



Distinguishing Himself from the Pack

Marks Lumber focuses on a “Montana look” to stand out

By Barbara Coyner

Steve Marks likes to say he has a Master’s Degree in perseverance, but he’s earned a PhD in business diversification, as well.

Marks Lumber of Clancy, Mont., just keeps reinventing itself, adapting to the changing times and fickle markets. The third generation of his family to work in the timber industry, Steve combined the work ethic of the past century with the thinking, practices, and equipment of the 21st century to keep his valuable 15-person work crew working, despite the economy’s wild ride.

Part of the Marks Lumber success story is its original business plan. Although his father and grandfather had operated small mills to supplement ranching, Steve set out in 1989 to make wood products his first priority when ranching turned sour.

“I went into this as a full-fledged business, and I haven’t missed a beat since,” he says. “I didn’t want to get into commodity type production -- I wanted to be a specialty mill. Things got pretty competitive in Montana at that time. Logs were expensive, but as a specialty mill, I could pay more. I worked with foresters who helped me get the first cut out of the deck, and the better logs made for better quality.”

The Montana Look

To distinguish himself from the pack, Marks capitalizes on “the Montana look,” making the most of distinctive wood grain and coloration to please customers who regard Big Sky Country as something to be reflected in their individual tastes and homes.

“Our signature piece is the circle-saw Douglas fir tongue and groove flooring,” he says, explaining that a friend from St. Ignatius first showed him the concept.

Marks gets his buyers through word-of-mouth and a few trade shows. Most crave the soft red tones of the Douglas fir and the patterns that the circular saw method creates. Marks Lumber grew its reputation turning out tongue-and-groove flooring, massive beams, and a variety of accent pieces that continue to be popular in log and timber frame homes and houses with the western touch that are springing up throughout the West.

When the company built its new headquarters in 2004, the building served as a showcase for the type of products Marks could deliver. Steve’s son Cody, who Marks regards as a true artisan, did the building’s design, incorporating the Montana look throughout.

As the markets fluctuate, Marks says he has the ability to ramp up production at the mill to get more into a commodity scale, and he does furnish wholesale lumber to some high-end markets. On the whole, however, the Montana look is still the mainstay, and he enjoys seeing people appreciate the company’s lineup.



Time for a New Mill

As 2000 rolled around, Marks determined that the original hydraulic mill was nearly worn out, so it was time to upgrade. The idea was to replace the carriage, but one thing led to another, and the company opted for a complete rebuild. Marks haunted the auctions to find what he needed. During the makeover, Marks' dedicated workforce never missed a beat.

The new mill has delivered, especially as the Montana look remains a focal point. The circle-saw headrig saws two- and three-inch planks, and the pieces are then run through a band resaw. The company has recently phased in a new Brewco 1600 horizontal band resaw as part of the operation.

"The nice part about this is that this is a flexible system, and we can change on the fly, depending on what we need," says Marks, extolling the value of staying nimble for the ever-changing markets.

In the Woods

2009 brought more challenges, but not one to sit in the office, Marks has always been on the lookout for other opportunities. The mountain pine beetle infestation, and keeping his men working, were foremost in his mind when he developed the inch-and-a-half thick written proposal with the Montana Department of Natural Resources.

Called the 2009 Montana Jumpstart 2 Forest Fuels Reduction and Restoration Forestry Grant Project, his application included 900 acres of forest fuel treatment. Marks was grateful that the contract was awarded based on the company's reputation and longevity in the area.

In May of 2009, the BLM put out a Request for Proposal (RFP) for a ten-year indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity (IDIQ) called the Helena Area Stewardship WUI Restoration. Pulling together a team of knowledgeable people, a proposal was churned out and accepted. The Marks crew is now working on the 10-year BLM stewardship contract that encompasses 30,000 acres, concentrating on the first 1,100 acres under the fuel mitigation project.

It was no surprise that Steve extended his operation into the woods, as he's always liked big iron, mechanical devices, and working in the woods. With a ten-year contract secured, he acquired a Timbco 445EXL feller buncher adapted with a Quadco 360-degree head. He found that with the Loewen mastication blade on the Quadco 360 head, there was a perfect match to go after the emerging biomass opportunities.

"We can masticate and feller bunch with the same machine, and it's worked out very well," he explains, noting that the machine takes on trees up to 20 inches in diameter and can masticate as part of the process.

The Timbco has become a multi-purpose machine, allowing Marks to go after other projects in the wildland urban interface. "With the Loewen masticating blade, we do not have much of a stump left, which in the urban interface people really like," he says.

Efficiency increased even more with the company's recent purchase of a Rotochopper B66 horizontal grinder. "With the B66 we can do a wide variety of products such as colored mulch, bedding, and hog fuel, and recently we ground some fuel for the Fuels for Schools project at Western Montana College at Dillon."



“There’s lots of pulp on the project and few logs,” Marks says of his recent BLM work, noting that some of logs will go to his own mill and Pyramid Mountain Lumber at Seeley Lake. “Ninety percent of it is hog fuel and pulp, some of which we will use for our own products. Overall, there’s about 20-25,000 tons of it on our first few task orders. The biggest challenge to the contract is where to take all the material, since Smurfit Stone of Missoula has permanently closed. With the Rotochopper, you get the ducks, guts, and feathers, and we may end up storing some of the material until markets improve.”

Capitalizing on Biomass

The colored mulch and animal bedding products are one more way Marks Lumber diversifies its offering, and the products are often harmonious to the total Montana way of life.

A Rotochopper Go Bagger 250 for bagging colored mulch and bedding was recently added to help in that part of the business. Much of the product is ground in the woods and shipped to a ready-and-waiting market.

“It’s a simple machine,” Marks says of the Rotochopper Bagger. “It’s not super high production, but I purchased it to keep the guys working, and I can bag most anything with it.” The woody biomass can also go to Fuels for Schools, and Marks trades off with his brother’s nearby post and pole operation, as well.

“Woody biomass is good for us, and there’s tons of wood in the WUI,” he says, adding that roadside hazard trees, Forest Service campgrounds, and government service contracts could provide even more material. So far, however, 95 percent of Marks Lumber’s materials are taken from private lands. The company works mostly with Ottman Forestry, a Missoula forestry consulting firm, and also trades logs with other mills, all in the name of staying resilient.

“We’ll keep pushing on the biomass when we can. There is an insurmountable pile of the ‘red and dead’ and I am going to try to capitalize on it. With the B66 grinder and the other equipment we have, new opportunities keep coming along. We don’t sell to other secondary manufacturers, and we don’t have to sell three truckloads [of biomass] a day to stay in business, because we aren’t a commodity mill.”

As Marks reflects on his success even in extremely challenging times, he gives much of the credit to his father, Bob Marks, who at 78, still lives nearby and has a hand in encouraging his sons in the wood products business. “My dad is a great mentor,” Steve says. “He never sticks his nose in my business, but he’s always there for advice.” Steve’s wife Laura is also a steady and valued presence, keeping watch over the books.

“I like to have my hands in all aspects of this business,” Steve admits of his multi-faceted management style. “I like to stay up with things. If you’re in business for yourself, you’re never away from work. You’re always thinking about how to make things better.”