Keeping the Wheels Turning

By Lindsey Mohlere

Ever since Joel Olson built his first logging road and bought his first three log trucks, innovation and attention to detail have been the hallmarks of Joel Olson Trucking.


“A friend of mine, Dave Bruijn, had four log trucks, and we were talking about combining the two…I had rock trucks and he had log trucks…but he passed away at an early age. I ended up buying three of his log trucks,” says Olson. “That’s how I got into hauling logs.”

Continued Growth

After buying Bruijn’s log trucks, Olson combined the operations, building roads and hauling logs throughout the seventies until Longview Fiber moved most of their timberland to the Oregon valleys through a land swap with Boise Cascade. As Longview Fiber’s primary hauler, Olson took the challenge and moved his operation to Clatskanie, Ore., sold off his gravel trucks, and began hauling logs exclusively. By the early eighties, Joel Olson Trucking had grown into a sizable fleet of over 30 log trucks.

Shortly thereafter, Olson took on another challenge with the same energy and attention to detail that helped his business grow from the beginning. RSG Forest Products asked Olson to haul a majority of its finished lumber products from the mill in Mist, Ore. That meant Joel Olson Trucking needed to step up into running flatbeds. It was an opportunity too good to pass up and Olson, along with his son Darin (company VP/general manager), began building a fleet of flatbeds to meet new customer demand.

During the eighties and into the nineties, the company expanded its line-up of Peterbilt and Kenworth log trucks and flats to include curtain vans, end dumps, drop box trucks, and low boys. Currently, the company runs a fleet of 70 over-the-road rigs out of its Vancouver, Wash., office and 35 logging trucks out of Olson’s shop in Longview, Wash.

Timber Operations

In addition to hauling logs for large timber operations like Weyerhaeuser, Stimson Lumber, C&C Logging, and others, Joel Olson Trucking also operates their own salvage logging sides, ranging from small plots to sides as big as 120 acres. All of Olson’s salvage crews are currently working for Weyerhaeuser.

The company’s salvage logging business runs 13 Kenworth 800s with end dump trailers as well as a CAT 325 excavator, two CAT 320 log loaders, a CAT D5 dozer, a rubber tire backhoe, and a CAT 320 Forest Machine with a Jewel bucket grapple.

Pat Balch, Joel Olson Trucking general manager – Longview, likes how his salvage team works together.
“The CAT 320 is very reliable and operator friendly. They hold their value and run smooth with good power.”

Balch also prefers the Jewel grapple to others because of its versatility. “The Jewel is easy to control and has the ability to reach into a pile and pull out a piece of chunk wood or salvage wood. Control is good with minimal swing. They work really well for what we’re doing.”

**Maintenance – Keeping the Rubber on the Road**

Keeping the iron in tip-top shape is a key factor to success. Joel Olson Trucking has two shops, one in Vancouver for over-the-road rigs, and one in Longview dedicated to the logging operation. Both shops work swing shift, and the Longview operation is staffed with three mechanics and a shop boy. Three bays are used for maintenance and the other is used for fabrication.

“It’s all about the maintenance,” Balch says. “Off-road work just destroys things, especially around the St. Helen’s area. You’d assume this many years post eruption it wouldn’t matter, but the rock and sand up there is like running 40 grit sandpaper on all the components every day, day in-day out. It eats equipment alive. But if you can maintain a good truck and keep the driver from tearing it up, you can keep a truck on the road a long time. We’ve got a 1992 that’s still in service. There’s a lot of life and service left in these trucks, but it is…all about the maintenance.”

Balch says an example of good maintenance combined with some driver TLC is veteran driver Carolyn Mabee and her 1996 Kenworth named “Lily.”

“Carolyn’s been with us about 13 years,” Balch says, “and her truck has over a million miles on it. Sure, it’s been rebuilt and refitted, but it’s still on the road. Joel once bought a new truck for Carolyn, but she preferred her old one and got it back.”

**Good Drivers, Safety, and Compliance – the New Normal**

Like many other trucking companies, Joel Olson Trucking is always on the look out for good drivers. “Between Vancouver and Longview we probably have seven trucks sitting because we can’t find drivers,” Joel says. “There’s a shortage, but everybody’s confronted with that same problem. We get a lot of applicants, but we’re pretty strict on who we hire.”

Accordingly, the company puts a lot of time and effort into finding the right driver. “We have a pretty thick employment packet,” Joel says, adding, “It takes a while to fill out, and we don’t let the applicant take it home. We want to talk to them after they fill it out.”

From start to finish, the hiring process can take up to two weeks once a prospect comes through the door. The company has to follow all the Federal Motor Carrier requirements, pull the prospect’s MVR, and drug test the prospect. After that, the prospect takes a drive test and, finally, spends one to three days training with one of Olson’s senior drivers before the company makes the decision to hire.

“There aren’t many “good” drivers out there,” Darin says. “We’re doing ourselves and everybody else a disservice if we take on a sub-par guy. The last thing we want to do is have somebody out there in over their head and have an accident.”

Another aspect of the trucking industry is the new world of electronic driving logs and GPS tracking systems to comply with stringent state and federal regulations. Electronic reporting of driving logs is set to become mandatory in 2016.
Recently, Joel Olson Trucking brought Susan Reszczynski on board as the company’s safety and compliance manager. Susan’s experience and deep understanding of compliance requirements and safety standards will help pave the way for running a smoother operation. She will also be part of a new consulting team that will offer its expertise to other companies in the business.

“A lot of these smaller companies aren’t in compliance, and they need to get on board or they’ll be in a world of hurt,” Joel says. “We’ve already talked to a few of our competitors. A lot of loggers, ones with five or six trucks, have expressed an interest in coming down and taking a few classes from Susan. They don’t want to mess with this kind of stuff. You can’t fly under the radar anymore. You’ve got to play by the rules.”