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Logging Legacy

Brown Brothers Construction, still going strong five generations later

By Barbara Coyner



Luke (left) and Matt Brown, 5th generation Idaho loggers, take a break from operating the Madill stroke delimeter and John Deere loader, at a logging site near Prairie, Idaho

The hour-long trip between Boise and Prairie, Idaho, has special meaning for Emmett logging contractor Tim Brown and his family. Tim's great grandparents settled this same rugged country. In fact, in 1901 his great grandfather lost his life in a sawmill accident here, and in 1909, his grandparents Timothy and Lona Brown were the first couple married on the prairie. Now Tim, his brother John, and Tim's three sons are back in the area, logging state land for Boise Building Solutions (previously Boise Cascade).

100 Years Strong

"We've come a long way in 100 years," says Tim, who primarily does sale layout and fills in wherever needed for the family logging business. "My great grandfather used to ski for three days to Atlanta [Idaho] to pick up winter work in the mines, when he wasn't working here. Then he would ski back out in the spring."

While some things have changed, the logging legacy hasn't changed in the Brown family. "I am a fourth generation Idaho logger," says Tim, who earned a business degree from Boise State University. "And my boys are fifth generation Idaho loggers. I started working in the woods at 13, and started my own boys out early, too, pulling straw line, bumping knots, and running skidder. I wanted them to know the basics and how to work hard, so they'd have more

empathy for others working the different jobs.”

Harvesting through the Decades

With a crew of around 25, Tim and his brother, John, carry on the company started in 1960, by their dad, “Bus” Brown, and his brothers. Harvesting approximately 25 million board feet of timber per year, the company operates two skyline sides and a mechanical side.

Sister Chris Coxe is their accountant. Tim’s three sons are no strangers to the work ethic — Matt, 28, Luke, 27, and Jake, 25, all opted for woods work. “We were taught to work, and it was always work before play,” says Luke, who is married and the father of three boys. “It gets in your blood.”

Tackling loader chores, Luke pilots a two-year-old John Deere 2054 loader, working in tandem with Matt on the Madill stroke delimber, which is now in its third season. The state sale is mostly ponderosa pine. Operating the 2054 for the third year now, Luke likes the added power and the smoothness and stability of the high, wide undercarriage, as compared to the John Deere 690 he operated before. Meanwhile, Matt has assumed the position of “floater” on the crew and currently takes the controls of the stroke delimber. For Matt, the Madill offers more power than other delimiters he’s dealt with.

“It’s a lot faster and easy to get used to,” says Matt. And although he likes the variety of the floater position, he says tong throwing is his favorite job, one that takes some practice to get the accuracy. “It’s not an easy deal, and it’s a whole different concept than loading logs.”



Elden Hoxie shows his skills with throwing the tongs, as the Thunderbird yarder works the steep slopes below (Prairie, Idaho) Tackling the Steep Slopes

Because of the steep terrain, Brown Brothers relies on a variety of machines to do a good job and meet Idaho Forest Practices standards. Sawing duties fall to company sawyer Craig Benesch and a Montana contract cutting crew working under Alan Smith. On this particular day, Tim’s youngest son, Jake, has stepped away from his usual spot on the 527 skid Cat to hook for tong thrower, Elden Hoxie, who’s running a new Kobelco. Hoxie has been throwing tongs for three years and likes the challenge. He also has kind words for the Kobelco, outfitted with a Jewell boom. “This machine is a lot smoother and nicer, and the boom’s longer,” says Hoxie, stressing the importance of boom length when throwing tongs. “I ran the old 690 before and couldn’t get the heel rack out of the way. I would come around and loop the boom and catch the corner of the track with the cable. If you’re throwing tongs, you want to clear that track.”

Maintenance is a Must

Preferring newer equipment, Tim says the company makes a point of keeping machines clean and fully maintained. “You might say we’re anal about it,” he adds. The fastidious maintenance has paid off, as best illustrated by the company’s die-hard 17-year-old Thunderbird TSY 355 swing yarder, bought new in 1990. Thanks to steady maintenance and fresh paint, the yarder looks brand new. The machine is anchored with carbon filament rope rather than cable, and Tim cites the lightness and durability of the rope as reasons for preferring it to traditional cable.

He says crews have an easier time moving the machine with the lighter, more flexible ropes.

With Wayne DeWalt at the controls, the yarder is perhaps the centerpiece of the Prairie operation. DeWalt, part of the team since 1989, has handled skidding, tong throwing, and loading duties. He's been on the Thunderbird for about five years and likes the machine's dependability and ease of set-up, plus he says it's fast. Brown Brothers chose Eagle carriages for their high quality and also because Scotty Baker and his crew are located close by, at La Grande, Ore. DeWalt has high praise for the Eagle Mark IV. "It's remarkably dependable and durable as heck. There's no weak point on them and even the electronics are tough."

Brown also utilizes a two-year-old John Deere 2554 stroke delimeter, a trusty 1990-era Koehring 6640 loader, and a Timbco 445 feller buncher — he figures he has good flexibility for the steep terrain at the Prairie site. Until 10 years ago, the company ran its own fleet of trucks, but now it contracts with 16 gypo truckers for the long trips to the Boise mills at La Grande and Elgin, Ore. With a second skyline yarding operation currently at Council, Idaho, Tim's brother, John, takes the helm of the Cat 322 stroke delimeter. The company relies on a Thunderbird 6140 yarder there, matched with an Eaglet carriage.



Wayne DeWalt, operator on the Thunderbird yarder.

Staying in the Game For Tim Brown, it's easy to pinpoint how the family stays busy in southern Idaho, given the Northwest timber industry's decline. "We figured out that to stay in the game, you have to be the better loggers," he says.

He cites good crewmembers as the main component, noting that the longer commutes to the workplace make family life more difficult for the crew. Usually crewmembers camp out at an RV park at Prairie, working four 11-hour days and a shortened Friday. Tim's son, Matt, finds the tight supply of good workers to be the biggest challenge for the younger generation as they assume more

management chores. "It's harder and harder to get people to work in this line. It seems most of our crew is more my dad's age. It's just not easy getting people who will work away from home all week." Despite labor challenges, the company manages to recruit long-term crewmembers that still respect and practice the work ethic. Another big ace-in-the-hole for Brown Brothers is its steady alliance with Boise since 1983. "Boise made us what we are," Tim says. "They pushed for quality all along and made us better loggers over the years." The Boise management encouraged Brown Brothers to certify all the crewmembers as pro loggers, and they emphasized bringing in quality logs. The crew practices careful skidding and delimiting to keep quality high.

Tim and his sons make the best statement about the company just by their tenacity to keep the company going strong.

"I think there's a bright future here, and if we make the changes as needed, we'll prosper," says Tim. "The lesson here is that if you learn to persevere, you'll get by. If you don't test your limits, you can't define your character."

