

Small but Critical

Although they don't get the press, the small machines — chainsaws to cell phones — keep operations running smoothly



For over 30 years Forklift operator Dawn Britt has worked at Bennett Lumber Products in Princeton, Idaho. She says the Hyster 761 dual directional accelerator pedal, among other things, helps her in the planer mill.

By Barbara Coyner

It's hard not to be impressed by a feller buncher working in the woods. The big machinery is impressive in size and performance. But without the little machines, like the chain saws and the cell phones, loggers would be hard pressed to run their operations. I

in the Cab — Communication Systems

For loggers and truckers, communication is just another word for safety. For most, that means a CB radio. But with the advent of cell phones, most truck cabs function like command central, some now boasting satellite phones and laptops too. "In logging, you've got to have good communication," says Norris Irish of Clark Communication in Lewiston, Idaho. "Communication is utmost in safety, but it's not always easy out in the woods." Irish has sold communication packages to loggers in North Central Idaho since 1986, and the specialized mobile radio, or SMR, has been a reliable standby for years. "It's analog technology and there's not very much of it left," Irish admits, explaining that Clark owns its own repeaters. "It used to be a nationwide 800-megahertz analog system, but then the FCC started changing the frequency allocation and it's mostly cell phones now. Cell phone towers are digital and the technology works fine around populated areas, but it's not always powerful enough to work in the woods. We're seeing an influx of satellite phone users these days, but those aren't cheap." Farther north, St. Maries log truck driver Greg Stancil relies on a push-to-talk business band radiophone that uses repeater technology. "I get better coverage with it than I would a cell phone, and there are no dead spots, so I can get out in a lot more places," he says. No doubt, a number of

contractors and truckers are plugged in to cell phones, and as towers sprout like dandelions, coverage improves.

One form of communication remains the same, however — the familiar citizens band, or CB. “It’s 2-way with no hesitation, and it allows you to talk person-to-person right there in real time,” says Stancil. No small detail, as truckers and contractors share narrow, winding forest roads that allow little room for error.

In the Mill — Forklifts

The story goes that when Pacific Northwest timber workers wanted loads lifted, they would holler out “hoist’er!” to the equipment operators. As the Portland-based Williamette- Ersted Company developed its earliest prototype forklift in 1929, “hoist’er” morphed into the company’s new name, Hyster. So much for industry folklore.

Mill worker, Dawn Britt, is one of millions who has made a living as a forklift operator, racking up 30 years at Bennett Lumber Products in Princeton, Idaho. Her Hyster 761 works at in-feed chores in the planer mill, and Britt admits that her early days as the mill’s first woman forklift driver were largely trial by fire, as she learned to balance loads, work in the dark, and avoid safety hazards. Like all forklift drivers in an open-air mill situation, Britt also deals with the weather. “We always have to worry about slickness, and sometimes we run with chains on,” she says. “You try to match your speed with conditions, and freezing rain can be a real challenge. We’re always dealing with weather conditions, because we’re not a covered mill. This is real life.” Real life presents problems with metal on metal, as well. “Metal racks on metal forks is like a marble on an ice cube, and the load can slide all over if you’re not careful,” Britt adds. “There’s a lot of hand-eye coordination involved, and it’s all in the timing. Sometimes you find yourself cussing and ramming and jamming to make things all fit.” Although Britt spent her early days ramming and jamming in a Clark, most of the lifts she’s operated have been Hysters. She credits Hyster’s patented Monotrol foot pedal as a real asset. “It really helps your timing,” she says of the dual directional accelerator pedal. “That frees up one of your arms to do other things.”

The modern breed of forklift is a far cry from the Truclift, built by Clark in 1920, and Hyster’s latest contribution is an energy efficient AC-powered lift truck. According to company spokesman, Matt Murphy, “An AC brushless hoist motor powers the advanced hydraulic system to reduce maintenance. The hydraulic system contributes to increased performance and energy savings through the use of powered and regenerative lowering. The system supports precise load handling with greater performance and less noise, while improving battery efficiency through regenerative electricity.”

For long-time forklift operators like Dawn Britt, creature comforts remain a big selling point for a job that requires eight hours of getting in and out of the cab. “I’ve spent 30 years thinking of how I could improve this machine,” she says, noting that the technical aspects are just fine. “If I were to improve anything, I would definitely want a better heating system. On my machine, there’s no defroster, so I have to keep a window cracked and a blower going for visibility. Maybe these things don’t matter as much if forklifts operate in covered warehouses.”

In the Woods — Chainsaws

Older loggers wince as they remember the first chainsaws, which debuted in the Northwest in the 1950s. They’ve come a long way since then.

Husqvarna, Stihl, Poulan, Jonsered, McCullough, Homelite. For the backyard logger, there’s now plenty to choose from when it comes to chainsaws. Pro loggers, however, have a whole different take, and in northern Idaho, most loggers say it’s still a Stihl. In fact, several professional loggers single out the Stihl 46 for its versatility for falling, sawing on the landing, and delimiting. As for power, the Stihl 66 leads the pack. “I like the Stihl 66, and I’ve probably owned four or five of them,” says Jacob Keck, 28, a third generation logger who started sawing

on the landing when he was 14. "They're reliable, easy to work on, and they've got lots of power."



St. Maries log truck driver Greg Stancil relies on a radio phone when he's not in an area with good cell phone reception.

Jeff Strong, a sawyer for Hansen Logging of Harvard, Idaho, has logged for 28 years and has tried out Poulans, Huskies, Jonsereds, and Stihls. He keeps a Stihl 46 and a Stihl 66 on hand these days. Ditto, for Potlatch contractor, Francis Larson, who has logged for more than 30 years and finds the Stihl line to be maintenance-free and

dependable. Having a dealer in the area helps too, he says.

"I get about three or four years out of a saw," Strong notes, adding that he does all his own repairs. "Some guys buy a new one every six months and find that it's cost effective to do it that way."

As for Strong's Stihl preferences, "The 46 is less weight and works for the smaller diameter timber we cut. The 66 has more stump power." Talk about stump power, Strong remembers the 1980s and cutting 8-foot diameter cedar in the Floodwood State Forest. His saw of choice in those days? A Stihl 56. And his best advice on chainsaws? "Do the maintenance." Nick Heath and Shawn Lynas of Idaho Rigging in Potlatch, say that they deal with a host of chainsaw brands when it comes to backyard loggers. But the area pros consistently buy Stihl. "There's a Husqvarna dealer in St. Maries, so we do see more of those there," Heath mentions. "The Stihl 46 is a good mid-level saw for the kind of timber we have around here. It's a good saw for falling and strip sawing. It's been around forever, and it's easy to get parts for." Lynas points out that big box stores, such as Home Depot, now sell the Husqvarna line, making those products more widely available. "They make a good saw," he adds, noting that with the popularity of country living, many more people are learning to operate a chainsaw.