

CRUSADE IN THE WOODS

By Jerry Thompson

The soft patter of rain falling through branches, spattering the leaves and tapping the nylon tents of Dirk Brinkman's bush camp promises a cold, muddy day in the woods of northern Ontario. Experienced tree planters huddle against the chill and try to go back to sleep; the new "greeners" lie there half wakened by the rain, probably still dreaming of stumps, shovels, dirt and damp seedlings.

Brinkman has flown in during the night from Vancouver, the first leg of a troubleshooting, summer-long trip that will take Canada's largest tree-planting contractor across the nation several times.

In 1988, Brinkman & Associates Reforestation Ltd., of New Westminster, B.C., planted 37.5 million trees across Canada - a vital resource worth more than \$8 million.

This Brinkman camp, about a three-hour drive northwest of Thunder Bay, is one of nine scattered across northern Ontario. Nine more crews are planting in



Meet Dirk Brinkman and his frontline troops in the campaign to replant a nation

British Columbia, one in Alberta, one in Manitoba - between 600 and 1000 people at peak season. Brinkman has come to Ontario to evaluate a new training program for his greeners and to investigate the frost kill of two million seedlings at a nursery nearby.

Brinkman and tree planters like him are tackling one of Canada's toughest problems: replanting approximately 20 million hectares of forest land - land blackened, scarred or left barren by insects, disease, forest fires and clear-cut logging - that threatens to undermine our number one industry.

For many of the 348 Canadian communities whose economic mainstay is the

forest industry, the continuous cutting and burning of more trees that we plant has become a serious problem. At the current cutting rate, experts predict some regions will run out of mature forest long before the new forest is ready for harvest. Some mills are already experiencing a scarcity of logs.

SHORTLY before 5 a.m. Brinkman and his planters awaken to the smell of fresh coffee. As a clanging bell makes morning official, they crawl from down filled sleeping bags, zip shut their rain-slick tents and stumble down muddy paths to breakfast. Daylight shows clusters of multicoloured pup tents and geodesic domes on the shore of a small, unnamed lake. For the crew of 42 planters – the majority of them university students who earn between five and ten thousand dollars for approximately 60 days' work – this Brinkman camp will be only the first of a half dozen temporary homes for the summer.

With winter's last frost barely thawed from the ground they will troop across rolling hills like a tribe of gypsies. All over our massive north woods, thousands more young, energetic tree planters are camped at the edge of logged-out wilderness areas, ready to chase the melting snow line up countless mountain-sides. As soon as they finish planting one section, they move camp to the next valley that needs a new forest.

Just after 6 a.m. the planters gulp the last of their coffee and join a tabletop assembly line, preparing sandwiches for lunch. They stuff plastic bags full of sliced carrots and celery, apples and a trail mix of nuts, dried fruit, seeds and grains. It will be a tough, 12-hour day

and they won't return to the campsite until suppertime.

The planters have draped themselves in layers of clothing: cotton long johns with sweat pants, army fatigues or jeans and rubber rain gear. Some wear heavy woolen socks and caulked boots; others trust their sneakers not to slip on the greasy logs. Some prefer to use rubber gloves to protect their hands from the pesticides sprayed on the seedlings.

When supervisors honk their horns at 6:15 a.m., lunch buckets, hard hats and shovels clatter across tailgates as the crew scrambles into three vans and a truck for the half-hour drive to the planting sites. Shortly after seven, they stop near the end of a washed-out logging road, where a sea of blackened stumps and low brown weeds carpets the rolling hills. Large cardboard boxes marked "Trees for Tomorrow" are stashed by the road. The boxes are impregnated with wax and lined with paper so that the 350 seedlings, sprayed with water and sealed inside, remain fresh.

The planters lift the dripping bundles of greenery, careful not to bang the tender roots as they fill three vinyl bags with some 350 jack pine seedlings. When the bags are fully loaded, the planters slip their arms through padded shoulder-straps, then stand and buckle the waist belt to help distribute the weight of up to 27 kilograms. Then they begin their hike across the valley to designated planting sites.

With short-handled, narrow-bladed shovels, they scrape away debris, dig, bend and plant as quickly as they can. For those who've mastered the technique, as taught by Brinkman and his

team, the movement is fluid, efficient and almost painless. The motion is completed with a tamp of the boot and a light tug on theseedling to make sure it's firmly planted.

By 9 a.m. this crew has been at work for two hours with a cold spring rain running down the backs of their necks. Steamy breath hangs in the air as cold, red hands clutch thermos cups of hot black coffee before bagging up another load of trees. These are the muddy boot people who have become a part of our frontline troops in this campaign to replant a nation.

FOR Brinkman himself, the campaign began in British Columbia's Kootenay Mountains during the summer of 1970 when he drifted west from his home in Ontario's Durham County. After college, he had a hunger for adventure and a desire to do "something positive" with his life. With only \$360 between them, he and a friend decided to build a sailboat and explore the Pacific. But they needed a grubstake and got a contract planting trees.

When he bid on his first contract in the fall of 1970, a government forester estimated there would be enough work for 12 people for 30 days. Brinkman and a friend decided to do the entire project themselves. It was customary then for planting crews in the BC interior to live at home and drive to the work site each morning. The Brinkman team camped at the site and avoided time lost commuting.

"An official from Victoria showed up when he heard we were planting 1400 seedlings a day," Brinkman recalls with a grin. "Back then it was inconceivable

that anyone could plant that many and still keep the planting quality up."

Before an early snowfall forced them to stop, after 21 days in the bush, Brinkman and his friend had planted 95,000 seedlings, and the idea for a company was born.

By the summer of 1978, Brinkman was operating a year-round business, running one crew and supervising several others. At on time or another all nine of his brothers and sisters, plus family and friends, worked with him. In the spring on 1975 he had hired Joyce-Murray, the fastest female planter any of them had ever seen. Two years later she married Brinkman and became organizer, bookkeeper and company administrator. Twelve years later, the Brinkmans have three young children.

At the same time, the business has become much more complex. In 1982, federal and provincial governments launched a tree-planting campaign called the Forest Resource Development Agreement (FRDA). Even though 85 percent of Canada's productive forests are on Crown land owned by the provinces or territories, the federal government agreed to share the cost of replanting. In 1988 nearly 900 million trees were planted across Canada under various tree-planting programs including the FRDAs. By the end of the five-year program, governments will have spent more than a billion dollars to plant and tend 1.5 billion trees.

Brinkman warns, however, that those new seedlings will cover only 750,000 hectares. "Simply planting a lot of trees is not good enough," he says. "We have to make sure that what we plant survives."

Stooping in the knee-deep brush to check the progress of trees planted several years ago, Brinkman illustrates his point. The tips of young spruce seedlings are barely visible above the clump of faster-growing weeds. In the wilderness, spruce, pine and fir trees take up to a 100 years to mature.

Silviculture, the art and science of growing a forest, attempts to produce trees of the same size in as little as 50 years by giving the seedlings a head start over weeds and other natural impediments.

“Growing trees is like tending a garden,” says Brinkman. “If we don’t thin and space, weed and fertilize just as we would a carrot patch, then a large part of what we plant won’t survive. We can’t afford to just plant them and walk away; we have to farm the forest.”

BY NIGHTFALL, in northwestern Ontario, the rain has stopped. A handful of stars poke holes in the clouds and the cook tent radiates a light the colour of buttermilk. Dinner at Brinkman’s camp has ended, dishes are being washed in large plastic tubs. This evening, instead of turning in early, the crew gathers around the tables for a special presentation: the Greener Awards.

This bush-camp version of Hollywood’s Academy Awards marks the graduation of Brinkman’s rookies, the transition from greeners to full-fledged planters. Amid raucous laughter and enthusiastic applause, they step forward to accept their prizes – fastest planter, most diligent, most co-operative, most punctual. Then camp supervisor Roland Emery, grinning from ear to ear, holds his hands up for silence. “And now, the moment

we’ve all been waiting for, the award for the best all-round planter...” Forty-two voices drop to a whisper as Emery produces the envelope with a flourish. “And the winner is...Joey!”

A thin, lanky, dark-haired youth moves to the front, an athletic swivel to his walk. “Three thousand trees in one day!” shouts Emery above the applause.

“Ninety-eight percent of them planted perfectly too!” Joey Rampton, a National Hockey League prospect who decided to go to the University of Toronto medical school instead, flashes an aw-shucks smile as he accepts his prize and ambles back to his hiding place in the crowd. Finally Emery asks the boss to say a few words. Brinkman tells this crew of mostly green planters that he is impressed, not only with their speed but with the quality of their planting. He talks about the backlog of barren wilderness, the urgent need for well-trained, highly motivated tree planters, and how proud they should be of the job they are doing. At the end of a long, wet, and muddy day, this is music to their ears. They cheer and clap one last time, then drift off to sleeping bags dead tired. After all, they’ve planted 78,000 trees today.

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