Logging Solo

In the smallest northeastern states, loggers work in areas where a log truck is a highly unusual sight. How do they make a go of it?

BY EILEEN TOWNSEND

Most loggers don't have time to cultivate a hobby, but Colin McLaughlin has one: He rescues box turtles from the middle of the highway, placing them carefully on the side of the road. "People drive through here fast and they don't see them," said McLaughlin, who works and lives in the Pinelands of New Jersey, amid cedar swamps and scrag pine. "They look like pinecones from a distance, I guess."

McLaughlin is in his late 40s, married with three kids. He has flashing blue eyes and a bit of a regional accent, which comes out most pronouncedly when he says "yous" rather than "you." When McLaughlin was younger, he used to hold down a job as a union ironworker and would commute several hours into Philadelphia or Manhattan on a daily basis. The work made good money, but the stress of commuting and working in cities made him miserable, until one day, he got fed up and quit. "People thought I was crazy," said McLaughlin. "They said, 'What are you going to do?' and I said, 'I'm going to work in the woods.'"

McLaughlin bought an industrial forestry mower and went to work as a contractor for a big agricultural landowner in the Pinelands, mowing around cranberry bogs and blueberry fields. The Pinelands of New Jersey have a unique ecology: sandy soils, frequent fires, and a lot of fresh water in a huge aquifer, which makes the region one of the most suitable places in the country for growing cranberries. The agricultural mowing business was good enough that McLaughlin was able to take on employees.

McLaughlin's life really changed when, one day, he noticed that one of the fuel cans that was supposed to fuel an employee's mower was still full at the end of a day's work. Said McLaughlin, "I didn't know what my guy had been doing all day, but I knew it wasn't mowing, so when I submitted that week's hours to the landowner, I didn't include that day. I said, 'I can't get paid for work we didn't do, and I had a problem with one of my guys.'"

The landowner thanked McLaughlin for his honesty and told him that they already knew — they'd seen it on security footage. He then invited McLaughlin to take a ride with him and drove him out to a cedar swamp. "I fought with the state to be able to log these swamps and the timber has just been sitting there for five years because I can't find anyone to do the work," the landowner told McLaughlin. "How much money would it take to finance a machine so that you'd be able to log this for me? I think you can do it."

Colin McLaughlin logs cedar swamps near cranberry bogs. He's one of only a few full time loggers in the entire state of New Jersey.

McLaughlin and his wife discussed making the change. "My wife is a lot tighter than I am with money," said McLaughlin, "and she said, 'I don't see how we can lose.'" A few months later, in 2007, McLaughlin started his cut-to-length operation. For the past decade, he has worked predominantly in Atlantic White Cedar swamps, doing restoration work. Cedar is sensitive to salinity changes and water temperature changes, and much of the 70 to 80-year old standing white cedar in New Jersey is rotted around the heart. "We have saltwater in places we've never had it before," said McLaughlin. "The trees can't adapt." Unmanaged swamps are turning into maple-dominated swamps. However, if the cedar is clear cut, better-adapted cedar trees grow in their place. "The landowner I work for is buying up more land just for cedar restoration," said McLaughlin.

McLaughlin realized early on that he faced a few major hurdles in working as a full-time logger in New Jersey. For one, he was practically the only logger he knew. He trained himself on his equipment, and when he had questions, he called up people as far away as Canada and California. Some of the most valuable help came from swamp loggers in North Carolina who'd worked extensively on hurricane cleanup projects in The Great Dismal Swamp.

"There's no brotherhood of loggers here," said McLaughlin, "There's one other guy who does some hardwood, but that's it. There might be a couple way up in North Jersey, but, for the most part, there's really nobody here. It's mainly land-clearing guys who, when they get slow, they'll do some logging."

Over the years, McLaughlin became increasingly familiar with what it means to log in an area where there is next to no forest products industry. He has struggled with issues that will be familiar to others in the industry but are magnified in a state like New Jersey. These include workman's compensation, trucking, the availability of markets, infrastructure, labor force, lack of public understanding, land fragmentation, and a lack of community support.

While these issues affect a lot of the industry in the northeast, the problem is one of scale. Whatever exists elsewhere is exacerbated by the fact that there is no support network for logging in a state like New Jersey. "I don't think there's a bonus to being the only one," said McLaughlin. "It's nice to have people to have your back, or that you can say 'hey, can you give me a hand?' and there is nobody like that here."

The Unknown Forests of New Jersey

When you say "New Jersey" to the average American, the first thing that comes to most people's mind isn't "forestland." More like: "suburbia" or "industrial corridor." In fact, New Jersey is a state with a lot of forestland, including a national preserve comparable in size to Yellowstone National Park. New Jersey's land-base is varied, but that doesn't mean the forest is properly managed.

"A lot of people don't realize it," said McLaughlin, "But there's a lot of timber in New Jersey. There are decent-sized lots still. But you need loggers and you need foresters who want to do something about it. We also have small lots, of course, and the small lots would be so much nicer if you had the infrastructure here. Then you could just throw a little skidder out there, put the logs out by the road, and someone with a self-loader could come and pick them up. But because you don't have that, it's impossible to do."

Bob Williams, a forester who works with McLaughlin, agrees that there is a problem. "There are probably three of four loggers in the state of New Jersey," said Williams. "I manage a lot of land; I do this six days a week." Williams is not incredibly optimistic about where the forest industry in New Jersey is headed, and he sees this as an education problem. "This forest has been utilized — it built Philadelphia! We need an ecological approach that requires a forest to be cut and it requires a logger who can make money."

Williams thinks that if there were more education, more industry, more markets, the natural resource in New Jersey could be utilized to great effect. But it's a chicken and the egg situation – which comes first?

In the cedar swamps, McLaughlin employs young people to run his forwarder and also trains them. Finding people who want to work and will be consistent is a challenge – especially in an area where almost no one grew up in a logging family. McLaughlin looks for character in his employees as much as availability. "I've got a kid now who works slowly, but he doesn't break anything. The production comes with time," said McLaughlin. "Plus, he doesn't think the world owes him anything. That can be hard to find."

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The scarcity of loggers also means that workman's comp is a struggle. In New Jersey, McLaughlin pays 56 dollars for every hundred, and there is no category for mechanized logging. The more loggers in a state's industry, the easier it is to get reasonable workman's compensation. With McLaughlin being the only one, there's just no reason for the insurance companies to pay attention.

Trucking is also difficult, and it's rare to see a log truck in the area. McLaughlin sends the bulk of his cedar to North Carolina. He initially spoke with mills further north, but trucking proved too much of a challenge. "Probably the biggest challenge I underestimated when I got started was moving the wood," said Mclaughlin. "Now we have a couple of really good truckers we use who backhaul our timber down to North Carolina. But it was a huge hurdle."

Another facet of being "the only one" is how logging exists in the public consciousness. McLaughlin spends a lot of time

The yard at Old Castle Lawn and Garden, one of the only remaining markets for low grade wood in the state of Rhode Island.

talking to curious (or angry) members of the public about what he is doing. “99% of people, if you explain to them what’s going on, are reasonable. It’s education more than anything.”

He interfaces a lot with a public that has never seen a log truck, and he wishes that weren’t the case. “It’s so cool when you go somewhere that you see log trucks and you see guys logging. You drive through Pennsylvania or New York State and you’re passing log trucks all the time. You’re not doing that in New Jersey,” said McLaughlin.

Logging in Rural Rhode Island

In Rhode Island, Bob Thurber lives on Jerimoth Hill, the highest point in the state. It was named for Jerimoth Brown, a progenitor of the Brown family that went on to found Brown University, and Brown’s body is buried in a small historic cemetery on Thurber’s land. Thurber works on quite a few historic tracts, and his corner of Rhode Island is dotted with farmhouses that have been standing since the 1700s and 1800s. Thurber has lived in the region all his life, along with his longtime partner, Martha, (“She was a tree hugger when I met her,” Thurber said with a mischievous grin) and their son, Eric, who is currently in school for forestry in Maine.

It’s clear from spending any amount of time with Thurber that his son is his pride and joy. He helped Eric get started logging in Maine as a part-time job during breaks from college. But when it comes to his son moving back to work in Rhode Island, Thurber feels conflicted. “Of course, I want him to be here, but I don’t want him to start his career somewhere he can’t make a living,” said Thurber. “There’s better opportunity up in Maine. Sometimes I think of going up there myself, but I’ve worked my whole life here. I can’t just drop it and go.”

With his son in another state, Thurber doesn’t always work with someone else, but he’ll work with contractors when he can. It’s not easy to find qualified help, so he is in the business of training people, which is, of course, an investment. “It’s got to be someone who really loves the woods. I have a young man working with me right now and I keep telling him he’s nuts. But he really wants this. We’ve got a lot of construction companies down here between the paving and the road infrastructure, and the bridge work. The unions can obviously offer a lot more pay and benefits than I could even begin to do.”

Continued Thurber, “It was tough when I got started years ago, but there were a lot more mills back then. What used to be an insatiable appetite for wood around here has become a situation where I have a hard time selling wood locally. There’s timber that I’ve been sitting on for the past 29 years that is just too good to let go. It’s not firewood; it’s too big for firewood. It’s beautiful lumber-quality timber that I’m hoping to see hit the market before it is full of wormholes and stain and rot. I’m trying to do as much as I can with the resources I have. But it has been a real challenge.”

In small states like Rhode Island where the land base has become increasingly fragmented over the years, it's often hard for loggers to operate. "I'm still trying to pay people for their timber and not charge to cut their timber, and that's getting more and more difficult" said Thurber. "The average size of a parcel in Rhode Island is 10 acres. It's someone's backyard. Timber revenue is not a high priority for landowners. It's aesthetics, forest health, wildlife, water quality protection."

Thurber has cut small parcels his entire career, and there are plenty of roads in his region where he's harvested pretty much every woodlot on the road. It's not all doom and gloom ("things blossom if you do a nice job") but the operational costs of moving equipment in on small parcels is high. Also, in Rhode Island, where the gypsy moth has decimated the oak and many landowners need dead trees removed from their forests, the costs of operation frequently exceed the revenue. "It's become a tough sell," said Thurber. "I want to help because I care about the forest, but I don't know if I can sell the timber."

Bob Farrier, a logger in Rhode Island, is nothing if not diversified. In order to make it work in central Rhode Island, he runs a company that does logging, tree work, road work, and kiln-dried firewood. "It's tough in a small state," said Farrier, "there are no markets. I've been in the industry for 45 years and when I got started there were probably ten or fifteen decent-sized mills in the state. Now everything has got to be trucked out." Farrier said he saw the shift coming back in the late 1990s and early 2000s and diversified his business extensively to deal with the shrinking markets for sawlogs.

Bob Thurber loves working in Rhode Island. But he's one of the only loggers left in the state.

Farrier, whose company has employees spread through its different areas, said, "My biggest problem around here is labor. It's tough to fill that many seats. You can't find qualified employees, so you spend a lot of time running in circles trying to wear too many hats. You grab new guys and train them properly and after they are trained, they go out on their own. We have a lot of rural land, a lot of forest, but the labor force is just not there. I look every day."

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Both Farrier and Thurber have struggled to get people together to organize around the issue of workman's comp but, said Farrier, "It's not a big timber state and most loggers are independent. It's like pulling teeth to get people organized."

Business is tough, but a high point of working in a small state close to big metropolitan centers is the viability of the mulch market. Both Thurber and Bob Farrier both send wood to Old Castle Lawn and Garden, a facility that produces over 80 different kinds of bagged earth and has been a hugely important market for lowgrade wood in the state. The company is expanding. "If it weren't for Old Castle," commented Thurber, "I'd be out of business. It's good to see them doing well."

The Importance of Community

Loggers are independent people. But having a strong community backbone is what makes that independence workable.

In an industry that is known for its collaborative spirit, it can be frustrating when there is no one around in the same industry to have your back or, perhaps on a more personal level, understand what you're up against. Everything from trucking, to equipment repairs, to community education, to infrastructure problems becomes more difficult when you don't have an organized workforce to handle some of the issues that come up on the job.

Said McLaughlin, "It's not like I get more money to do it, just because I'm the only one. It's not like I wouldn't want camaraderie here. And then when that one percent comes out to argue with you about your work at meetings, it would be nice to have other people standing behind you, but there is nobody behind you."

Thurber, for his part, sees the decline of the industry and the health of the forest in Rhode Island as a potentially dire problem. "I've got a lot of money tied up to make a little bit of money," said Thurber. "But I love what I do, and I don't do it solely for the money. So, I just try to keep those things in perspective and hopefully we survive."

As an afterthought, he said, "Who knows, maybe one day I'll end up working seasonally for my son in Maine. But I love my home. It would be hard to leave this place." NL