



SMITH BROTHERS LOGGING

by Joel Moon

Smith Brothers
Steve Smith (L) and
Kelvin Smith (R)

2022 LOGGER OF THE YEAR

Alabama's Logger of the Year, Smith Brothers Logging, is a family-owned business centered around Christian and family values.

They have built a reputation for prioritizing environmental protection, sustainability and crew safety.

Steve and Kelvin Smith grew up in a farming family; however, their father Leon would work on logging jobs during the winter months when it was too wet to farm, and the brothers would sometimes go to the woods with him. There were limited options in the area for the brothers after high school. They could farm, work in the mines or in a plant, or log. They decided to try logging and worked for a few years on Robert Kimbrell's logging crew.

Steve decided to try trucking and bought a truck. He hauled a dump trailer over the road for a couple of years. Steve shares, "This was in 1992 when Desert Storm broke out and the US went to war. Fuel prices went real high and I didn't like being away from home for extended periods." While Steve was trucking Kelvin worked in a plant but realized he missed working outdoors and felt cooped up in the mill. Kelvin adds, "The plant had a big layoff and I needed to do something different, so I started working on Noah Skelton's logging crew." After a couple of years of over the road trucking, Steve made the decision to work closer to home and he joined Kelvin on Noah Skelton's crew.

After a few years with Skelton, they began thinking about starting their own crew. They had learned a good deal about logging from two of the most respected loggers in the area, first on Kimbrell's crew and later with Skelton, so they decided it was time to have a go at running their own crew. In September of 1994, they founded Smith Brothers Logging (SBL). Both Steve and Kelvin have high praise for Thompson Tractor who saw promise in two young men wanting to start a new business, and were willing to take a chance on them and provide financing for their equipment. This relationship has grown stronger over the years and the Smiths are Cat/Weiler to the core.

Their father Leon worked in the woods with them as "crew foreman" early on and they attribute much of their success to his example. "He had instilled in us the value of hard work and strong moral values," says Steve. Their strong work ethic was reinforced by other "old timers" that helped them early on. They tell about Johnny Williamson a long time logger and part of the largest logging family in the area.

(continued on p28)



(continued from p27)

"When we started, we didn't have a dozer but daddy had a small one. Johnny Williamson had logged for years in the area but had quit at the time. He offered to move dad's dozer on an old bobtail truck, and then stayed with us, working for the first few weeks. You weren't going to beat Johnny to the woods, he was there before daylight. He ran the dozer but would also help topping wood and cutting down with a chainsaw. He was always doing something out there. Johnny noticed us taking a break and told us, 'You're not going to be able to take all these breaks, you'll go broke doing that.'" He really liked the Smiths and once even called some contract truckers in the area and told them they needed to come help the Smiths get caught up on their wood pile.

In the following years, they honed their logging skills contracting with wood dealers in the area. They had delivered to Westervelt facilities many times and got to know some of their foresters. Clint Mancil with Westervelt says, "I had known the Smiths for many years and was familiar with the work they did, so I was happy when we were able to contract with them." In 2012 they began harvesting on Westervelt lands, and have not looked back. They really like not having to move as often as they had while cutting for wood dealers. When I visited with them in September, they had been on the same piece of property since May. Their older brother Kenny did all their trucking early on and is still involved in that side of the business. They have used Maxiload Scales since 2012 to insure loads are legal and that they have the full allowable payload, and say they have not had any trouble with them. They believe that when using a platform scale, setting out trailers is the best way to go. With the scales, their average GVW is about 87,500 lbs.

From day one they focused on creating a business centered around the Christian and family values that they learned early on, and that they themselves strive to embody on a

daily basis. Steve and Kelvin know the pivotal role teamwork, equality, and respect play in the success of their business. They treat all employees as equal members of the team, and believe this is one of the key reasons why they have experienced little to no turnover throughout the years.

SBL employs five members on their wood crew:

Steve Smith, Co-Owner and Feller-Buncher Operator

Kelvin Smith, Co-Owner and Loader Operator

Jim Bridgeman, Skidder Operator

Jamison Smith (Steve's son), Skidder Operator

Donnie Watson, Dozier Operator and Set Out Trucking.

We can't leave out Steve's wife Renee, who is a valued member of the team, she keeps up the paper work which has grown larger each year. Truckers include their older brother, Kenny Smith & his drivers, along with Mr. Oswald and Dale Woods driving SBL trucks. All employees are paid on a weekly basis. Smith Brothers offers health insurance to all employees, and maintains their commercial general liability, automobile liability, and worker's compensation insurance through Hawkins & Rawlinson, Inc. located in Auburn, Alabama.

Steve and Kelvin firmly believe the safety and well-being of their team is job one, and this approach is reflected in their operations at all times. Having their crew members and contractors return home each day in the same condition that they arrive to work is a core value. All equipment comes with industry-standard safety features such as fire extinguishers, first aid kits, etc. All personnel are required to have an integral knowledge of their operation. Additionally, all crew members are trained to identify and manage potential safety hazards that may occur in the woods such as dead snags, widow makers, and other hazards, and how to operate equipment in the safest and most efficient manner possible. Crew members are also required to wear personal protection equipment

such as hard hats, saw chaps, safety vests or highly visible clothing, steel toe boots, and safety glasses. In fact, you better not show up on their job without proper PPE, or you will likely be scolded. Their safety record is excellent and they have never experienced any lost time accidents.

SBL takes environmental performance seriously and goes above and beyond when it comes to sustainability and protecting the environment. Their logging jobs consistently meet the most strenuous BMP standards and are audited annually by SFI, PEFC, and FSC certification auditors. In 10 years of auditing, they've never had a non-conformance or opportunity for improvement. They fully implement SFI, Sustainable Forestry Initiative guidelines to the highest standard. Each tract they harvest is under a forest management plan and is certified under FSC's Forest Management certification standard. In regard to erosion protection measures, Smith Brothers effectively uses water bars, broad based dips, and turn outs to control water flow following harvests. Their crew members and contractors must abide by all applicable state, local, and federal laws and are subject to drug testing at any time. Trash is disposed of at all times and landings are closed out in a manner in line with state BMP standards before moving to the next loading ground.

SBL harvest a wide variety of timber types from loblolly and longleaf pine stands to upland and bottomland hardwood forests. These harvests may include longleaf or loblolly thinnings, high value wildlife recreation stands, or sites with difficult topography or sensitive soils. Brandon Loomis with Westervelt says, "Smith Brothers have become our go-to thinning crew, and they have found innovative ways to maintain production and quality regardless of harvest type." Each harvest has a timber sale plan along with detailed maps that are given to the crew members. The timber sale plan outlines planned access routes, SMZ prescriptions, sensitive areas, boundary line descriptions, and harvest details (prescription). Loomis adds, "They are renowned throughout their community and industry as an honest business that places safety,

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-STEVE SMITH

ethics, and sustainability at the forefront of their operation." The fact is, they are one of the crews Westervelt uses to harvest their Lodge property. They are also the crew that Jon Warner, COO of Westervelt, lets cut his own property. One of Westervelt's foresters relates that several years ago he had a call from Mr. Warner. The forester got nervous when Mr. Warner said "that logging crew gets there mighty early, I hear the equipment starting up before daybreak." He went on to say, "It's ok, I enjoy sitting on the front porch in the early morning hours drinking coffee and listening to them log." The Smiths are thinning experts and Steve will tell you, "You've got to know what you're doing to thin. It's the most important job you can do on a stand of timber. It determines what you're going to have in the future."

SBL holds their associates and contractors to strict standards as it pertains to timber harvesting. They have trained crew members to utilize all products and to sort them in a manner that results in the best value for the landowner. SBL has the highest

yield in grade products of all contractors currently operating on Westervelt timberlands. All slash and logging debris is spread throughout the tract on skid trails or other areas that may be at high risk for rutting, soil compaction, or erosion. SBL utilizes set out trucking to reduce the impact of operations on haul roads while optimizing production. From an aesthetic standpoint, they leave buffer strips on tracts with moderate or high visibility concerns and leave dead snags as well as living trees as retention for wildlife. When clearcutting, they harvest tracts in a manner that does not leave unsightly un-merchantable whips that may impact regeneration, instead utilizing them to minimize soil disturbance.

SBL have a written and signed contract with the landowner for all tracts that they harvest. These contracts require them to, among other things, have a PLM certified professional on the crew at all times, implement state BMP standards, maintain an appropriate level of liability and worker's compensation insurance, and abide by all federal, state and local laws.

Smith Brothers are active members of the Alabama Loggers Council and the Alabama Forestry Association. Both families attend New Hope Baptist Church where Steve is a deacon. They like to sponsor local schools and church kids in various activities from their rural community. Both enjoy outdoor activities and... fun fact, Kelvin and some of his friends are Catfish Noodlers on the Black Warrior River.

They see a number of challenges for their company in the coming years, trucking being the largest. Their brother Kenny used to do all the trucking, but as need increased, other trucks had to be added. Kelvin says, "You can have trucks, but maintaining trucks takes a lot of extra time. If you have trucks and aren't in the woods on a Saturday, you will be at the shop changing tires or something like that." Steve adds, "The high cost of equipment, fuel, parts, payroll and everything else we buy is and will continue to negatively impact our bottom line." Steve also shares that, "when we started in 94 a Cat skidder

(continued on p30)

SMITH BROTHERS LOGGING RECEIVES THEIR LOGGER OF THE YEAR AWARD IN A CEREMONY AT THE LEGENDS AT CAPITOL HILL



(continued from p29)

was \$110,000, now it is around \$330,000." They admit that the last couple of years have been a challenge. According to Steve, "We've have met payroll and expenses, but our margins are near to zero." Steve says, "People look at you and the wood you move and say gosh you're making money. But they don't understand how much money it takes to run a logging business. But if they came and looked while you're doing the book work they would see that it's just coming in one hand and going out the other. It's hard to show any profit."

Insurance is another issue. Steve says, "The insurance companies don't want you to have contract trucks but since we do, we are required to pay a few cents more per ton to cover the drivers. And since COVID hit and the supply chain got out of whack, the cost of used trucks has shot up. If you can find one, it is too expensive. They have

gone up 30 to 40%. Inflation has caused many of the products we use every day to go up by 20 to 30%." Steve says, "When fuel went up, Westervelt was quick to respond and paid a fuel surcharge per ton. This allowed us to be able to keep meeting our obligations; we were concerned that might not be possible. I know it's expensive to them but it's the only thing keeping us going right now." That being said, they are hopeful for the future and in fact just received the delivery of a new Weiler skidder. They want to work until retirement age, but when talking to them you can tell they love logging, especially thinning. The brothers credit much of their success to their top-notch crew. They would miss logging, but they love hunting, fishing and catfish noodling too.

*Join us in congratulating our
Logger of the Year. Well done
Steve, Kelvin and crew! ▲*

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- BRANDON LOOMIS, WESTERVELT



EQUIPMENT

- 2007 559 Cat Loader
- 2014 559C Cat Loader
- 2022 660 Weiler Loader
- 2007 D6N Cat Dozer
- 2015 563C Cat Cutter
- 2020 724G Tigercat Cutter
- 2016 535D Cat Skidder
- 2022 350 Weiler Skidder

Steve and Kelvin's brother, Kenny, conducts all contract trucking for the operation. Between the two businesses, they own/operate two Kenworth and two Peterbilt trucks.



BUILDING A LIFE

For those of you who are avid readers of this column... both of you... you may remember my last column titled "More Than a Job". In it I related stories illustrating how most forestry folks view their role as more of a calling and the people they work with as more of a family.

This past weekend I met another one of those individuals, Steve Smith - Smith Brothers Logging, and heard his story as he accepted the Alabama Loggers Council "Logger of the Year" Award. Here's what Steve had to say.

“ Looking back over the last 28 years, it isn't the big weeks that we've had or the good years that mean the most to us. It is the fact that in 28 years, the only crew members that have worked in the woods with us have been family or close friends. And we did it with few problems or issues as a result. It has meant the most to us to have an enjoyable environment to work in and that we could find success in doing that.

Being from a farming family, work is a central part of who we are. Even as teenagers we would take the grain bed off the truck, put some standards up, cut and hand-load short pulpwood, and haul to a woodyard for a little extra money.

In 1994, when Kelvin and I went into logging for ourselves, our dad was not too keen on the idea. He had worked with some local loggers through the winter and knew it would take a lot of effort (and struggles) to stay in business. But with him being kinda retired from farming, he started helping us in the woods and worked until he had a stroke at age 65 while in the woods. How thankful we were to be able to work with him all of those years.

Looking back, it is that time that means the most. And how our granddaddy (his daddy) would make his way out to the fuel tank that we were using at his house every afternoon to ask us how many loads we got that day. When he wasn't able to walk outside anymore and bedridden, he would have our grandmother raise the window so we would come to the window to tell him how many loads we had that day.

After dad slowed down from the stroke, he would be more forgetful of things, but still would ask us. "Where are y'all working now?" and "How is the timber?"

Not too long after we started logging, our older brother, Kenneth, got laid off from the coal mine and started helping us in the woods doing the trucking. For about 5 years, all of us men worked together until daddy had his stroke. As our sons got older, they worked on Saturdays and summers running a skidder. I wouldn't trade anything for those times.

We have our own signals for things. One day, one of the boys stopped me on the cutter and said, "Uncle Kelvin is motioning to me and tapping on his head and I don't know what he wants." I laughed and said that means he needs HARDWOOD pulled in. Not sure how that got started but the boys got a kick out of it.

Those of you that have been logging for a long time may catch

It is the past that has made us who we are today... we weren't just doing a job, but truly building a life.

yourself doing like we do, marking the big events of your life by what tract of timber you were on at the important time. Me and Kelvin both know what tracts of timber we were on when our children were born.

Our families were able to grow up closely together and our wives bring the kids to visit us in the woods. They'd get to sit in the equipment and see what we do. I

can still hear the sound of our boys when they were little running in and saying, "Mama where is dad?" And her saying, "I'm not sure. Did you look in the office?" Most of the time spent doing paperwork seems endless.

But looking back, you tend to lose sight of all the hard times, long days, and financial difficulties, and would not want to change anything. It is the past that has made us who we are today... we weren't just doing a job, but truly building a life.

Many times we feel like we're under so much pressure, but I heard recently that having pressure on you is a privilege because that means somebody expects a lot out of you. It is that pressure that keep us from slacking or becoming complacent.

We have been blessed with the very BEST crew and wish we could give them each an award for Logging Crew of the Year because a logger is only as good as the crew and drivers that make up the team. We are thankful that ours are not only some of the best workers but also our family and close friends.

We want to thank Mr. Joel Moon for making this process go so smoothly. We probably only lost a couple of loads of wood and figured the hotel rooms would make up for that. All joking aside, God has truly blessed our families and our business and we are most thankful to Him. ”

Congratulations to Steve Smith and his entire crew for this well-earned recognition! 🎉