

B E T W I L E E N the BRANCHES

The Hodge Brothers By Paul Iarocci

Successful businessman and unconventional thinker, Eddie Hodge talks about Williston Timber's new low impact thinning concept and why, once upon a time, he and his brothers bought an unproven one-off machine from a bunch of Canadians.

Pulled off beside a north Florida highway in 1992 was a Mack truck hauling a strange looking feller buncher. Two guys stood armed and ready with a punch and die set and a ball-peen hammer: a truck driver called Don Snively and a tradesman named Jim Wood. Both worked for MacDonald Steel, a fabricating plant in Cambridge, Ontario.

Serial numbers and paper work were minor details that no one thought about

during the rush to get the prototype Tigercat 726 feller buncher designed and built, that is until the prospect of jail loomed.

When it came time to build the prototype Tigercat 726 in 1992, Wood was the obvious choice. As a licensed electrician, millwright and automotive mechanic, he had the skills and talent to deal with the vagaries, complications and uncertainties that were sure to accompany the assembly of a new machine in the back corner of a steel fabrication plant. (Wood subsequently trained, Tim Koniuch, Curt Martin, Stewart Maurer, Ross MacDonald and Denton Rerrie as the build schedule increased from one to 30 per year. Tigercat was also lucky to hire assembler Larry Almond who had extensive technical experience with construction and forestry machines.)

The clock was ticking and Wood recalls being questioned by Tigercat president Tony Iarocci regarding the machine's state of readiness. "We can ship it now or wait three more weeks. Tony said 'ship it tomorrow.' We had the batteries bungee corded into the belly pan."

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Tigercat district manager Don Snively with Eddie Hodge, owner of Williston Timber and veteran MacDonald Steel employee Jim Wood who built the prototype 726 feller buncher. Photographed at the Hodge's farm January 2006.

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The operator can reach to the second row and remove trees without disturbing the stand or the ground.

Snively loaded the machine and climbed into the old Mack truck bound for Expo Southeast in Tifton, Georgia and Wood followed in a pick-up truck. They worked on the machine at rest stops in the evening. By the time they reached Georgia, it was acceptably finished. After the show the two of them, often accompanied by Iarocci and company owner, Ken MacDonald toured the southeast with the machine.

In 1992 Williston Timber was a big Deere customer. Recalling the Expo Southeast show, Williston co-owner Eddie Hodge says, "[The Deere representatives] were rushing us through the show to get us to the new Deere machines and we wanted to stop and look at this new Tigercat. The damn engine was turned around the wrong way... Besides it was a catchy name."

Shortly after the show the Eddie and his operator flew to Louisiana where the machine was being demonstrated and met up with Iarocci, MacDonald, Snively and Wood. There were not many trees left on the site but they made due. "We cut some stumps and drove it around on some hills and found a few standing trees," explains Eddie. Then he proposed a one-month trial.

Eddie recalls, "I said to Tony, 'If you want to you can bring that thing to Florida. We don't know anything about it, so you'll have to leave the mechanic with it. If it stays together for a month, we'll buy it.' So that was the deal. It didn't even have a serial

The well balanced 845 equipped with 36 in. triple grouser track pads leaves not a hint of a footprint.

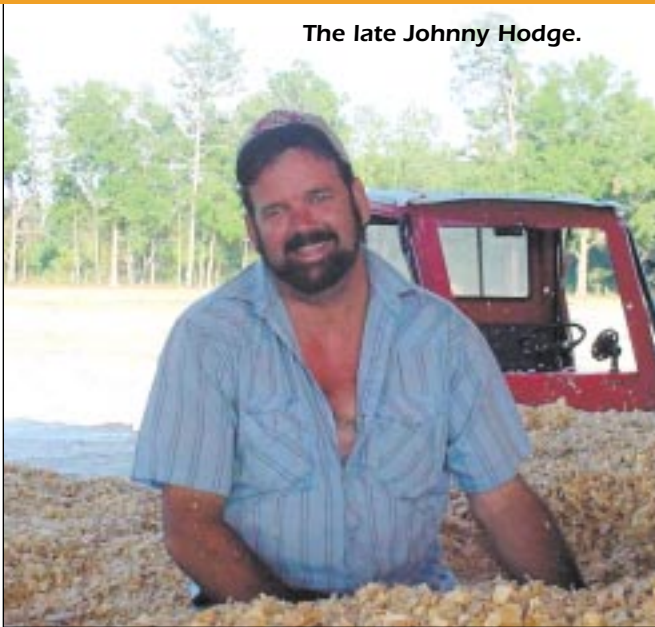
number on it. Don gets stopped by the Florida DOT [Department of Transportation.] They're calling us. He calls Canada and he's down for like half a day. You know stolen equipment moves like that, you grind the serial numbers off... They're from Canada. They don't have any paper work. They've got a day cab truck. And

all they wanted was to get rid of that thing and go home." By the time Snively dropped the machine to the Hodges and headed for home, he had been away 40 days.

Based in Williston Florida, Eddie, Johnny and Billy Hodge worked hard for twenty-five years building Williston Timber to where it is today. They played to each other's strengths. Eddie was the businessman and Johnny, a self-taught mechanical designer and inventor of specialized forestry equip-



The late Johnny Hodge.



ment. Of the youngest brother, Eddie says, "Billy is on the ground, getting things done." Together the three brothers kept operations running smoothly. Tragically, Johnny was killed in an accident. "Tragedy struck us hard on October the 5th, 2003, when we lost Johnny in a horrible truck accident," Eddie says. "We lost more than a brother, a loved one and best friend. Our loss of Johnny struck to the very heart and soul of this business as well."

For the record, the serial number started off as 726001. Snively and Wood stamped it with the punch and die, avoiding further brushes with the law. To head off any potential questions the finance company might have with purchasing a prototype, the serial number was subsequently changed to 7260101, "Like we've got 101 of them," jokes Eddie.

"When that 101 tractor came, you would have thought the county fair came to town. Every damn logger in central Florida came. Some saw it at the show but by word of mouth it spread pretty quick. They'd be out there watching it and they'd want to get up close."

"I remember that well," Wood cuts in. "On Sunday I'd be out there checking on the oil and greasing it and there would be ten guys to come out and look at it... on a Sunday."

As part of the deal, Wood stayed with the machine. "Jim's got the most boring job in the world," recalls Eddie. The machine ran day after day without incident. "He sat in the service truck with no AC for three weeks. The tractor never stopped working. He's still here on the weekend and he doesn't have anything to do. This goes on for three weeks and we haven't had a problem. He hadn't been home in two months. I talked to Don and Tony and told them that he's got to go home."

That was the beginning of a relationship that has lasted fourteen years. Williston Timber also purchased the first 720 feller buncher in Florida and the second 845 track feller buncher. They've owned at least seventeen Tigercats over the years, piling ten of thousands of hours on them.

Regardless of how well the machine worked in the first month, the 726 purchase was a big risk for Williston Timber. At the time, Tigercat had no dealer network. Parts were to be ordered directly from Canada. Eddie and Johnny had no idea if a second machine would ever be built.

But all this circumstance was somehow

"Tigercat was always going to come out with something opposite. Same as us. If someone tells us an idea won't work, we know we are on the right track."

The prototype 726.



reassuring to the brothers. "Tigercat was always going to come out with something opposite. Same as us. If someone tells us an idea won't work, we know we are on the

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right track," Eddie explains. Also the Hodge brothers liked the fact that Tigercat was a small upstart. To them, the new company brought its own unique advantages. The top people were accessible, hands-on and always listening to the end user. Eddie marvels at the fact that Ken MacDonald once flew parts to him in his own plane and that Iarocci regularly checked in on them and brought drawings for the new 720 thinning feller buncher for their comments and input.

Butch Garvin who ran the 101 tractor recalls, "That machine cut 36 loads a day in the first year. We changed one o-ring and no hoses." Eddie explains that to achieve that production, the machine would cut 30 loads in the daytime and an additional six in the evening.

Then he runs through a quick calculation of what the machine has produced over its lifetime. A meticulous record keeper, Eddie assures me he can prove that the machine has cut between 3,000 and 3,500 tons (2,720–3,175 t) per week between 1992 and 2005. His conservative estimate is somewhere between 1.5 and 2 million tons (1.36–1.8 mil. t) of timber.

Tigercat took the machine back after a year and a half to inspect it for wear. Williston used a loner in the meantime. Other than that, "We ran the machine from 1992 to 2005 straight through on one crew. We've never had a machine that could cut that many different sizes of wood," says Eddie.

The 620 runs 70 in. rubber to prevent soil disturbance even after heavy rain.



Retail packaging for the horse bedding. Eddie is proud of the mill Johnny built.

"The hydraulics ran so cool. We damn near wore out the hinges off the rear door, showing people how cool the hydraulics were. You could always hold your hand on the pumps and hoses. If it doesn't have any heat, it's not going to have any wear because it means it never has any friction. This is common sense."

Before Johnny's death the brothers decided to sell two of the five logging crews to long-time employees, although they still operate under the Williston Timber name. "We were getting too thin and we wanted to help them make a go of it," Eddie explains.

The remaining three crews employ 40 people, fourteen of which are Hodge family members. The Hodges' other businesses include a sod farm, a shaving mill that produces horse bedding, a sand mine and a site preparation crew that also doubles as a wildfire fighting crew when the need arises.

Eddie is especially proud of the shaving mill, which Johnny designed and built initially as a hobby. Eddie is quick to admit that

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during the mill's construction, he would come by every few days but mostly just tried to stay out of Johnny's way. Johnny was technically brilliant and Eddie marvels at his ability to figure out the inner workings of just about anything. These days the mill has 15 employees and often operates around the clock, seven days a week to supply the high quality bedding to farms and feed stores.

The site prep and logging crews work mostly for Plum Creek which bought out Georgia Pacific. Williston's relationship with G.P. and then Plum Creek has spanned over 25 years. In 1998, the brothers used their site prep equipment to help fight the devastating 1998 wildfires, working 28 days straight. Often it was only a few hours sleep that separated the exhaustingly long days.

The fires did a great deal of damage to Florida's swamps and ponds. Williston Timber was also involved in the salvage work, which released the new growth and brought the ponds back to life. The experience prompted Eddie and Johnny to

attain government certification for disaster relief and clean-up work for hurricanes, fires and other calamities.

Williston's newest concept is the low impact thinning crew. The idea stems from a number of realities affecting Florida's timber industry. Florida has a great deal of land that is due for first thinning. Over the last few years, the 'Sunshine State' has seen higher than average rainfall. Conventional wheel feller bunchers and skidders cannot operate on thinning sites when the soil is wet. Therefore rain causes shutdowns or forces thinning crews to seek higher and drier sites. Either way it upsets the contractor's production and wood flow to the mills.

Hodge's idea was to adapt one of his hardwood swamp crews to the more delicate task of pine plantation thinning. Industry pundits said the idea wouldn't work. Of course, that was just the encouragement that Hodge needed to pursue it.

Important considerations for any thinning application include removing the correct number and type of trees from the stand,

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preventing rutting which causes root damage and avoiding bark damage to standing trees. The overall goal is to minimize the



Even at 15 ft. - 10 in. wide the machine can operate effectively in the thinning corridors.

shock to the remaining stand and promote healthy future growth. First thinning pine is usually 15-17 years old with 12 ft. (3.65 m) row spacing. 35-40% is removed from the stand and used for pulp or chip and saw.

The crew has been operating successfully since late 2005.

The equipment consists of four TigerCats: An 845 feller buncher with 36 in. (915 mm) triple grouser track pads, a 620 skidder with 70 in. (1,780 mm) wide non-aggressive flotation tires, a 235 subframe mounted loader and a T240 track loader. Each machine has at least 14,000 operating hours.

The 845, which has clocked about 15,000 hours with a single operator, (Hodge likes to partner operator and machine for the long term) cuts the fifth row and then plucks trees in the first and second rows on either side using the boom reach to get into the second row with minimal tracking and no disturbance to the ground, foliage or standing trees. At 15 ft.-10 in. (4.9 m) wide, the 620 easily operates in the 24 ft. (7.3 m) corridors where the 845 leaves the bunches. Skid distance averages one quarter to a half mile. Hodge estimates that two or three decks are required to thin a 125 acre (50 ha) tract.

Phil Parker,
Plum Creek

resource manager for Florida likes the low impact thinning system because it is more versatile in terms of when and where you can operate. It extends the window and provides a more constant flow of timber but he stresses that it has to be joint venture. "It's a higher cost system so there has to be buy-in from the landowners," explains Parker. "Another advantage is that they can readily switch to cypress with the same system."

Hodge says that the crew has been able to operate after up to five inches (127 mm) of rainfall. The night previous to our visit to the job site, one inch of rain fell and there was no evidence of soil disturbance in the stand.

With the three-machine system, the crew is producing twelve loads per day for 1,500 tons (1,360 t) per week. Hodge is hoping to boost that number to 16 loads and 2000 tons (1,800 t) with the addition of a second early model 620 and the '101 tractor.' The 30,000 hour buncher will cut corridors when weather permits, leaving the 845 to follow and thin the adjacent rows.

As Eddie surveys a newly thinned tract of pine that looks virtually untouched by mechanical harvesting equipment, he turns to me and says, "What we're trying to do here is carry on a legacy. Johnny was the best you ever met. We've got a responsibility to carry on those qualities and that determination. The best you ever met." ■

A stand recently thinned with Williston Timber's low impact thinning crew.



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Wheels to TRACKS

By Paul Iarocci

Hudson Bay, Saskatchewan contractor Blair Lutz switches from drive-to-tree to track feller buncher.

Wading through waist deep powder snow in mixed boreal forest on the eastern edge of Saskatchewan is the last place one might expect to find a Tigercat drive-to-tree feller buncher. Contractor Blair Lutz, owner of Lutz Logging, has made the Tigercat 726B the cornerstone of his logging operation for the past three years.

Saskatchewan's actual annual cut averages five million cubic meters. (A cubic metre is approximately equal to one ton of timber.) Most of the harvesting activity takes place in the boreal plain, a region covering one quarter of the province. Predominant species include trembling aspen, jack pine, white spruce and black spruce.

The forestry industry in Saskatchewan roughly falls into three regions. In the west is the Meadow Lake area. The Prince Albert - Big River region in the centre of the province is currently facing some uncertainty with mill closures. In the east, the industry is focused around Hudson Bay. It is the Hudson Bay region where a handful of drive-to-tree feller bunchers are operating, with two 726B Tigercat machines among them.

A fur trading post established in 1757 evolved into a village that was named Hudson Bay Junction in 1909 by the Canadian Northern Railway Company. In the 1940s, 'Junction' was dropped, leaving the name Hudson Bay for a town 500 miles from the western coastline of Hudson Bay.

Forestry is deeply entrenched in the history and culture of the Hudson Bay area. Home to Canada's first plywood plant built in 1948, the Hamjea Plywood Company churned out up to 40 million sq.ft. (3.7 mil. m²) of plywood annually until 1958 when the plant was destroyed by fire.



The Wizewood aspenite plant opened in 1961, a joint venture between private sector investors and the provincial government. In 1965 Wizewood was sold to MacMillan Bloedel, which in turn sold the plant to Weyerhaeuser in 1999. Weyerhaeuser sold off the old aspenite OSB mill in pieces and built a new one in 2000.

Today Weyerhaeuser operates a plywood plant, the new OSB mill, as well as a saw mill in nearby Carrot River. When the company took over forestry operations in Hudson Bay, one of its efficiency measures was 'right sizing' the number of contractors feeding the mills from 34 to 11. It was left to the individual contractors to team up within three years or face the loss of their volume contracts. The magic number was 105,000 m³. At the time Lutz Logging was subcontract skidding for Biro Brothers which had an annual volume of 70,000 m³. Salmond Brothers, another local contractor, had a contract volume of 35,000 m³. Biro Brothers, Salmond Brothers and Lutz Logging joined forces to form Willow Logging.

Lutz purchased the 726B feller buncher three years ago. Prior to that the machine

(L-R) James Farquhar, Tigercat district manager; Chuck Miles, Redhead salesman; Keith Tiedjens and Lyle Fletcher, Lutz Logging operators; Ron Litton, Weyerhaeuser contract administrator; Frank Kovach, Lutz Logging crew foreman; Blair Lutz.

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Tough operating conditions for a wheel feller buncher.

was owned by Triple M Enterprises but even at that time the machine and its operator, Lyle Fletcher subcontracted for Biro Brothers. When Lutz bought the machine, Fletcher came with it and has been a Lutz Logging employee ever since.

In the 2004-2005 season, Willow Logging

produced 154,000 m³ of timber. Of that, 124,000 m³ was felled with the 726B. The terrain is often hilly, usually wet if not frozen and covered with snow for five months out of the year. The rough ground requires a great deal of maneuvering and machine travel to cut and lay the wood correctly for the skidders. Ambient operating temperatures range from -40 to 30°C (-40 to 86° F)

Double shifted for 24-hour day work cycles, the buncher has worked 13,000 hours with the original engine, main pump, saw pump and saw motor. Lutz is quick to point out, "The 726 never got cheated on service either. Lyle and Keith were good about that." Structurally, both the machine and the 5700 saw head are in excellent condition. "We were never in the centre section," says Lutz.

Keith Tiedjens who also operated the 726B is now running a brand new Tigercat 860C



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track feller buncher. The new machine is equipped with a Tigercat 5702 felling saw and 340 degree wrist and works five double shifts per week.

Before Lutz purchased the machine from Redhead Equipment in Saskatoon, he and Tiedjens went to visit the operation of Rick and Cheryl Watt, owners of Cherick Ventures. Cherick purchased the first 860C in the area in the summer of 2005. Rick and Cheryl spoke very highly of the machine. Operator Clayton Sheptak is so fond of the 860C that his own name adorns the cab window. Redhead salesman Chuck Miles had the decal made, surprising Sheptak with it one day.

Rick and Cheryl have been logging for fifteen years and are extremely dedicated to their enterprise. As Cheryl says, "We don't take vacations. I'm married to this business." Cheryl watches the production numbers very closely, analyzing every aspect of the operation. They can back up their opinions with data and facts.

According to Lutz, the Watts' recommendation coupled with the performance of the 726B contributed to an easy purchase decision. "Basically the wheel buncher sold it," states Lutz. "People buy into this product. If it stands up half as much as the wheel buncher with the money we spent on it and that many hours, then it will be a good machine." He adds, "The price was no hell

but I liked the machine. If the 340 degree wrist works, it will pay for itself. It will save life on the undercarriage."

Tiedjens agrees. "The 340 degree wrist is good because you don't have to track the machine nearly as much." The machine is equipped with 28 in. (710 mm) double grouser track shoes. "The 28 inch doubles make a big difference in the muskeg," says Tiedjens. "I also really like the HID lights for night. These lights don't seem to blind you like the other lights. They are less fatiguing."

Willow Logging operates and hauls 24 hours a day. Lutz operates one double shift and one single shift skidder. In addition, the Salmond side runs two skidders plus a spare. It is planned that the new 860C buncher will replace both the Tigercat 726B and the subcontract track feller

buncher and will be able to cut enough wood to feed all the skidders. One processor, one delimeter, two slashers and manual limbers work to process the wood before being delivered by one of six trucks. "Over 30 regular paychecks are coming out of this camp," Lutz says.

The low ground is predominantly forested with black spruce – one of few species that survives in the poorly drained, acidic muskeg. Generally,

The 860C bunching spruce. The rear air intake prevents clogging of ice and debris.



The 726B cutting poplar.



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Salvaging Katrina

Mississippi contractor purchases Tigercat T240B grapple saw equipped loader to aid in salvage efforts.

By Mike Ross

Over five million acres (2 mil. ha) of forest land in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana were damaged by the extreme winds of Hurricane Katrina that ripped through the Gulf Coast states on August 29, 2005. Once-third of the damage occurred in southern Mississippi within 60 mi. (100 km) of the coast. The storm damage consisted of completely uprooted trees and partially broken trunks. Situated in the middle of the mayhem is O'Neal Timber based in Wiggins and owned by third generation logger, Len O'Neal.

Within one week of the storm, O'Neal had mobilized his crews to commence salvage efforts. It wasn't long after that he realized he required a track loader with a grapple saw to effectively untangle, cut and extract the fallen wood. A track buncher equipped with a high rotation saw would also have met the task but at a considerably higher cost. Also, O'Neal liked the fact that unlike the feller buncher option, a loader could be put to many additional uses.

The trees that snapped at a height under 12 ft. (3.65 m) but are still partially attached are cumbersome for a wheel buncher. The loader can easily finish cutting the top portion of these trees and bunch

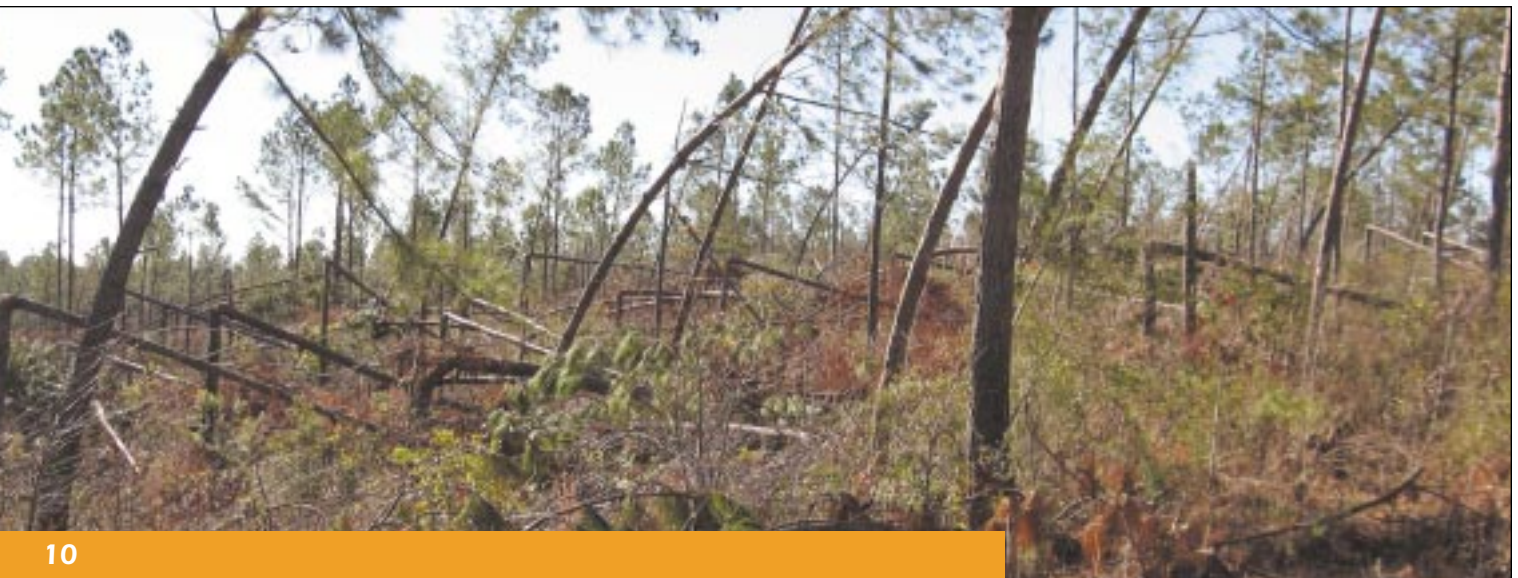
them for the skidder. Any trunks less than twelve feet high are left standing as they are no good to mills requiring tree-length wood. Furthermore, the short logs take up the same space as a full tree on a trailer but are considerably lesser in value. The mills pay by the weight of the load, therefore the logger is better off to fill up the trailer with full length trees instead of a mixture of random lengths.

Cleve Allman, salesman for B&G, Equipment in Hattiesburg, Mississippi learned that O'Neal was in the market for a track loader. A quick call to Tigercat headquarters and Allman had a T240B equipped with a Hultdins TL520 and 550S SuperSaw coming his way the following week.

When the machine arrived at the job site, it did not take long to utilize its full potential. The operator would finish cutting the broken trees and pile them in skidder bunches. When the T240B was not required in the woods, it was used to delimb and load trucks.

O'Neal's clear fell crew consists of a Tigercat 724D feller buncher, two skidders, two trailer mounted loaders, an Ardco forwarder and the Tigercat T240B. The Ardco forwarder is used primarily to carry

The Katrina aftermath.



the wood to roadside when it is too wet for the trucks to come to the landing. All the wood is bound for Weyerhaeuser chip and pulp mills. Average daily production ranges from ten to eighteen loads at 34 tons (31 t) per load in a nine hour shift. According to industry sources, it is estimated that logging productivity drops by as much as 50 percent in wind damaged timber stands.

O'Neal estimates that the salvage work will continue until April of this year at which point the wood will have decomposed too much to be of any commercial value. In 2005, O'Neal Timber harvested approximately 250,000 tons (227,000 t) of wood. With the storm damage, O'Neal finds it difficult to speculate what the company's volume will be in 2006.

Currently, O'Neal Timber employees 22 people. "Treat employees fair and they will stay. A successful logging company requires hardworking, honest employees, productive, reliable equipment and a dealer to back them up," says O'Neal. "Equipment is no better than the dealer. The dealer is



going to make you or break you." He also attributes the company's success to supervisor Jeff Baxter who has been with O'Neal Timber since 1993. ■

Len O'Neal and B&G salesman Cleve Allman.



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Cotton-Hutcheson Moves into New Facility

Cotton-Hutcheson Inc. located in Evergreen, Alabama took on the Tigercat line in 1996. "It was a good decision," says owner Bruce Hutcheson. In October 2004, Hurricane Ivan wreaked havoc on the facility, forcing Hutcheson to rebuild. Forecasters speculated that Hurricane Katrina might also hit Evergreen. Fortunately, predictions were incorrect and the new building, started in January 2005, opened for business last October.

The 18,000 sq.ft facility has an 8,000 sq.ft. (745 m²) shop floor, an 8,000 sq.ft. parts warehouse and 2,000 sq.ft. (185 m²) of office space. The shop has eight service bays laid out in two rows of four and two ten-ton (9 t) overhead cranes spanning the 80 ft. (24 m) width of the building. Cotton-Hutcheson employs ten service

technicians with seven service trucks. There are 22 employees in total.

Cotton-Hutcheson has increased Tigercat sales by 300% since the end of its first year representing the product line. "With Tigercat's good reputation, it makes you believe in the product," says Hutcheson. "When you believe in the product, you give it your all to sell it."

Johnny Boyd, district manager for Mississippi and Alabama attributes the dealership's success to Hutcheson's strong business sense and good, dependable employees. "A successful dealership has little or no employee turnover. When it comes to Bruce, he treats his employees good and fair so that they will stay," says Boyd. "I am proud of Cotton-Hutcheson's success." ■

Steady Expansion at Mississippi Based B&G Equipment

B&G Equipment Inc. in Magnolia, Mississippi became a Tigercat dealer in 1993. Joe Kemp has been branch manager throughout this period. In 1997, B&G expanded its operations into Hattiesburg, offering primarily Tigercat equipment. In October 1999, B&G owner W. J. Bates gave the go ahead to start selling Tigercat equipment out of the Philadelphia store.

In November 2000, Bates hired David Long for the position of branch manager in Hattiesburg. Long, former

service manager for Tigercat dealer Patrick Miller Tractor Co. in Many, Louisiana was excited at the thought of the new challenges.

In August 2003 a fourth B&G store opened in Iuka, Mississippi. Steve Ballard is branch manager.

To keep up with the increased sales at all of the B&G dealerships, many expansions and improvements have taken place over the years. The Hattiesburg store added overhead cranes and expanded the service area by 50%, creating over 7,200 sq.ft. (670 m²) of floor area. The Philadelphia store added a service bay for a total area of 9,000 sq.ft. (835 m²) and a third overhead crane with a ten-ton (9 t) capacity. Magnolia has improved its service capacity, adding 50% more floor space. The high clearance addition can accommodate a five and ten-ton overhead crane.

In January, 2005 W. J. Bates bought out partner, Donald Grantham. B&G Equipment is now 100% Bates family owned. ■



The Bates family: Back row (L-R) Doug Bates, sales; Jeff Lee, parts manager; Rodney Kelley, sales; Justin Webb, product support. Front (L-R) W. J. Bates, president; Debbie Bates Webb, vice president/controller.

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