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# GROWING QUALITY TREES

## A FOREST ENTREPRENEUR'S FOCUS

BY JIM FROHN

**S**tarting when he was four years old, Russell Barnes wanted to be a logger. He didn't grow up in a logging family, or even in a rural area, so he's not sure where the desire came from. His parents took the family to Ludlow, Vermont, on vacation back when there was a sawmill in the town and, said Barnes, "I made my dad take me to the sawmill to watch them saw logs."

Barnes grew up in suburban Massachusetts. The family's neighborhood had been recently developed, with the subdivision carved out of the woods, so there were piles of four-foot wood at each house lot. "I went into the firewood business when I was eleven years old," Barnes recalled. He knocked on neighbors' doors and offered to cut and split their wood for them. In high school he did tree work during summer vacations. He studied geology in college, and on a field trip to North Dakota he hated the lack of trees. When the class went to Yellowstone "with the trees, water, and blue sky," Barnes realized that there was no future for him in geology. After graduation, he considered attending graduate school for forestry but thought his grades weren't good enough.

**A stand of released pines.**





Returning to Massachusetts, Barnes got back into arborist work, which gave him an appreciation of the individual tree and how to make it grow and prosper. He also learned as much about forestry as he could on his own. “I bought all the forestry textbooks, went to Society of American Foresters meetings, and went to forestry lectures. I snuck into the National SAF meeting in Boston,” admitted Barnes.

High school connections told him about the town of Lincoln, Vermont, and its 1200-acre land holding. Barnes convinced the town that someone needed to be on the land, managing it. He worked there for eight years, cutting firewood, conducting timber stand improvement, removing hazard trees and planting trees. He also worked as the town’s tree warden.

After moving to Vermont in the early 1980s, Barnes needed a way to earn an income. He met a forest engineer who had developed a radio-controlled winch for low-impact thinning and joined forces to sell the machine. He demonstrated it all over the eastern half of the US, from Michigan to Maine to West Virginia. It proved a tough sell, so he decided to try selling a Swedish version. That wasn’t successful either, but the connections Russell made while trying to sell the winch accelerated his logging career.

At a show in Ithaca, New York, in 1984, he was demoing the winch, and Rottne was at the booth next door with a double grip harvester and a forwarder. Swedish forestry techniques were being introduced to North America, including their felling and limbing techniques and cut-to-length equipment. Soren Erikson, who was bringing his Game of Logging to the US, was also at the show. Barnes learned the felling techniques from Dan Tilton at Tilton Equipment in New Hampshire, from reading some of

#### **The Rottne Blondin.**



the Husqvarna training brochures, and from Soren. “Dan and Soren were very good teachers,” said Barnes. He became quick friends with the Swedes and would get together with them whenever they were at trade shows, and through this he got to know some of the Rottne salespeople.

In the meantime, Barnes had purchased a tractor and built a forwarding trailer. He worked for consulting foresters and also lined up his own woodlots. Despite being a self-described introvert, he wasn’t afraid to knock on doors. He looked for red pine stands to thin, and one weekend lined up three different lots. He found markets for red pine, selling it to the Windsor prison where it was made into guard rail posts. Another market was cabin logs to Vermont Log Buildings. He cut pulp-quality white pine and hardwood and supplied the Elmendorf OSB plant in Claremont, New Hampshire.

#### **Next Steps**

In 1992, at the Bangor Logger’s Expo, one of the Rottne salesmen he knew told him about some used forwarders that were available. Scott Paper was liquidating assets, including all their logging equipment. This meant some Rottne Blondin forwarders, the company’s original forwarder model. Barnes made an appointment on the recommendation of the salesman, who said to “buy it no matter what, unless it was burned.” Barnes bought the machine for a bargain price and graduated from the tractor and forwarder trailer.

The Blondin forwarder got its name in an interesting way. A competitor, Lars Bruun, was also making a forwarder, which he branded the “Bruunette.” In response, Rottne decided to call their forwarder the Blondin, Swedish for blonde. Barnes ran the Blondin for 16 years and sold it for almost four times what he

originally paid for it. "I won the lottery on that one," he said.

The Blondin lasted a long time due to Barnes being "terrified" of a catastrophic breakdown in the woods and his resultant attention to preventative maintenance. He had a Rottne mechanic replace the torque converter, which was known to wear out early, and bought two spare axles, another weak point. Every spring he would rent space at a garage in White River Junction and go through the machine, doing necessary repairs and maintenance.

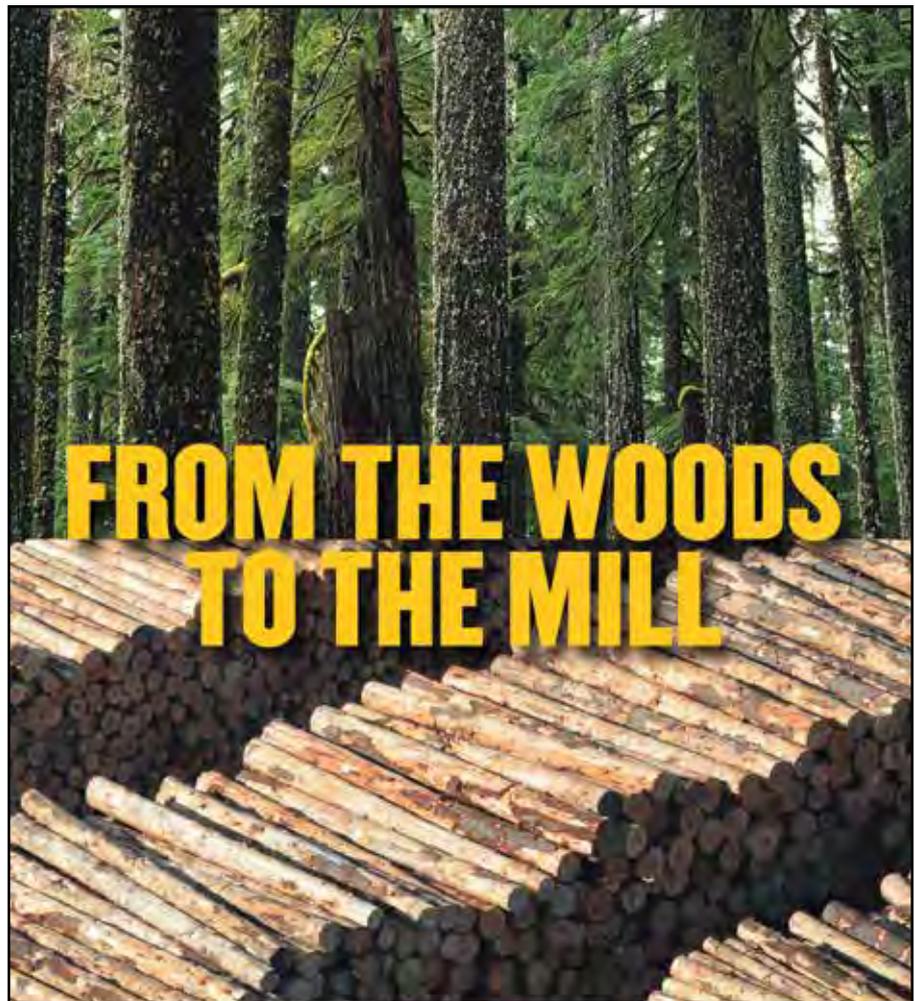
Starting out just felling each tree and picking up logs with the forwarder, Barnes developed a better system after meeting a forestry consultant at the Elmia Wood show in Sweden. The forester told him about using trail layout to improve efficiency. Barnes started to flag trails pre-harvest, using a system where trees on opposite sides of the trail were flagged, with knots facing the inside of the trail. The trail corridor was easier to visualize this way. He would then clear out unmerchantable wood in the trail corridor. He would lay out trails as long as possible, and loop around the back of the harvest area or against a land feature such as a wetland or ravine. Long trails meant the forwarder could pick up more wood before having to maneuver down another trail. With this system the faller knew where the forwarder would travel and could fell trees way ahead of the machine for easier extraction. This "changed everything" and made logging more productive.

In the late 1990s, after moving to New Hampshire, Barnes met a Dartmouth College student named Jim Hourdequin. At first skeptical, Hourdequin learned from Barnes that logging could be done in an ecologically sound manner, and he developed a strong interest in the industry. The two formed Yankee Forest Safety Network, a contractor group with the purpose of reducing workers' compensation rates. Working with an insurance company, the network offered safety training to its members, but ultimately the group dissolved.

During college, Hourdequin had worked on the AMC trail crew and become friends with fellow crew mate Jack Bell. Hourdequin introduced Barnes to Bell, who was interested in logging. He started working for Barnes in 1998, and eventually the three of them formed Long View Forest Contracting in 1999. Barnes and Bell worked in the woods full time, and Hourdequin took care of accounting,

marketing and business development.

Long View started out with the Blondin and a new Rottne Rapid forwarder. All felling was done by hand in the early days, with six to eight cutters working in the woods. Each cutter was in charge of bucking decisions at the stump, and the log ends were marked with different symbols for various sorts. All the crew members were trained in Game of Logging techniques. They used the trail layout system that Barnes developed, and everyone carried two-way radios. Regular meetings were held, with costs, markets, safety issues and job planning discussed



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among all employees.

Long View officially mechanized in 2011 with the purchase of its first harvester, after contracting with an independent harvester operator for several years. Barnes ran a harvester for a year and a half but didn't enjoy it.

Long View has grown since its founding from two forwarders and a half dozen or so hand cutters to thirty-five full time and five part-time employees, six cut-to-length harvesters, and seven forwarders. The company also owns a feller-buncher and two skidders, plus excavators, bulldozers, and loaders. Most of the wood is harvested mechanically, but several hand cutters cut oversize wood for the mechanical crews and work some smaller lots. Long View added a forest management division and a woodland services division that conducts TSI, invasive plant control and trail building.

Hourdequin is now the general manager of Long View. Bell is the CEO of Lyme Timber, a timberland investment firm, and he remains involved with Long View.



**Barnes, ready for TSI.**

## **Life Beyond the Woods?**

Operating the harvester led Barnes to his next venture. With 70 greasing points, it took him over an hour to grease the machine. Frustrated with grease getting on the machine and the grease coupler popping off the fittings, he needed a better way. He “looked on the internet for four hours” one night, and at midnight found the picture of what he was seeking. It was a grease coupler that locked onto the fitting, preventing the coupler from popping off and losing grease. Contacting the manufacturer, he found that they distributed the product only in South Africa, where they were located. He bought some of the couplers and had some professional photos taken. Five hours after first posting on eBay, Barnes sold one. He came up with the name Lock n Lube, and the slogans “End Greasing Frustration” and “Grease goes in, not on, the machine.”

When Lock n Lube was starting out, Barnes was still working for Long View. The grease fitting business was growing, and he had to decide where to focus. One day the decision was made for him – walking across an icy parking lot, he slipped and badly broke his ankle. “I didn't have my spiked boots on that day; I almost always wore them.” He crawled across the parking lot to his car and painfully drove to the hospital.

He knew it would be difficult to work in the woods while his ankle healed, so he decided to devote his attention to Lock n Lube. He bought print ads in trade publications, and the manufacturer put together an Amazon listing for him. He talked to people at gas stations, farms and log landings, and went to trade shows. He learned how to work with customs brokers and arrange delivery of shipping containers. The company developed a web site. “I answered the phone all the time,” Barnes recalled.

One of the things he enjoyed the most about the business was talking to people from all over the country. Some were loggers, and some were in construction. One of his customers was a 92-year-old bulldozer operator who loved his work. The operator's son wanted to retire, but the nonagenarian did not. Many farmers were also customers. They all had in common the fact that they ran equipment that needed to be greased. “I was talking to my people,” said Barnes. “I can talk grease.”

In the first five months of the business, he sold five hundred couplers. After that the business took off and at the end of the first year, 23,000 units were sold. He hired a couple of people to help with the business, including a bookkeeper and a graduate of Dartmouth's business school.

After three and a half years, Barnes sold the business. “It was fun... and I lost a lot of sleep,” he said. The business school graduate he hired bought the company and runs it today.

## **Crop Tree Management and TSI**

When Barnes decided to go full time with Lock n Lube, he was glad to be doing something different. But as most readers know, sawdust gets in your blood. At the tail end of running Lock n Lube, Barnes needed a way to relieve stress. He called a Vermont county forester and asked if he had any TSI work. The next day he was back in the woods, releasing crop trees. He soon sold Lock n Lube and retired. He now spends many days volunteering his time doing TSI and crop tree release on town

forests and private woodlots and reading studies on crop tree management and pruning. His passion for forest stand tending has led to travel to New Zealand and Sweden, spending three months in each country doing pre-commercial thinning and pruning work.

### Pruning Leads to Another Venture

In New Zealand, where radiata pine plantations are pruned on an industrial scale, Barnes had a chance to practice intensive pruning. There they use loppers and a ladder to get up to 20 feet on the tree. This technique has proven to be faster than pole saws, and the loppers have less potential for damage to the stems. He started to use the technique in white pine.

At a show in Sweden a few years back, a pruning tool caught Barnes' eye. He bought one but didn't give it any more thought. When he got back into crop tree release and pruning work, he tried out the device. It attaches to a pole, but instead of a saw it has two opposing blades. It works by hooking the tool over the branch, lining it up flush with the trunk, then pulling down on the pole. A lever and short link of chain act together to close the blades, shearing the limb. Bark tearing is eliminated, and the tool quickly prunes a tree.

Barnes contacted the manufacturer and found they weren't making the tool anymore. He is currently arranging to have it made by another shop. He named it the "Limb Zipper" and plans to start selling it soon.

### A Lifelong Fascination

Throughout his career, Barnes has been fascinated with crop trees, describing his interest as an obsession. His arboriculture background influenced his focus on individual trees, and his logging experience taught him the importance of growing valuable logs. "TSI is about the excitement of seeing the results of your work and realizing that you have the power to influence the growth of a tree," he said.

When talking about crop tree management, Barnes said, "We're doing this to eventually make stumps." In other words, the point of growing the best trees is to eventually harvest them and use them for products. Quality trees create more value for everyone in the supply chain – landowner, logger, forester, trucker, mill. The communities that depend on forests will do better too – a high-value resource creates more prosperity than a low-value one.

Though he didn't grow up in a logging family, Russell Barnes embodies the spirit of the forest entrepreneur – resilient, innovative, willing to learn the skills needed to survive and thrive. A common concern in the industry is where the next generation of loggers will come from. There may be more people who, like Barnes, come from backgrounds that aren't traditionally associated with logging but have an instinctive interest in it. If they get the opportunity to learn more about the industry, there might be some new loggers who bring a fresh perspective. **ML**

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