

Despite The Risks . . . I'd Rather Be Logging

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
CYNTHIA STOWELL

Less than a week into the 1978 logging season and breakdowns are already part of the routine. Before November the loggers can expect much more "down time," heavy turnover among their crews, the chance of a bad sale and bills up to their hardhats.

But every productive minute of their 10-12 hour days means cash and further proof that "I can do it."

At least five green loggers have "done it," with a new outfit about to prove itself this season. On May 1, after meeting with BIA Timber Sales Administrators and piling last year's slash, Albert Comedown, Zane Jackson, J.R. Smith and Johnny Guerin sent their fallers, skidders and loaders out to finish up sales abandoned when the snow began to fly last fall. Tommy Smith and Levi Greene have taken over the larger half of Russell Smith's logging empire and will be tackling his huge quota.

For most of the Indian loggers the romance of the woods faded long before they launched their own outfits, but being boss is an especially large dose of reality therapy. Years among the logging crew ranks have made woods operations quite familiar, but becoming businessmen and decision-makers often proves to be a new experience.

The initial search for capital

his department's loan limit is \$100,000, but he has assisted logging hopefuls in finding the balance elsewhere.

The Small Business Administration has been a regular source for loans and some loggers have even received grants from the BIA's Indian Business Development Fund. In a couple of cases loggers went to banks off the reservation where interest rates are inevitably higher.

Proving himself to be a good risk can be as much as a two year project for a starting logger. First, Warm Springs Forest Products must acknowledge the need for another outfit, then the prospective logger must put together a detailed "package," including a three-year projection of income and expenditures based on the expected number of loads per day balanced with such ongoing costs as payroll, maintenance and licensing. A good accountant becomes a necessity early on.

Once the business is underway, borrowed working capital might be a way of life and there are always improvements to be made with equipment.

Finch, who works closely with some of the loggers each summer, said of logging, "It's a very high risk business. Everything is in big figures when it happens." And yet none of the loggers are behind in their payments, he noted.

Inflation is always looking over the loggers' shoulders. In ten years equipment costs have more than doubled and parts

Logging is a year-round business, with all the planning, bookkeeping and maintenance that must be done. The four or five off-season months are not vacation time for most owners who can be found mechanicking under a cat, juggling books, pouring over log sale maps and work plans, riding sales on snowmobile or upgrading their equipment. The quiet months might also be spent "visiting other loggers and kicking our problems around," as one owner said. If lucky a logger and his family might fit in a trip to Disneyland or Reno.

When logging season starts, every day counts. Loggers agree that the biggest worry during the season is Breakdown, with a capital B. As Albert said, loggers try to "plan" their breakdowns for the two-week mill shutdown in July, but they learn to expect the unexpected.

J.R. Smith, who is starting his third season after buying out the smaller "side" of his brother Russell's business, estimated that when his shovel quits on him he's out \$4000 a day. A broken swing shaft (which he has replaced four times already) costs \$1600 and in the down time he's losing 16 loads a day and still paying his whole crew.

Most loggers count crew turnover and absenteeism among their seasonal headaches. Aside from a small nucleus of skilled, reliable employees, loggers must face persistent crew changes.

Nature also has a way of throwing wrenches into the works. Bad weather can make movement in the woods difficult or impossible, and the length of the season is dependent on nature's whims.

A bad sale can take years to recover from, too. Loggers negotiate with WSFPI for sales and they don't always come away with the ideal units — those with high volume, few defects and easy terrain. A string of bad sales can break a beginning logger and can even be difficult for a veteran to absorb. Guerin, who says he's only had four good sales in his eight years of logging, remarked, "It's up to you to pull it out of the bag."

So a prospective logger takes the big gamble and decides to run the obstacle course of owning a business. He finds himself saddled with responsibilities bigger than the out of doors he loves so well and he tries on half a dozen different hats in his roles of businessman, mechanic, financial analyst, personnel counselor, and as one logger suggested, "wet nurse."

Why does he do it?

Eleven-season veteran Russell Smith, who says he's getting too old for the hassles and wants to give younger guys a chance to make it, pointed to the sense of accomplishment that derives from the business. "I dedicated everything towards working in the woods," he said, and spoke proudly of the many equipment operators he had trained through the years.

Russell's successors, J.R., Tommy and Levi, are standing at the other end of the logging road and calling that same journey a "challenge."

In between are the long,



Although logging outfit owner J.R. Smith works right in the woods along with the crew, he says being an owner is "a lot different than being foreman." J.R., who is starting his third season, said, "You take more pride in your work."

hard hours which Albert Comedown says "you might as well put in for yourself." Guerin takes pride in his after-hours mechanicking, saying "I know I'm helping myself." Once bitten by the bug of self-employment, a logger usually can't imagine any other way of making a living.

Loggers are a fiercely independent lot for whom toeing the line is intolerable. It is that spirit of independence that drove them into logging ventures and continues to provide them with their chief source of satisfaction.

With the exception of a councilman and a real estate investor among the ranks, the loggers tend to maintain a low profile in the community. Their

single-minded devotion can bring logging out of the category of business and into the realm of lifestyle. It is often a life apart — a world created and sustained by the logger and his family.

And of course, there is the unfading hope of striking it big, which some have indeed done. A rising standard of living is one of the tangible rewards that is worth the rocky times of insecurity and red-figured ledger books.

But behind the dream lurks the plain fact that for many loggers the woods are what they know best. The reasons for risking can boil down to Albert Comedown's simple statement — "I'd rather be logging."



Zane Jackson owns one of the largest logging outfits on the reservation, cutting 21 million board feet each season. Inflation in equipment costs has not prevented him from upgrading with this Northwest log loader, nor has it kept him from smiling. CDS Photo

separates the men from the boys right away. To get into the woods now a logger must look at 6-figure sums. New D-6 cats start at about \$100,000 and a rubber-tired skidder can cost \$65,000 or more. And then for the grand schemers there are such "frills" as shovel-type loaders that can be as high as \$200,000 and log trucks that run around \$65,000.

Loggers can enter the business at very different levels. In 1966 Russell Smith started out with one tractor and one front-end loader. This year Tommy and Levi Greene are taking on an outfit of five cats, three skidders, one loader, five trucks and a crew of 24. But regardless of size, it involves lots of capital and as Albert Comedown said, "Lots of talking."

Tribal Credit has helped each of the loggers to greater and lesser degrees. Credit Manager Bob Finch explained that

have gone the same route. But machines must be reliable and as Zane Jackson said, "Although it's costly to repair and replace, that's money well-spent." Loggers, among other things, are quite skilled check-writers.

Keeping a logging outfit in business is a bit of a balancing act. Loggers find themselves working within a structure dictated by fixed allotments of board feet (from 8 million board feet for Johnny Guerin to 24 million for Russell Smith's retiring outfit) and comparatively low log prices on the reservation. Businesses grow to a point and then must stabilize and stay ahead of inflation by increasing efficiency. Johnny Guerin in fact, has "grown smaller" after making the mistake of starting too big. During the first five years of logging he was tempted to "sell it all and skip the country," but his trimmed down outfit is finally paying off.



Albert Comedown, like all the loggers, does as much repair work as he can right in his own yard. Just before the beginning of the season Albert (right) and his woods boss Don Waldrip repaired the track on a cat. CDS Photo