

The loader, usually operated by Gill Morris, takes the logs that have been skidded to the landing and tugs them through a de-limber that strips all the branches and automatically senses diameter and when to cut the top off.

Photo by Mike Eckley



BUCK MORRIS and his Mandolin

When Buck Morris was 10 years old, he picked up his father's guitar on the sly and taught himself how to play. Never pushed into lessons by his mother, who grew up in a family of talented musicians herself, Buck progressed rapidly. When he heard his father's truck coming up the street, he'd quickly stuff the guitar back in its case; he didn't want his dad to know he'd been playing the new instrument.

By the time Buck graduated from Orange County High School, he's was tearing it up, mostly on mandolin, in a bluegrass band. And for the longest time, he'd work four days a week in the woods with his father and then head up to Maryland to play every weekend.

Buck is one of those guys who can pretty much play anything he picks up. He could well have chosen music as a career.

But he didn't. Instead, he came back to the woods.

Buck hasn't played much in awhile...he's too darn busy. Working five days a week with his two brothers in the woods is only part of it. On weekends, Buck can be found walking timber tracts, estimating yield so he can quote a landowner an accurate figure. When he's not walking timber, he's volunteering.

Buck's favorite is the Log A Load for Kids program, which is supported by the Virginia Loggers Association (VLA), of which he is a board member. He helps organize skeet

shoots, golf tournaments, anything to raise money for this charity that benefits the Children's Hospital. Last year, he helped raffle off a Harley-Davidson motorcycle that the Rolling Stones had signed. It went for \$56,000, "and all of it went to the hospital," he says proudly.

Buck is also involved in logging education as a Sustainable Harvest And Resource Professional (SHARP). And he and three other loggers in the state were chosen for the Virginia Forestry Association's (VFA) annual Merit Award. Buck's parents, Rachel and Glen Morris are rightfully proud of this recognition. The award hangs in their Unionville office.

"It's humbling really," says Buck in his characteristic unselfish manner. "I'm kind of glad of it for my Mom and Dad. They started this thing in '63, and they've really struggled with all kinds of ups and down that I never had to do. I kind of accept it on their behalf and for all of us who try to do what's right."

Now, area forester, Mike Eckley will nominate Buck as Virginia's entry for the Appalachian Region Outstanding Logger Award encompassing a nine-state area east of the Mississippi. We'll know if he won later this summer. And then maybe, Buck can find the time to pick up that mandolin again. Logging and music are to Buck, "kind of like a disease; it gets in your blood."

Buck and Cheryl Morris receive the 2006 Logger Merit Award at the Virginia Forestry Association Convention at Wintergreen in April. Standing next to the Morrises is State Forester, Mike Eckley who helped co-nominate the Morrises for the award. Eckley will now submit the Unionville-based Glen Morris and Sons Logging for a regional award covering nine states.



Above, replacing the chainsaw is the buncher-feller. This machine can approach trees up to 22 inches in diameter, grab them, saw them off at the ground, and lay them down in bunches for the skidder to take to the loader. On a good day, Dean Morris has cleared as much as five acres of woodland. Below, Buck Morris stays so busy logging and marketing his product that he has little time to play his beloved bluegrass music. Most weekends he's either evaluating timber tracts or volunteering for Log A Load for Kids charity or teaching a safety class for the SHARP (Sustainable Harvesting and Resource Professional) program or serving on the boards of the Virginia Forestry Association and the Virginia Loggers Association.

Photos by Phil Audibert



Everything has changed in the logging industry...you don't just go out in the woods with a chainsaw and start cutting willy-nilly anymore.

LOGGING TIME IN THE WOODS

What image comes to mind when you hear the word, "logger" ...a Paul Bunyan type, with a flannel shirt and a double-bladed ax? Or maybe a wiry little guy with a scrawny beard, missing teeth, and an unpredictable temper.

How about this. Today's logger is (a) a shrewd business man, (b) a mechanic (c) a conservationist (d) a heavy equipment operator (e) all of the above.

In the case of Buck Morris and his two brothers, Gill and Dean, the "sons" in Glen Morris and Sons Logging Inc. of Unionville, the answer is most definitely "all of the above." Recent winners of the Logger Merit Award from the Virginia Forestry Association, they have managed to keep up with the myriad of changes that affect their business in this day and age. And they have managed to do so and still safeguard the environment, improve the land, and even make a buck or two.

Everything has changed in the logging industry; from supply to demand, from technology to market, from client to customer, from resource to conservation strategy. The equipment has changed; the tracts of timber have changed; the landowners have changed. You don't just go out in the woods with a chainsaw and start cutting willy-nilly anymore.

One thing hasn't changed...the image. "Logging is perceived very poorly," says the State Forester for Orange and Culpeper counties, Mike Eckley. "Those who do it are perceived, in terms of status, like bell boys, low pecking order type of person. But in actuality they are entrepreneurs, especially the independent loggers. They have books to keep; they have regulations that they have to abide by; they have to develop the relationships with the mills and the landowners, and now there's more and more pressure to maintain certain certifications."

Right now, Buck Morris and his brothers are clear-



The Morris brothers, from left to right, Buck, Gill and Dean, make a perfect team in a typical three-stage logging operation. Usually Dean cuts, Buck skids, and Gill de-limbs and loads. Logging has become safer since the boys first went out in the woods to help their father.

Photo by Phil Audibert

A dangerous job

"It's a dangerous job," softly says Buck's mother, Rachel Morris. She is visibly relieved that logging nowadays is safer than it used to be. And, miraculously, her husband Glen can say, "I've had some close calls but I've never been broke up in the woods."

His sons cannot claim as much. All have suffered accidents. Gill Morris was hospitalized for two days when a chainsaw kickback chipped his shin bone. On another occasion he laid open his foot when the saw chain nicked his brand new Red Wings, prompting his father to say, "You done ruined a brand new pair of boots." Buck teaches classes in chainsaw safety, saying "I won't operate one without a chain brake."

Three years ago, Buck broke his shoulder when a tree came down on him. "I walked away from it," he says gratefully. "I hope I don't get hurt any worse than that." Back in '84, "I wasn't watching what I was doing," continues Buck, quoting the last line of many an accident victim. "That's when you get hurt when you just don't think for a minute."

He was trying to save a chainsaw that was hung up in a grape vine from being run over by the skidder as Gill was cutting down a tree. "My train of thought was to the saw," says Buck. "I knew he was cutting the tree, I'd just come by it. There's \$500 worth of saw about to go under a wheel. I jumped on the back of the machine and said, 'bad move.' I knew I'd done wrong."

Buck heard the tree crack. He jumped. The top hit him so hard that, according to Gill "he left a pretty good print of his body in the mud. I was pretty sure he was dead."

Buck suffered a cut scalp, that's all.

cutting 50 acres of a 100-acre tract about halfway between Orange and Gordonsville bordering the North Anna River. On site, the first thing you might notice is that the chainsaws are, for the most part, sitting on the truck. They and other traditional tools of the industry have been replaced by huge machines, in the Morris's case, about a million dollars worth.

Take the feller-buncher for example. Looking like a giant insect, it approaches a tree, grabs it, and in an eye blink, cuts it off with a 48" diameter horizontal circular saw spinning at 1,300 RPM with teeth 2-1/4 inches thick. Holding the recently cut tree in its talons, it proceeds to another tree to repeat the process, until it has a "bunch." The operator, in this case Dean Morris, then lays them down exactly where he wants in a pile on cleared land.

Gone is the whine of the chainsaw, the nervous looks skyward as the tree rocks back and forth, the warning holler, "Timmmberrrrrr!" and the destructive crash as the tree plummets to the ground, taking other small trees and branches with it. And reduced significantly, but not entirely, is the danger associated with logging, from "widow makers" to "spring poles" to "kickbacks." The operators of these machines sit in protective cages. They operate levers and pedals, not chains and cant hooks.

As Dean fells and bunches, Buck approaches with another quarter-of-a-million dollar insect, a skidder that grabs the bunch and drags or "skids" it down a trail to Gill who is operating the loader at what's known as the "landing." The loader's massive grappling arm picks up individual trees like they were twigs, draws them through a de-limber machine that strips all the branches, senses the diameter of the trunk, and cuts off the top at the appropriate place.

Gill then sorts the stripped logs into piles according to grade, one for saw lumber, one for what's called "chip and saw," and one for pulp wood. These piles will be loaded onto tractor trailers and sent to different mills, some a hundred miles away or more, to become pressure-treated lumber or OSB composite board or paper.

But not today. It rained hard last night. The road is a mire. Buck and his brothers don't want to rut it up with heavy equipment and trucks. So they'll cut and skid sparingly today and load nothing until it dries out. And that's why they are Merit

Award winners.

"Water quality is number one," says Buck who, before he cuts the first tree, will carefully locate his landing on high ground and situate his skid trails to follow the lay of the land. He builds "water bars" to channel rainwater away from trails. He brings portable bridges so as not to damage streams with heavy equipment. He'll replant and mulch and even install silt fences. He'll leave buffer zones around all drainages. "The North Anna River is at the back of it," he says of this tract. "We're not going to cut anywhere near it."

Then there's his practice of smooshing the tops and laps into the skid trails. "If it's wet in the winter-time, my machine will start to make ruts in the woods," he explains. "I'll put these tops in those roads; it keeps my machine from cutting the land up. They call it a bio mass...puts more organic material back in the ground. It's a win-win situation for us."

Mike Eckley smiles and nods in agreement. "Buck, he tries to do right," he says appreciatively. "He may sacrifice some income that he leaves in the woods, but you've got to think long term and he does. He's a great operator. He can go in and extract timber that needs to be removed in less turns." Less "turns" means less rutting...less damage.

A logging site is not usually a thing of beauty. The land is scarred; saplings are peeled and run over; it's noisy, dusty and hot. "Logging is perceived as destructive," says Mike. Even though more damaging runoff stems from golf courses and housing developments, "logging will take the black eye." The problem is there are no votes in the woods...but there are plenty on the golf courses and housing developments.

Mike also praises Buck's business sense. "The thing that separates him from the rest of the loggers around here is that

he's willing to develop the interpersonal relationships with his clients," says Mike. "He sits down and listens to his clients and really helps to meet their goals and objectives." Buck is also talented with the other end of the deal...the mill. "He can sort his products, merchandise them and maximize the return on his end and the landowner's, and that's critical," says Mike.

Before he makes an offer to a landowner, Buck will walk the property and make an informed estimate of its yield. Then he'll try to find a mill that will buy it. "So you find where your market's at, what it's going to cost you to get it to that market



Buck Morris usually operates the grapple skidder. He grabs bunches of felled trees and "skids" them to the landing where his brother Gill de-limbs and sorts piles of logs by grade before loading them on tractor trailers for the journey to the mill.

Photo by Phil Audibert

and try to give him an estimate of what he's going to get in the end, what he'll wind up with," he explains.

Needless to say there are many, many variables not the least of which are fuel cost, insurance, equipment debt load, tract size and timber quality, to name just a few.

"It's a little bit more complex than most people think," confirms Mike who has seen bids vary by as much as \$50,000 for the same tract of timber. On the other end, at the mill, demand for certain kinds of lumber changes too. For example, Buck noticed when roadway sign posts changed to steel from treated lumber, "the price of six by sixes went down overnight." Right now the market is flooded with fence posts.

Landowners are changing too. In the old days a farmer would contact Buck's father because he needed to raise enough cash to buy a new tractor, for example. They would selectively cut timber more than 22 inches in diameter. Twenty years later they could come in and do it again. All three Morris generations have cut and re-cut a tract behind Montpelier. It just keeps on growing in that good Davidson soil.

"Now, you've got a different landowner from outside of here comes down here and says 'I want all of this gone.'" Buck points to the thicket of mixed pine and hardwood. "I'm putting horses in here...or hous-

es'...and you don't grow any more trees where they go." That's what's called a "terminal harvest."

Mike Eckley has also noticed a trend. The big pulp wood companies are re-focusing overseas where labor is cheaper and regulations less stringent. They are quietly selling off their local tracts. "A lot of that land has been purchased by either private timber investment management groups or by non-industrial private landowners," says Mike. "You're seeing a major shift across the entire country where our paper companies had a land

base to maintain the supply of wood products coming into their mill, but they're realizing there's so much value in real estate that they're now parceling it and selling it off. Those investment groups are going to hold it for another 10 to 20 years, and that's the scary part; you don't know where it's going to go."

And so timber tracts are generally becoming smaller. That might play well into the hands of a three-man operation like Glen Morris and Sons Logging Inc. "We're a small crew, one of the smallest," confirms Buck. "A crew like us will have the opportunity to work those smaller lots if we can find a margin in it."

Mike Eckley is on a mission to change the public perception of the logger and to

educate the timber tract owner to not just "take the best and leave the rest." He explains it this way: "If you've got 100 trees per acre and 50 of them are high quality and 50 are poor quality and you go in and cut the 50 high quality, well those poor quality trees are not going to all of a sudden lose their lower limbs; their knots are not going to fall off and start growing straight. It's just not going to happen. The 50 poor quality trees occupy that growing space until it is cut."

And so, in some cases, clear-cutting is not such a bad thing.

This particular tract in Orange County, where the Morrises are working, is not high quality timber. The soil is poor and the trees are spindly. It is highly possible this tract was consumed by the infamous 1941 fire which reportedly stretched all the way from the outskirts of Gordonsville to Orange east of the railroad tracks.

Buck and his brothers will clear-cut 50 acres of this tract and leave the other 50. "This gentleman here wants to manage this property for wildlife," observes Buck who will pile the sawn-off tree tops in clearings to make "wildlife hotels."

It is now up to Mike Eckley to persuade the landowner to do something more with the land. "There's a window of opportunity...two years."

What happens if the landowner does nothing? "You'll see a tremendous flush of hardwood vegetation, woody stems coming up and it will eventually lead to somewhat unproductive forest land like you see here...small-diameter, spindly, undesirable trees." The only difference will be more invasive species, mostly from the orient, will also take hold here. Mike would like to see the landowner ask for a controlled burn which will kill undesirable seeds and promote grass production. This tract would then do well planted in loblolly.

Mike says that landowners and loggers such as the Morrises are changing their values. "People want to maintain healthy forest, they want to have recreational opportunities and they're not all in it for deriving income every 10 years. Once that change occurs, you're going to see better management where harvesting is not just cutting the best and leaving the rest."

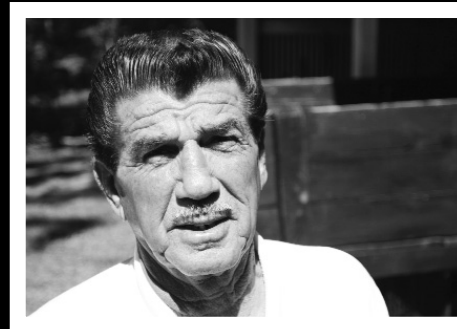
Buck Morris nods in agreement, but it's time for him to get back to work. He climbs the rungs of the skidder and starts delivering bunches of felled trees to his brother.



Left, Kenny Morris, Glen's brother, stands next to huge veneer logs that they had just winched aboard with a tractor and chain. The photo was taken in 1966.

Below, after 40 years in the business, Glen Morris, at age 68, still misses working in the woods. Photo by Phil Audibert

"Starvation sticks"



Pulp wood... "starvation sticks," says Buck's father Glen Morris, with a twinkle. He's cut more than he can count.

Glen suffers from rheumatoid arthritis brought on by 40+ years back-breaking work in the woods. Despite his diminutive size, he still looks like he could whip his weight in wildcats. "If I had the stuff they have now, I wouldn't be crippled up like I am," says Glen of his sons' arsenal of labor-saving equipment.

There was none of that when Glen started. He remembers helping his dad skid logs with a horse and hand roll them up on flat bed trucks using levers called cant hooks. If the logs were too big, they'd winch them aboard with a tractor and a chain. Glen remembers cutting down huge trees with a crosscut saw... trees so thick you had to take the handle off of one end of the saw, just to let it slide through. As a child, he loaded pulpwood by hand onto railroad cars in Orange. His Daddy paid him "a quarter to go to the movies."

Glen left his father's employ ("he did-

n't know when to quit!") in 1963. All he had was a chainsaw and a pick-up truck. He cut pulp wood, "starvation sticks," but gradually moved into selectively cutting high quality grade timber. "You can't find big timber like that anymore," says Glen a little sadly. "Sawmills are going to be glad to get beanpoles now."

When Lake Anna was starting to fill up with water, Glen Morris spent much of his time cutting trees on nearby farms so that landowners could cash in on their timber before it was flooded. And speaking of floods, Glen will never park equipment again in a low area like he did a bulldozer prior to Hurricane Camille. When he came back the following morning, "All you could see was the smoke-stack. It made me sick." He looks down and shakes his head in disgust.

Belying his 68 years, Glen dashes into his shop to show off his collection of crosscut and buck saws. He spies an ancient chainsaw that Don Waugh gave him recently. It's just like the first one he used with his father. It must weigh close to 30 or 40 pounds. Waugh had asked him if he could fix it. "They wouldn't halfway run when they were new," he replied with disdain.

Glen spends his time these days repairing and sharpening chainsaws. He rarely goes in the woods anymore because, "I'd want to get on a piece of equipment." He pauses and adds passionately, "It gets in your blood."

Funny...his son said exactly the same thing.