



Potlatch Partners for 71 Years

Finke Logging has adapted over the years and strengthened its bond with Potlatch

By Barbara Coyner

The year 2009 was a milestone for Finke Logging of Orofino, Idaho — a 70-year alliance with the Potlatch Corporation. Jim Finke says it's been a good run.

Since Jim's dad, Carl, snagged his first Potlatch contract in 1939 to cut pine around Teakean Butte, the Finke name and Potlatch have become intertwined. Although Carl is gone now, Jim Finke, his brother Butch, and Jim's three sons, Corby, Terry, and Randy, all make a living working on contracts with Potlatch Corporation.

"Potlatch has made us a comfortable living," says Jim, 73, who retired but still signs the paychecks for a crew that runs 40 to 60 strong. "What I like about Potlatch is that they've tried to keep us working steadily. Like back in 1987, things were bad, but they found us work in the Waha, and we took logs to the port. They found stuff for us to do so we could keep our men on the payroll."

Even in the current hard times, the Finkes expect to keep busy. The cut ran around 30 million board feet over the last three or four years, but that is down this year, according to Corby.

Staying Flexible

Three generations deep in logging, the abundant north central Idaho woods gives the Finkes a perspective on the whole logging industry, and the men are in agreement that staying flexible is the key to survival.

"The biggest thing that has kept us going is Dad's ability to change," says Terry. "If it was up to me, we'd just be doing cat logging and line skidding, because we could save a lot on equipment costs. But we can produce more with mechanized."

"If we don't adapt to change, we won't be around," Corby adds.

Moving to CTL

Although Butch began his career using Idaho jammers and D-6 Cats, the big change came as the company got into cut-to-length in 1996.

"We've been with cut-to-length for over ten years, and I'd like to see Potlatch stick with it because it's better for the forest," says Butch. "The partial cuts look good, and it's putting nutrients back on the ground."

When the Finkes opted for cut-to-length, they chose the Valmet 892 forwarder and the 500T harvester with a 965 head. "We went with Valmet because they offered us the best service, the best machine at the time, and they were the leader in the industry," Butch recalls. Although the company still uses its two line machines and skidder crews, the new mechanized equipment excels at thinning jobs.

Benefits to Thinning

Terry sees real advantages to thinning jobs, explaining, "With the thinning projects, we can pretty much work year around. If you lay them out properly, you can still work in wet weather if you have the right strip and the right operator."



Terry recounts the year his dad held off on entering a site until the roads had frozen. Frustrated as the other contractors moved into the area, Terry and his brothers had fretted over falling behind, but Jim continued his prep work, waiting for the roads to firm up. When the other contractor's roads fell apart, Finke Logging came in to efficiently fulfill their contract.

"The others screwed up," Terry says, making his point about the right strip and the right operator. "Dad was the better logger."

Staying Competitive & Efficient

Remembering his first real woods job, Jim says he started hooking off an old Idaho jammer in 1951, making ten cents per log. By 1952, he'd saved \$2,960, enough to buy an old Ford and school clothes. Clearly his leap from those simple days to a stable full of mechanized equipment has been dramatic, yet the same principles apply.

"You've got to think ahead," Jim says. "You learn these things from the school of hard knocks."

Working steadily with Potlatch Corporation has furnished its share of school-of-hard-knocks moments. During the years that the company had its own logging crews, the independents like Finke had constant competition. But they learned to be efficient. If the Potlatch crews were getting \$136 per thousand, Jim would bid \$120 per thousand and his men still made good money. Paying by production furnished, and still furnishes, the incentive.

Looking Ahead

Although Finke is the largest Potlatch contractor around Orofino, the family company still has to compete. And that means changes in equipment and logging techniques. "About two years ago, we went to a feller buncher," Corby says of the Valmet 450 with a 2900 Quadco head. "Potlatch was changing to tree length logging and clearcutting because the methods are cheaper. For us, it was more cost effective and more productive with the feller buncher."

As one of the company mechanics, Randy weighs in on the added costs of mechanized equipment beyond the initial purchase price. Parts and repairs can be more expensive, he says, agreeing with Terry that going back to basic cat logging has its appeal sometimes. He admits, however, that the Finke name might also disappear from the Potlatch Corporation payrolls because the company and its spinoff, Clearwater Paper, favor mechanized equipment. An avid Cat fan, Randy singles out that brand for its long track record of straightforward repairs and reliability.

When it comes to reliability, Jim frequently mentions the Bucyrus line machine, which was cobbled together using an old industrial crane chassis and a custom boom, enabling a 1,600-foot reach and good agility in the woods. Coming online in 1980, the machine sports a Maki carriage and a good track record, although Terry says it's almost time to retire the old girl. "That machine made us money," Randy says, adding that he can no longer get parts for it.

Looking into Wood Biomass

Constantly analyzing their strategies, the Finkes are now cautiously exploring woody biomass options. Recently Modern Machinery's Rene Van der Merwe staged a demonstration for Potlatch contractors at Headquarters, and Finkes did the cutting with their Valmet equipment. The biomass will be chipped later in the spring.

"We're going to get there," says Jim of the biomass concepts, but Corby furnishes the reality check. "We're definitely interested in it, but it's got to make money."

Listening to the five-man Finke lineup, it's impossible to miss the secret weapon of a long-lived family company: the ability to listen and learn from each other. In the case of woody biomass, Terry and Butch staunchly favor the cut-to-length equipment, because they observed the advantages during the Headquarters demonstration.

"Long logs can make a mess, and the cut-to-length is better because you get the logs and the fiber and you leave the tops," says Butch, noting the value of leaving tops for nutrients and also to prevent soil compaction. "We need those tops left on the ground to keep from making a mess."



As the Finkes launch into their 71st year with Potlatch Corporation, they're firmly committed to staying competitive. "We've always had good men," Corby says of the workforce, adding that the Finke wives also play an important role. From Carl's wife, Neva, riding herd on the business side, to Jim's wife, Shirley, taking on the role, the torch has now been passed to Corby's wife, Kelly; Butch's wife, Fran; and Terry's wife, Jan.

While Jim reflects back on simpler times, simpler equipment, and smaller equipment costs, he nevertheless knows the reality of the business. "You have to adapt," he says.