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Photo of Bighorn Logging's yarder taken by Lindsay Mohlere.

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Unfortunately, with new opportunity came tragedy. In 2003, Jerry Sedlack lost his life in an accident when he got out in front of a cutter and a tree fell on him. "Jerry and I had a good relationship," Smouse says. "We really enjoyed each other's company. But after the accident, it was just my wife Laurie and I. We had to buck up and continue on."

At that point, the company took a sharp turn and moved out of the thinning business. "Jerry was the forest engineer. He did all the layout work, legwork, the cruising, and stuff on the sales we were working. After he passed, I needed to get away from that aspect of the business. The crew did too. So we got away from thinning and went back to concentrating on the final harvest work."

Hook Tender - Kenny McKinney

Retooling

Over the years, Emerald Valley has prospered running clear-cut operations. In 2013, Emerald Valley applied its flexibility by opting to get back into the thinning business and re-tooled to take advantage of new methods and opportunities. Travis Smouse, Tracy's son, manages the thinning operation, dealing with the customers, negotiating contracts, and running the sides.

"We have some longevity there. Thinning is going to be around now that the state and the Feds realize it's a way to sell timber without drawing too much attention from people who don't like clear cuts."

Additionally, fuel reduction practices are gaining ground. "They're starting to see the light," Smouse says. "They have to do something about it because it's not going to get better on its own."

Three Sides

Today, the company is going full steam operating a thinning side, cable logging side, and a yoder side, punching out over 20 million board feet a year. Currently, the cable side is logging for Plum Creek Timber Company and will soon move to Georgia Pacific tracts. The cable thinning side is working for InterFor on state land. The yoder side is also working InterFor contracts.

Emerald Valley contracts out its cutting through Jay Mullberry Contract Cutting, and the bulk of the company's hauling is handled by Henry Trucking of Toledo, Oregon.



Tracy Smouse and son Travis in front of the 240 Link-Belt.

The Right Iron for the Task at Hand

As far as Tracy is concerned, Link-Belt is the right iron for the task at hand.

"They're one of the better machines out there," Smouse says. "They have a great support group and the dealer is local, Triad Machinery in Coburn. Parts are readily available, and the service technicians know their stuff. Management and staff really go above and beyond to fix you and get you back on the road."

"One year we had a machine that burned up a wiring harness, and parts were a couple weeks out. The dealer had a used machine in the yard and offered to let us use it until we got ours back in service. Pretty commendable for a dealer to do that," Smouse says. "When we buy

Emerald Valley Keeps on Keeping on

Lindsay R. Mohlere

Celebrating twenty years in business means a lot to Tracy Smouse, owner of Emerald Valley Thinning Inc. of Philomath, Oregon. "It's been a tough go, but we survived. We're still here."

Emerald Valley got into thinning in 2013. They now have a thinning side, cable side and yoder side. Pictured is a Link-Belt 290 with a Log Max 10000 and Thunderbird Tower.

Handling the Punches

Having the resolve and flexibility to keep on through the tough times is a hallmark of Emerald Valley. "This is actually my second go-round. We did this back in the '70s, but when the market took a dive, we just got out," Smouse says. In the mid-1990s, when new opportunities became available, Smouse, along with business partner Jerry Sedlack, jumped back in and founded Emerald Valley. "Jerry and I had like-minded goals," Smouse said.



new, we buy Link-Belt.”

Field Test

Emerald Valley has also field-tested new equipment from Link-Belt. The most recent test involved the new Link Belt 4040.

“It was the second field test we’ve done,” says Smouse. “This time the factory brought out four engineers from Japan. They soldered connections to the main boom and wired it to record stress and flex. We shovel logged all day with the machine, and the next day they attached the wires to the stick boom and worked it all day again. I think they’re a little amazed at what the loggers do with these machines once they get them on the ground.”

Emerald Valley uses a variety of machines. Below is a Log Max 10000, which is coupled with a Link-Belt 290. At right is a Komatsu PC220LL with a Pierce stick and boom.

Lots of Iron

Emerald Valley’s cable thinning operation employs a 1980 Washington 78 yarder alongside a 2014 Link-Belt 240 with a Log Max 7000 processor. An older Komatsu 220 handles shovel and log loading duties. “The Komatsu is in the mix because we picked it up at the right price,” Smouse adds.

On the cable side, Emerald Valley uses a 1985 Thunderbird TMY 50 yarder paired with a couple 290s. The 2012 Link-Belt 290 is the processor utilizing a Log Max 10000. The log loader is a 2013 Link-Belt 290.

The yoder side tackles its duties with a 2011 Link-Belt 290 double-drum yoder matched with a 2010 Link-Belt 240 processor and loader.

The company also keeps production running smoothly with a Caterpillar 517, a John Deere Grapple Skidder, a 550 John Deere, a TD20 Dozer, and a D8 Dozer.

“We use the D8 as a support vehicle in our tower operation,” Smouse says. “Anymore, with these tree farms, sky lines and anchors are getting to be a real big issue. We’re always backed up against the re-prod and the stumps are rotted out. There’s nothing out there, so we anchor the skyline with a dozer.”

The Challenges of Everyday Business

Like all logging companies, Emerald Valley has experienced the everyday battle of trying to find a happy medium between the cost of doing business and the topsy-turvy market fluctuations and downturns.

When the economy tanked in 2008, Emerald Valley tightened the belt and weathered through it.

“It was ugly, wasn’t it?” Smouse says with a chuckle. “Yeah, you end up doing things you don’t want to do. But we made it through. Kept the crew, kept the equipment.



We weren’t the only ones. Everybody suffered through that. The mills did. We did. You just have to do what you gotta do.”

However, the biggest challenge in keeping the company running at maximum production is people. “Keeping a good crew,” Smouse says is the secret to success but remains his company’s biggest hurdle. “Finding the right people is a huge challenge. We work as steady as anybody, and we pay a good wage, but the work force is non-existent.”

Emerald Valley has tried a number of ways to recruit new employees, including the State Employment office and, on occasion, Craigslist.

The company is also involved with the local high school’s forestry program. “The local high school has a pretty good forestry program, and we’ve been able to pick up a few good employees through it.”

Smouse said they’ve even started a few people out green. “We don’t start them out in the machines,” Smouse adds, “We start them in the chokers and if they show me they’re motivated and that they’ll show up five days a week, think straight, and be a team player, we keep them on.”

Currently, Emerald Valley employs twenty crewmembers including two support staff and a mechanic. The company offers a family wage, pays half the premium for health insurance, and offers a 401K program, contributing up to four percent after one year of employment.

It’s been 20 years of ups and downs, but Emerald Valley Thinning is looking forward to the next 20 years.

