

Hanging Tough

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SCOTLAND NECK, NC

Times might be a little tight for logger Willie Bunting and his company, Pickin' Pines Inc., located here, but not too terribly bad, he says. There are plenty of folks in his line of work (logging and timber purchasing) not doing nearly so well. And by all accounts, Bunting is doing okay.

Bunting was named the Wilson County Logger of the Year in 2008 and he doesn't even live in Wilson County. He works Wilson

County plenty, however. While 2008 was a year that marked the beginning of one of the worst economic times many of us will ever live through, Bunting and his crews have managed to hold their own in the rural woodlands of northeastern North Carolina and the southern edge of Virginia.

Bunting says he's not sure why he was chosen for the annual logging honor but that he appreciates that someone would think he deserved it. After a few minutes of conversation with the third generation logger, one might come to the conclusion that Bunting wouldn't tell you even if he knew. What he will tell you is that he is grateful that he and his crews have a very good working relationship with the folks who run the paper mill, KapStone Kraft, in Roanoke Rapids, formerly owned by International Paper. KapStone owns another facility down the road in Charleston, purchased last year from MeadWestvaco.

"We've been working with this same mill for a long time, nearly 20 years," says Bunting, a 40-year-old father of three who followed his late father—who followed his own father—into the business by working summers beginning at age 14. Both his father and his grandfather made their livings as clear-cutters. Willie has done his share of the same over the years but has gradually switched over to thinning operations. The clear-cutting jobs, he says, have pretty much dried up.

Bunting's reputation as a proficient logger is well entrenched regionally. Scotland Neck is located in Halifax County, adjacent Wilson County. It's part of the same region of communities that have grown up along the Roanoke River since before the country's founding. You might wonder how a place gets a name like Scotland Neck.

According to the town's website, in 1722 a colony of Scotch Highlanders settled in the "neck" of the Roanoke River. The name Scotland Neck first described the small communities that clustered around this original settlement. Nearly 150 years later, the name was officially adopted. Today the town has about 2,600 residents.

The rich history of the area hasn't exempted it from the reality of current economic conditions.



Right now, Bunting says quotas for his pine thinning operations are down from an average of 90 loads per week to 60, which means one of his three crews—a contract outfit—is working independently at the present time. The other two are putting in just shy of a full work week (taking a half day off on Fridays) and haven't needed to work a Saturday for a good while. Regular work days start at 6:30 each morning and end at 4.

Bunting and another employee, Ben Long, are timber purchasers for the company. Long is a former bank employee who was working at his desk in the lobby of a bank about four years ago when he realized he'd chosen the wrong career. "I was sitting inside the bank one day and thought to myself: 'What in the world am I doing inside?' So a couple of weeks later I was on an open cab John Deere skidder," says Long. "I sure got out of my suit in a hurry!" Long went to work for John McLaughlin at Cool Springs Lumber, before joining Bunting.

Bunting runs a three-man crew and another four-man crew. The contract crew is called Bennett Trucking and Logging. (When Willie's dad, Mike, got out of logging, he sold his crew to Keith Bennett.)

Currently, one of Pickin' Pines' company crews is working just outside of Scotland Neck, thinning a 35 acre tract of pine that is hauled to KapStone. The second of his crews is working a 125 acre tract near Tarboro. The loads from this thinning operation are also taken to KapStone. Long says KapStone's Gary Zimmerman "has really helped us along the way and is eager to help all the time. Really an amazing guy."

Bunting says he will occasionally work in hardwoods—once a year or so—and haul hardwood pulpwood to International Paper in Franklin, Va.; Domtar in Plymouth, NC and Rayonier in Jarratt, Va. Other sorts include chip-n-saw to West Fraser in Seaboard, NC or Georgia-Pacific in Dudley, NC; plylogs to GP in either Emporia, Va. or Dudley, NC.

One fortunate result of the economic downturn, Bunting says, is that his fuel costs have come down to earth and that his insurance premiums and workers' compensation costs have not gone up this year.

"When fuel was up so high about a year ago, well, that just killed us like it did the rest of the country," Bunting says. "It just about did us in. I'm so thankful our fuel bills have come down to where we can pay them without going broke. I was also pleasantly surprised when I went to renew my insurance and it had not gone up. I suppose it has something to do with the economy but whatever the reason, we're glad."

Health care premiums, however, which Bunting helps to provide for his employees, have risen. "I pay half and my crew members pay their half," he says. "I believe in helping take care of my men. They've got families and need it."

According to Bunting, his crews have been accident-free over the years. He adds that his crews are made up of men around his same age or a bit older. He doesn't see any young people coming into the business. "I've got a couple of truck drivers who are a little older than me, but for the most part, the crew is my same age. We just don't get a lot of young people interested, not around here, anyway."



Bunting adds of his workers: "They are all hard working men. They are really what keeps this company going. They all know what their job is and they do it well. If someone is out, everyone else steps up to take up the slack. They make sure that our landowners are satisfied. This makes my job easy."

Bunting says he's heard people talk about the emergence of new markets, such as biomass and fuel pellets, but talk is all it is. "I haven't seen anything concrete when it comes to new markets coming in here," says Bunting. "I do think the chipping market is flooded around here and there are those who have gotten out of it

or are switching to something else.”

Pickin’ Pines does not operate its own maintenance shop, but Bunting says most simple maintenance is taken care of by his crew. Bigger maintenance jobs are handled at dealerships.

The company has had a long-time relationship with the former Pioneer Machinery in Greenville, NC. Bunting’s father, Mike Bunting, worked for the dealership for many years. Today Pickin’ Pine maintains a good working relationship with parts and service departments at Pioneer Gregory Poole Forest Products in Greenville and Pioneer Virginia-Carter Forest Products in South Hill, Va., as well as John Bullock at Bullock Brothers in Smithfield.

Mike Bunting passed away in May. Except for a brief stint in Georgia, Mike lived in the Scotland Neck area his whole life. “He was a logger and then an equipment dealer for years in this area and he knew just about everyone in the industry,” says Long. When his son, Willie, went into logging, he bought out his father’s crew. “He taught me so much about the business,” Willie Bunting says. “I am going to miss him and so is the community.”

Pickin’ Pines equipment includes: an '02 Cat 535B skidder, '04 Cat 525B skidder, '07 Cat 525C skidder, '06 John Deere 648 GIII skidder, '03 Hydro-Ax 470 cutter, '04 Tigercat 718 cutter, '02 Prentice 384 knuckleboom loader, '06 Prentice 384 loader, '01 and '04 Kenworth trucks, an '03 Peterbilt truck, an '01 Ford F-250 and '03 Ford F-350 with utility body, an '06 Chevrolet 3500 HD with utility body and two Chevrolet 1500 pickups.



According to Long, Bunting is becoming partial to Chevy.

All oils, antifreeze and other fluids come from Pugh Oil Co. The company usually buys tires from Colony Tire, using whatever brands bring the best deals and service life.

The Pickin’ Pines three-man crew includes skidder operator Joshua Conway. cutter Ron Mizelle and loader operator Robert Parrish. The four-man crew includes skidder operators Richard (Preacher) Beck and Mike Ingram, cutter Jimmy Colbert and loader man Pete Ricks. Mizelle has been with Pickin’ Pines since

day one, with Ricks, Parrish and Colbert not far behind.

Bunting's trucking company is called Carolina Timber Transport, Inc. Haulers include JR (Judge) McKensey, who does all the truck maintenance, William (Stick) Earp and Bob Beck. Contract truck drivers are Earnest (Big Money) Howard, John Bradberry and Horace May. Of McKensey, Long notes, "He usually spends his whole weekends working on trucks, which we are extremely grateful for." Trucks pull a mixed bag of trailers, mostly Pitts and Big John.

Bunting and Long are both active members of the North Carolina Assn. of Professional Loggers, which they view as vital to the well being of logging in the state. "It's a great organization," says Long.

Because he runs two and sometimes three crews and is busy looking for tracts to purchase as well as running a company, Bunting says he doesn't have ample spare time to pursue hobbies.

"Hobbies?" Bunting asks. "I didn't know loggers were supposed to do anything else but log."

Actually, he admits he does find some time for hunting. Deer and turkey are plentiful in the area. He also wets a line in the Roanoke River from time to time.

Office duties, including payroll and other administrative tasks, are handled by Vicki Coggins, who works three days a week.

As to the state of timber buying these days, Long says landowners have been so hesitant to sell their timber in the area that markets are starting to dry up somewhat. "But it is a week to week thing," he adds. "It seems like we buy 1,000 acres in a week, then all of a sudden nothing for a month."

However, Long says he's optimistic. "I think the economy will pick up and there will eventually be a big market in the biomass field."

The company usually cuts self-bought tracts from local consultants, but occasionally cuts on a tract purchased by Zimmerman or Gary Goodman with KapStone.

"We take pride in a lot of consultants using us so often," Long says. "It really does pay off if your crew goes that extra mile and does the best job possible, even if it does mean it takes a little

more time. It really makes my job, as far as buying timber, a lot easier when Willie and Pickin' Pines reputation is as good as it is."

"Quality thinnings and satisfied landowners for 14 years plus" is the slogan for Pickin' Pines. Bunting says he stands behind the slogan and will continue to do so regardless of the economy or changes in the industry.

"He has really treated me great," says the former banker Long. "I have learned an amazing amount from him. He runs a good company and he has respect for everyone he works with. He deserved Logger of the Year in 2008 and if it was up to me he'd get it every year."