



MORBARK

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▶ Starting Out

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▶ Old Blue



Old Chipper Breathes New Life Into New York Contractor's Business

There are days when, no matter how hard you try, how much effort you put into a task, nothing seems to go right. And then there are those in which the planets seem to align, everything falls into place and life is good. A couple years back, Mark Congden, owner of a central New York logging and landclearing business that bears his name, had one of those outstanding days and it quite literally changed his life. Looking to grow his business from one that hauled chips to one that produced them, he set out to look for a whole tree chipper. This being the information age, he did what any internet savvy person looking for goods does: he turned to eBay. There, in one of the strangest bits of luck, the collector of vintage machinery found a 1970 Morbark whole tree chipper which, for reasons to be explained below he calls "Old Blue." That purchase allowed him to redefine his business and, because he uses it in his everyday operation, underscored what he had already heard about the longevity of Morbark's equipment. All in all, a very nice turn of events.



► Not That Cleveland

Cleveland, New York is a quaint village of less than 800 residents and sits on the heavily wooded northern shore of Lake Oneida near Syracuse. According to Mark Congden, logging is a big part of the local economy and has been his livelihood in one form or another for better than two decades now.

“I have been hauling wood chips for other contractors since about 1987,” he says. Most of that time it has been in support of nearby Colgate University which has a well-established biomass program on campus. I started out subcontracting as a wood chip hauler, then began purchasing chips from other area grinding companies and hauling them to the university. About three years ago felt I was ready to take the next step and start generating the chips myself.”

While that move to the next level offered its share of economic gains, it went much further than that says Congden.

“One thing I learned early on about Colgate is that, as a supplier, you need to be very reliable, and purchasing wood from

others didn't allow that. As long as I was buying wood from an outside source, there was no real way I could guarantee the college I could provide the quantity and quality of chips they needed, when they needed it. That left me no choice but to start looking around for my own chipper.”

► Online Treasure Find

As mentioned, Congden started—and finished—his chipper search with a visit to eBay, the online auction site. A single entry of “Whole Tree Chipper” into the search box yielded a surprising result.

“It brought up a Morbark 22-inch whole tree chipper being offered for a fraction of what I was expecting to pay,” he says. “The description said it was a 1970 model chipper that had previously been owned by the City of Chicago and kept out near O'Hare airport for more than three decades. Apparently, whenever the surrounding municipalities would suffer serious storm damage, they would bring green waste debris to an airport collection site and the City would call the unit into duty to aid in the cleanup. So, despite its age,

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the hours on the unit were not that bad.”

Congden adds that the chipper was unlike any other Morbark unit he could ever recall seeing. Instead of the company’s traditional orange color, it was painted a sky blue (most likely to match Chicago’s other equipment); at more than 22-feet, its deck was easily three times longer than most of today’s chippers; it discharged chips off the left side of the machine rather than the right side as is commonplace today; and it carried a serial number of 1102.

“Because of that number, I knew immediately that this was one of the first units of this size Morbark had manufactured,” he says. “Being an avid collector of vintage farm engines and machinery, it seemed like I was just meant to have this machine. So I bought it, brought it back here to Cleveland, dubbed it ‘Old Blue’ (for obvious reasons) and got it ready for work.”

A Reliable Source

To ensure a steady source of chips, Congdon secured contracts with a number of customers he had met while hauling for other companies, then grew the business strictly through word-of-

mouth and referrals. He chose to focus his efforts on landclearing as well as selective forest thinnings and cleanups.

“I needed, first and foremost, to make sure Colgate always had everything it needed to keep its boilers fueled. They were the real reason I got into this part of the business, so I got my first contracts into place and set to work. I was counting on ‘Old Blue’ to be the workhorse of

the operation—a tall order for a 35+year-old piece of equipment—but she definitely rose to the challenge. That chipper has been at work every day with us now for more than three years and gives us all the production we need and then some.”

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Colgate University is obviously pleased with the service Congden has been providing and has shown so by continually shifting more of its order for chips to his firm. To meet that need, Congden has added a second machine, a Morbark 20 Chiparvestor, a relatively “new” 1997 model it purchased from Wellsville, NY Morbark dealer L.C Whitford Equipment. That unit provides backup should any unforeseen downtime occur, and allows Congden to ramp up volumes in winter when Colgate’s demand is at its highest.

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“We chip and transport anywhere from 66 tons per day in summer to four times that amount in winter. In fact, there were a few weeks last winter when we were running 15 loads a week through each chipper—that’s better than 1,000 tons of chips headed to Colgate.”

▶ A Dream Instead of a Nightmare

Given its age and time in service, Congden was understandably concerned that “Old Blue” could present a potential maintenance and parts availability nightmare. However, he says those concerns have proven unfounded.

“I guess I can’t speak to the availability of any major components because, in the three years the machine’s been working for us, I’ve never had to order any major parts; it’s been that reliable. The few things I did order though—some valve parts, for example—were standard enough that Morbark had them in stock.”

It’s important to note that the schedule Congden Logging and Landclearing maintains is anything but easy. The University demands chips regardless of how inclement the weather is, meaning that

Congden and his crew are in the woods through steady downpours, heavy snowfalls, bitter cold and searing heat.

“We don’t have the luxury of waiting out any bad weather,” he says. “But that’s fine with me as long as I can keep the people at Colgate happy. They are an outstanding customer and I work hard to make sure they are taken care of. The performance of both machines has been outstanding at helping me do that, but I have to be particularly impressed with

‘Old Blue.’ She has no problem at all keeping pace with the newer chipper which is really saying something. I guess I went into this business hoping for the best from my equipment and got even more than I had hoped for.”

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Opportunity created

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