robichaud are very happy to have the opportunity to finally have a business they can call their own and structure it in such a way that it fits both their business and personal needs.

