

Job Story

NO TALL TALE – VOLVO HELPS SWING A BIG AX

Volvo excavators are at the front of an efficient and safe logging operation in Arkansas

ANTOINE, Ark. – School-age children and folk singers have long marveled at the legend of the mighty Paul Bunyan. As the story goes, Bunyan used a huge ax and a big blue ox to quickly and efficiently clear the woods of the upper Midwest.

Rusty and Randy Ledbetter may not be legendary, nor is anyone writing songs about their work. Still, the Ledbetter brothers and their crew at Charles Ledbetter Logging are using two specially equipped Volvo excavators to cut and process logs at a pace that would make even the lumberjack of tall tale fame gasp in disbelief.

To maintain their impressive levels of speed, safety and yield, the Ledbetter crews working in southwestern Arkansas rely on two Volvo excavators as track carriers, each equipped with special log harvesting heads.

“With our Volvo machines, we can process a tree and stack it more quickly and safely than you can believe if you haven’t seen it,” Rusty Ledbetter said. “We can handle up to three trees a minute when we’re really moving, and we don’t have to reposition the excavator too often.”

Ledbetter crews are running two Volvo excavators, an EC290B LC and an EC210B LC, each equipped with special logging attachments that allow operators to handle trees from 24 to 35 inches in diameter.

According to Rusty Ledbetter, the Volvo excavators work in a world of stumps and rocks, serving as



Ledbetter crews are using Volvo excavators to harvest timber more quickly and efficiently.

mobile track carriers to position the heads near trees to be cut, and providing both reach to the tree and plenty of hydraulic muscle to operate the heads and manhandle the timber.

Crews walk the Volvo excavators up to the tree, where they hook up the harvesting head, delimit the tree, and cut it to preset lengths, before finally stacking the logs.

“We have better yield because we move faster and also because of the measurement and control systems on the harvesting heads,” Rusty said. “We have a system that measures the length and girth of the tree, and in addition calculates the way to get the maximum yield from each tree. As a result, we produce about 25-percent more usable lumber than with conventional methods.”

Ledbetter harvests a variety of hardwoods and softwoods, including southern pine, loblolly pine, red and white oak, hickory, gum and sycamore, under contract to various customers, which will turn them into lumber and plywood, railroad ties and wood chips for making paper. Ledbetter also provides raw materials for saw and chip mills owned by its parent company, Antoine Hardwoods, Inc., headquartered in Antoine, Ark.

Today, Antoine Hardwoods is an integrated forest products company. In addition to the logging company, Antoine Hardwoods also operates sawmills, a chip mill and is part owner of a timber management company. “But, that wasn’t the goal when it all started in the 1980s,” Rusty said. Like a lot of things in life, it just worked out that way.

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“MORE QUICKLY ... THAN YOU CAN BELIEVE IF YOU HAVEN'T SEEN IT.”

Charles Ledbetter was an established small-town Chevy dealer. He sold to loggers and knew a little about the business, but he had no first-hand experience with logging.

At that time it was common practice in the region for car dealers to guarantee a borrower's note to a bank. When some trucks he had sold were repossessed, Charles Ledbetter used them to start a contract log hauling business, which evolved over the next few years into a full-fledged logging company.

Since then, a combination of opportunities – and Charles' entrepreneurial drive – has resulted in the development of a diversified and integrated operation.

As the company has grown, Charles' sons have come to play key roles in the company's success. Johnny runs the mills, and Randy and Rusty handle the day-to-operations of Charles Ledbetter Logging.

The Ledbetter brothers began logging with hydraulic harvesting heads on excavators in 2000. Says Rusty, “We were attracted because we could see it was a faster, more efficient method that would add significantly to our yield.”

The Volvo EC290B LC replaced another excavator in 2004, and the EC210B LC was added in 2005. “We use the two machines a little differently,” Randy Ledbetter said. “The main differences in the way we use them are based on the size and weight of the trees and the obstacles we have to deal with.

“We take advantage of the longer reach and bigger hydraulic system of the EC290B LC so we don't have to reposition the machine so often. And the 290 has the big Kato head that handles bigger log diameters. We use the EC210B LC with the Waratah head for smaller trees and where its agility is more important.”

Using each machine differently makes it easier for excavator operators to separate logs by size or species so the loader operator can pick them up faster and more efficiently.

Both the performance of the machines and confidence in their Volvo dealer – Hugg & Hall in Camden, Ark. – were crucial to the Ledbetter's decision to go with Volvo excavators. Hugg & Hall also has operations in Springdale, Fayetteville, Conway, Fort Smith, Little Rock and El Dorado. “We've worked with David Jordan at Hugg & Hall for a number of years,” Rusty said. “We knew they were reliable and service-minded.

“We also knew that Volvo had a good reputation for strength, toughness and reliability. Logging puts unusual wear and tear on machines, and we needed equipment that would stand up to that. Downtime just kills you.”

Rusty said they were impressed by the longer reach of the Volvos, and the strong, reliable hydraulic systems. “The logging heads and the way we work make a top-notch hydraulic system essential.”



Johnny (left), Randy, Rusty and Charles Ledbetter

The Volvo excavator operator compartment was also a high consideration in making the buying decision. “The controls are placed just right and the operation is super smooth,” Rusty said. “It can get pretty steamy here, and the climate control helps a lot. It's a nicer environment for the operators; they don't get nearly as tired and stressed. It's good for us, too; they're more alert, safer and more productive.”

Rusty said Ledbetter Logging has been pleased with its decision to go Volvo. “We've had great uptime, with no problems at all,” he said. “We take good care of them, and they take good care of us.”

According to Hugg & Hall's Jordan, machines operating in the woods suffer a lot of cosmetic wear and tear, but the Ledbetters do a “jam-up job” of mechanical maintenance with a superior program that includes all recommended periodic service.

Operators lube machines daily and oil is changed every 250 hours. Rusty said they appreciate how easy and accessible key service areas are on his Volvos. “Somebody gave that some serious thought,” he said.