Granite Mountain Alaska Lumber of Delta Junction started small, but grew “slow and steady.”

Today, the original father-son operation, with its one skidder, that split time between Alaska and Washington, is now running a fully mechanized logging operation. Granite has become one of the biggest timber sale buyers in the area, and this growth and commitment have made them one of the most prominent mills in the region.

The company is now owned and operated by Joe Chapman, who took over several years ago when his dad “retired” to his own small mill in Washington. Joe’s dad started horse logging in Eastern Washington after World War II. Joe grew up working with his dad, and in the mid-80’s they made their way to Alaska. They spent time between Delta Junction and Washington, but ultimately committed to a full operation in Alaska, logging and eventually starting up a sawmill in 1995.

The Necessity of a Mill
“You pretty much have to have your own mill if you are going to make it logging in Alaska,” states Chapman. “Almost no mills buy logs. Most are small operations, and everyone does their own logging. You can’t really make a living unless you have a mill.” The mill equipment includes a 1992 #3 Meadows sawmill with computer setworks, two 1992 Morgan re-saws, a 1974 966B Caterpillar front end loader, a Newman 8B planer, and a homemade planer for surfacing rough-cut, threesided house logs.

The homemade planer, built by Joe and his dad, is one piece of equipment that helps Granite Mountain stand out from the competition. They sell threesided, hand-peeled house logs, and with this planer they can surface the inside wall of the logs, something other mills do not provide. Their cabin kits are quite popular, and the mill also sells a lot of firewood. In addition, they offer tongue and groove spruce, with special services including deck design and an on-
All of their lumber sales are in-state, with the majority going to private parties. Joe says there is not a big market for wood chips, but they do sell a lot of sawdust to the local dairy. They bring everything in at about 54 feet and process it in the mill yard. Lumber is cut and sold green for the most part.

As far as the logging end of things, Granite Mountain is currently working on a sale at the nearby Gerstle River. Chapman says he also has a potential sale in the works at Pogo road just outside Delta Junction, involving some burnt timber that needs to be moved. His logging equipment is extensive, including: a 1986 Timberjack 2520 feller buncher with a 20” rotosaw felling head; an ’85 227 Caterpillar with a 20” Koehring fellinghead; two 1982 Drott 40 log loaders; and a 1993 Hitachi 200Lc with a 5550DH Denharco processing head. Their truck inventory is also fairly large: a 1984 Kenworth 900B and a 1986 Mack, both used as lowboy trucks; log trucks; lumber trucks; and a 1989 International 22’ flatbed and a 1994 GMC Topkick 20’ flatbed that are both used for delivery of lumber and house logs.

Challenge of Finding and Maintaining Equipment
Just obtaining this quantity of equipment was a challenge for Chapman. “There is very little in the way of equipment for purchase up here,” he says. “The stuff you find for sale is usually for sale because it’s worn out. So all of the equipment has to be purchased out of state and shipped up. And then you’d better be able to work on it yourself!” he laughs.

Working on one’s own equipment seems to be one of the most important factors for anyone in Alaska who works in the industry. There are no specialists for the equipment available, and often no parts.

“You can’t just call the Cat repairman,” Chapman says. “You have to have the ability to fix your own equipment, weld parts, whatever it takes.” Because of the need for this kind of highly specialized experience, Chapman states that it can sometimes be difficult to find trained workers who understand the business and can do the work.

Handling the Weather
Another common thread for Alaska operations is weather. Weather can be an issue anywhere, but Alaska’s winter temperatures can make it difficult to keep things going. Chapman tries to keep the mill open year round, and logs in temperatures down to -35 degrees Fahrenheit.

“After that,” he says, “metal starts freezing up, and you are constantly welding parts back together. Iron starts crystallizing once the temperature goes under -20F, and equipment oils start freezing. One year I had a skidder blade fall completely off when we were trying to work!”
Temperatures, as low as -35 • fahrenheit, add an extra challenge.

Granite Mountain Alaska continues to strive forward and anticipates continued development. Potential expansions include a larger dry kiln, as they only have a small one right now. Chapman says a bigger kiln might mean the opportunity to start grading lumber, which they currently can’t do. Joe also has his eye on trying to get some of the grants offered through the state, because financing can sometimes be another challenge. Although they haven’t been able to obtain any grants, it’s a future goal.

The company is also working towards getting the mill more automated. While the mill functions well, Chapman would like to eventually update things for a better overall operation.

**Lack of Bureaucracy**
Despite the obvious obstacles that logging and milling in Alaska can bring, Joe Chapman truly loves where he lives and what he does. He lists the lack of bureaucratic “hassle” as one big positive, as there aren’t as many hoops to jump through for Alaska loggers. He also enjoys the solitude of living in the north, with its smaller population and hardier lifestyle. “It’s just what I grew up doing,” he says. “I spent most of my life logging in the woods with my dad and now on my own. It’s what I do.”

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