

Trees for Tomorrow

by Douglas Cowell

In 1970 the British Columbia Forest Service was in trouble; it was quickly trying to expand its reforestation program but tree planting was generally considered the lowliest job in the forest. Planting crews were rounded up from beer parlours and hiring halls and reluctant planters seldom averaged 400 trees a day. It was not a hopeful situation.

Then the hippies hit. A great migration was taking



Dirk brinkman: Mr. Silviculture

place as thousands of disaffected young people flocked out of the cities and back to the land. In B.C., some of them tried tree planning. Two of the earliest were Ted Davis, an accomplished rock

climber, and Dirk Brinkman, a philosophy graduate.

Rather than working by the hour, Brinkman and Davis got a planting contract and did the impossible; they each planted 1500 trees a day, and with the help of a friend managed to plant 90,000 trees over a 20-day period.

They were so successful, in fact, that in the following year they planted one million trees. And they kept doing the impossible, season after season.

Each year they invited more family members and friends along and each time took on larger contracts. Yet it was never conducted like business; rather, the annual migration to the slopes became a tribal affair. But almost in spite of Brinkman and Davis, it grew like mad as a business.

In fact, in 1987 Brinkman and Associates Reforestation Ltd. grossed almost \$9.0 million and had nearly 1200 people in its payroll.

Throughout those heady early years, Brinkman and Davis continued to plant more and more trees with ever largest crews. Many of the planters hired were family or

friends from Brinkman's home town of Bowmanville, Ont. In 1975, however, he hired a young planter named Joyce Murray.

She was to have a profound affect on the boss-who-refused-to-be-boss. In 1977 they were married and it resulted in some interesting changes. "I went through some changes in my thinking," says Brinkman. "I decided in fact, that silviculture was what I was doing with my life so I might as well make a serious commitment to it."

As well, it was a time for departures. Ted Davis, by then an accomplished kendo (i.e. Japanese sword fighting) practitioner, accepted an invitation to study with masters in Japan.

"Joyce essentially replaced Ted's roll as the organizer, accountant, controller," Brinkman explains. "That was incredibly important because it allowed the operation to reach a more serious level since we were then working on it year round."

Over the next few years the phenomena grew at a breakneck pace. Perhaps most important was the use of the satellite crews. While Brinkman ran one contract, experienced plant-

ers began to run others. Suddenly, the opportunity for growth opened wide.

In 1979 the commitment to the business was taken one step further as Dirk Brinkman Contracting Ltd. and Loki reforestation were incorporated. (Loki had been created mainly handle contracts that involved labour unions.)

In 1982, the main company's name was changed again to Brinkman and Associates Reforestation Ltd. to reflect the growing involvement of the associates. And in the same year the Brinkmans finally settled down in a semi-rural part of Burnaby, B.C. and set up some portable aluminum office units two blocks away. Until they were spending half the year in the Kootenays and the other half in Vancouver.

"Personally, the relief for Joyce and me having things more organized- was enormous," says Brinkman.

He recognized that ten years of growth had resulted in a company that was then almost impossible to manage. He hadn't completely recognized the management requirements of dealing with that growth while it was happening.

Brinkman, therefore, took it upon himself to do the impossible once more. He strategically moved the company into a new five-year plan, one which can best be characterized as building a professional management team.

Full time staffs were hired; systems were set up to properly support and control the ever-growing crewing system; and facilities in Burnaby were gradually enlarged to include conference rooms, equipment storage and an overhaul facility for company vehicles.

One of the biggest issues in Brinkman's drive for professionalism has been staffing. Up until 1982, as the company grew it offered managerial and professional positions to experienced planters or to others who had worked their way up through the Brinkman ranks.

But the size and complexity of the demands being put on these people constantly increased and not always in their areas of expertise. The old relationships between planting buddies and family members too, proved insufficient for the demands of a modern business. Things had to change.

"So we put a greater demand on the people working with us to perform to be professional and do the job well." Brinkman says. "We required a higher level of competence."

That quest for efficiency and professionalism received a boost in December of 1986 when management consulted Tom Lattimer was called in. He liked what he saw so much that he decided to join the company and take on the responsibility of financial control, business planning, policy and procedures, government programs and budgeting.

One of his immediate tasks was to bring the company-kicking and screaming if need be-into the 1980s as far as management and computer systems go. As a result, software programs have been written in house and are running on a growing network of Macintosh computers.

All manner of business is now done digitally at Brinkman. Bids are developed on computerized models; basic cost data is provided to each supervisor who is also provided with a budget when he or she goes onto the field. As well, actual and budgeted costs are recorded

and variances noted; and key performance factors such as cost of food, transportation, production rate and net revenues are all tracked and analyzed.

Still, there are some things that are not about to change. The most important has to do with relationships. Many of the 14 full time employees are old friends, ex-tree planters and Brinkman originals.

"We are definitely making a shift," Brinkman admits. "But we are maintaining the integrity with our relationship with planters, supervisors, clients, and suppliers."

There is also that peculiar Brinkman atmosphere created by the boss-who-refuses-to-be-called-a-businessman. It's an easy, informal atmosphere with wide latitude for individuality.

Lattimer, for instance, works in a shirt and tie, while computer programmer Gordon Murray wears full-blown clown suits as his regular office attire. It's as if the mainstream and the counter culture magically meshed so that they can appreciate each other's abilities and idiosyncrasies.

In an industry rife with complaints about

contractors going broke and planters not being paid, Brinkman has always been known as an honest player. Alastair McColl, president of the Pacific Reforestation Workers Association (PRWA), a planters' group with many members working on Brinkman crews, says that his organization's relations with Brinkman have been pretty good. He adds, however, that, since Brinkman gives his crew supervisors a fair amount of independence, working conditions can sometimes vary and generate occasional complaints.

But McColl views Brinkman as a visionary and leader in the industry. In fact, impossible as it sounds, Dirk Brinkman was one of the founders of the PRWA.

"He also almost single-handedly formed the Western Silvicultural Contractors Association (WSCA) and keeps it going," Says McColl. "He's the only one of them I can see that has any long term vision and works toward it. He's done much the same with the Ontario Contractors Association."

In fact, Dirk Brinkman is constantly involved with silvicultural issues beyond the immediate interests of his company.

Besides being a founder of above, he was an invited delegate to four of the six Canadian Forest Congresses held from 1985 through 1987.

In March of 1987, he was the first silvicultural contractor invited to present a paper Association's annual meeting in Montreal. The CBC's 'Journal' carried a documentary on him in the fall of 1987. By his own estimation Brinkman spends two thirds of his time on company business and one third on public involvement in silvicultural issues.

As well, word on the street has it that Brinkman was an important influence on the content of British Columbia's new forest policy in the area of forest renewal.

"If we seem to be leading in some of the directions," Brinkman explains, somewhat downplaying his involvement, "it's partly because we're interested in effecting changes... but the best way is to show the way."

One of those ways has been to change the company's focus from constant growth in volume of trees planted (i.e. 37 million trees in 1987) to consolidation and vertical integration.

In fact Brinkman is projecting a slightly smaller income for his company in 1988 compared to 1987.

Rather than planting more trees, Brinkman wants to provide more services; such things as juvenile spacing, brushing and weeding, conifer release, browsing control, pest control, cone picking and girdling. In short, he says he wants the company to gear up for a new level of skillfulness.

Not that 1988 is going to be a slow year for the company. It will have 18 to 20 crews- perhaps a thousand people- rattling down logging roads in 50 to 80 vehicles. Roughly half will be in B.C. half in Ontario. It's early yet to tell but there may also be some crews planting in Alberta and perhaps some contracts in Manitoba and Quebec.

On the management side, another project begun in 1987 is due to flower this year. The company hired a full time trainer to develop a whole array of staff training programs including such things as videos and films. The first project-a course on training-the-trainers- is a due out in 1988.

Other plans, especially for the long range? The visionary Brinkman pauses and with gaze a drift answers: "NASA has an ongoing biosphere project to establish an ecosystem on Mars. I intend to develop a company that's here long after I'm gone and I'd to love to get that contract."

Sound impossible? Not really when you come to think of who's dreaming that impossible dream.