



Wis. Contractor Leans Heavily on TimberPro Company Has Line-Up of TimberPro Carriers, Forwarders for Land-Clearing Operations

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ASHLAND, Wisconsin — A big challenge is met by a way and a will, and great things are accomplished. Sometimes being part of a huge undertaking even clarifies direction in life. Craig Vernon, vice president of Northern Clearing Inc., knows the feeling.

While still in high school, Craig worked summers for his father, who wanted him to go to college to study accounting. "When I went on my first pipeline job, I was hooked," said Craig. "You're moving a half-mile to two miles a day, very fast moving. It's very exciting. It's fun."

Envisioning the pipeline ahead and looking back on what had been accomplished inspired Craig. He knew he wanted to join his father's land-clearing company. First, however, he would study accounting.

Today, Northern Clearing Inc. (NCI) is owned by Craig and his brothers, Richard Vernon, president, and Todd Vernon, vice president.

The company has a wide scope of operations. Land clearing work is the "golden egg" at NCI, said Craig, but there have been slow times over the years. During the lulls, NCI began expanding its services. In 1989, for instance, the company began to do site work for new golf courses. William Kopela plays a special role in that effort. "He helps us bid out a lot of the golf course work," said Craig.

Site work of various kinds, including wetland mitigation, ski hills and athletic facilities, is now a specialty of NCI. So is

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pipeline recoating. The company also performs land clearing work, including land for utility rights-of-way, and performs other services to restore and maintain forests and landscapes. NCI works in the Great Lakes region as well as states as far away as Texas and Colorado.

Clearing land for a new right-of-way area can be particularly tricky, especially when it involves felling and removing a substantial number of trees. "Sometimes on a right-of-way we're limited down to 25 feet wide," said Craig. The limit is strict. Equipment cannot cross the boundary on either side, and trees must be felled within the right-of-way.

Felling by hand with a chainsaw usually is the method of choice when a tree must be removed in a confined area. Craig has worked with chainsaws for years and has long relied on saws from Husqvarna.

"I started out as a laborer," he said. "I'd run a chainsaw." He moved on to operating a dozer with a rake and then backhoes. Later he began operating forestry equipment, such as feller-bunchers and cutters. "My favorite machine is the backhoe because you can do a lot with it," said Craig.

In recent years, he has found a machine that he appreciates as much as a backhoe. It is a wheeled forwarder from TimberPro Inc. in Shawano, Wis. When Craig spoke with *TimberLine* in early October, he had several TimberPro machines on his equipment roster.

NCI owns two TimberPro TF830 forwarders as well as a TimberPro TF810, and it has ordered another TF810. The company also owns two of the TimberPro predecessors, Timbco 820F machines. (Timbco is now part of Komatsu; Pat Crawford, after selling the track division of Timbco in 2002, launched TimberPro with the rights he retained to the wheeled carrier design.) In addition to owning the TimberPro eight-wheel forwarders, NCI leases six more TimberPro forwarders.

There is no machine that can match the performance of the TimberPro forwarder for working in the right-of-way setting,

said Craig. “The full swing, that’s the key,” he explained. “It lets you work in a narrow width.”

NCI purchased the Timbco 820F machines directly from Pat and his new company. Beginning with the two TimberPro TF830 machines, NCI began purchasing them through a dealer, Woodland Equipment Inc. in Iron River, Mich. Woodland Equipment is the TimberPro dealer for Michigan and Wisconsin.

Craig had bought a few grapple skidders from Woodland Equipment over the years, but he has worked more closely with the dealership since buying the TimberPro machines. “They’re great people,” said Craig. “That Woodland company is awesome.”

Craig has worked with Woodland Equipment president Ron Beauchamp, sales manager George Pond Jr., and others. The entire staff has provided exceptional service, he said. He is glad the decision to invest in TimberPro machines led him to work with the dealership.

Having bought and leased so many TimberPro forwarders in fairly recent years, Craig is knowledgeable about improvements. For instance, the newest machines are manufactured with a heavier boom structure. The strengthened boom is a “big help” to NCI, he said.

However, the full swing capability on the TimberPro cab is one of the most important benefits to NCI. “Whoever thought of that thing, the 360-degree turn — it’s helped us,” said Craig.

Pat listens to the people who buy and operate his machines, considers their feedback and makes improvements accordingly, according to Craig. Pat was in Ashland recently when Gov. James Doyle visited an Xcel Energy power plant. When he was in Ashland, Pat sat down to lunch with Craig and others and listened to their feedback about TimberPro equipment. “He took notes,” said Craig.

The newest TimberPro machines also feature

improvements for fire prevention. The engine and exhaust systems are sealed from forest debris, and the exhaust and muffler are covered with a high-temperature wrap. Power can be turned off at the batteries from an operator switch in the cab.

The TimberPro TF830 forwarder also is equipped with an onboard fire extinguisher and an Ansul® system, a premium brand of Tyco Fire and Security's fire suppression line. A 10-pound dry chemical extinguisher is standard on the machine, and a 30-pound loaded stream antifreeze extinguisher is optional.

The base of operations for NCI is Ashland, Wis., a town of 8,200 residents. It is located on Chequamegon Bay on the western edge of Lake Superior. Ashland is a summer destination for vacationers looking for cool temperatures, picturesque environs and water sports.

Xcel Energy has an innovative three-unit power generation station on Lake Superior, Bay Front Plant, that NCI helps supply with hog fuel. The power plant has a history going back to 1916. Xcel Energy uses different sources of fuel to power the plant. For example, since 1979 the company has used wood waste, railroad ties, used tires, and other materials.

Although NCI started out working in the northern part of the Badger State, the company routinely crisscrosses the nation performing contracts for private landowners, businesses and government agencies. NCI has completed jobs in 36 states, and it will bid on contracts in any state except California. It has completed site work for dozens of golf courses, working with more than 10 different architects on projects.

NCI has 70 full-time employees and approximately 400 seasonal employees in a single year. Employees are unionized and belong to labor groups that correspond with their job categories. The electrical right-of-way workers, for example, belong to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). When NCI contracts for jobs in another state, it arranges with unions to hire 50% of required workers locally.

Craig focuses on electrical right-of-way clearing and reclamation, Richard handles golf course and excavation projects and Todd oversees land clearing for pipelines. However, they sometimes share duties in the three areas. The brothers are in communication with each other daily to monitor projects and the company's operations. Most of the traveling to monitor jobs falls to Todd.

NCI got its start when Craig's father, George Vernon, had a bit of bad luck. "My dad was a dairy farmer and his barn burned," said Craig. Instead of rebuilding, George went to work for a construction company that installed utility poles. From that vantage, he saw a need for crews to work ahead of the construction company, clearing more land.

George and two partners (his brother, Wayne, and his brother-in-law, Bernard Guski; he eventually bought them out) took out a business loan and launched NCI in 1966. George tapped his knowledge of business and his experience clearing land on his farm.

Having been interested in his father's business for as long as he can remember, Craig always planned to join NCI. Over the years the company has grown, of course, as well as diversified.

One thing that Craig avoids, however, is competing with loggers. "We try to stay out of" merchandising wood, he said. "I don't like to compete. Our expertise is clearing rights-of-way."

However, NCI collaborates with loggers. Loggers in the Lake Superior region needing to dispose of slash, tops or low-grade wood can take it to NCI, which grinds it into hog fuel for the Xcel Energy plant.

"We do a lot of grinding," said Craig. "We have lots of different grinders. In some states we can burn," but usually not. NCI owns a Morbark 2036 whole-tree chipper, two Morbark 3036 whole-tree chippers, a Morbark 4600 wood hog, two Morbark 1200 XL tub grinders, a Peterson Pacific 6710 and a Peterson Pacific 4710. NCI also owns a number of chippers,

including models supplied by Bandit and Vermeer.

What happens to the wood harvested by NCI depends on the particular job, and often, where the company is working. For instance, in areas where the emerald ash borer beetle is a threat, wood must be processed by grinding to ¼-inch pieces or smaller, and none of it can remain on site. Some contracts specify that wood chips or grindings will be left or moved and what mills will receive saw logs.

For felling, NCI relies on feller-bunchers whenever feasible. It owns six, including Timberjack, Tigercat and John Deere models, as well as a number of bulldozers. The company also leases a considerable amount of equipment. NCI typically leases equipment from local dealers when it works on jobs in the South.

NCI has 16 semi-tractors (WesternStar and Peterbilt) and lowboy trailers for moving equipment. “We hire a lot of trucking companies,” too, said Craig. “We use rail if there’s time.”

The versatility of the TimberPro eight-wheel forwarders purchased since 2006 from Woodland Equipment have made a big impact on NCI’s operations. Of course, they can be used to move logs, but they also are used for other tasks. They are used to move and place road mats when the company needs them working on pipeline or other projects. Some of the TimberPro machines — the TF810, TF820 and TF830 — are dual-purpose carriers; they can be operated with a grapple or a harvesting head, and the attachment can be changed in about 10 minutes.

Trying to identify a project as most memorable is difficult, said Craig, but working in Colorado is a great treat. The scenic albeit remote areas where NCI has worked in Colorado provide a picturesque work environment and solitude. How remote are such places? They have guard houses, said Craig, and the work roads are shut down when the snow is deep.

NCI works with many different kinds of clients, and running the business is invigorating, said Craig. “We’re excited to go to work in the morning,” he said. “The day goes by quick.”

Craig spends free time with his family. “I love my family, so I spend a lot of time with them.” That includes church, youth group outings, sporting events, and other activities related to his children. Craig also enjoys hunting and fishing.

Communicating on a regular basis is essential to harmony when family members work together, said Craig. “We make sure we stay on the same playing field,” he said.

“The three of us brothers give thanks every day to the good Lord and what he gave us.”

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