

Safety *PLUS*

AN OFFICIAL'S POINT OF VIEW *by Tom Heidlage*

Tom Heidlage had two long days ahead of him before he would blast the starting horn to begin the 2009 Great Portable Sawmill Shoot-Out. Time and again, he managed to use his skills with wood and machines—and people—to do a job that looked impossible.

After driving over 900 miles from his home in Pierce City, Missouri, Tom stood in the pouring rain and surveyed the Shoot-Out area. As a logger, he'd had plenty of experience with rain and mud. But there was a lot more than that to deal with. He opened the back of his Ford pickup truck, laced up his steel toe boots, fueled his chain saw, and went straight to work.

To the spectators, Tom was just the guy who started the events and watched for possible safety problems. Those of us who had spent the previous three days preparing for the show knew that this was only a small part of his duties. As he took in the tasks that needed to be done before the show, his usual smile and sense of humor (you've got to have a sense of humor in the lumber business) gave way to a brusque, no-nonsense attitude (which loggers and sawyers also need).

As a retired platoon sergeant in charge of the maintenance section of a Missouri National Guard Combat Engineering unit, Tom knows how to organize people and get things done. It did not take him long to fall back into that role, determining what needed to be done, who would do it, and how to keep the forklift in motion. "This year reminded me a lot of some of the two-week summer camps in the Guard," he recalled.

The first thing Tom noticed was

that the logs had been delivered about 200 yards from where they needed to be. He had to find a way to move 60 sawlogs and roughly 300 firewood logs to the other end of the exhibit area. Even if he could find a logging truck and driver willing to come in on short notice to move all that wood, the truck would have to thread its way through the exhibit area, and share the main road with the constant stream of incoming exhibitors and gravel trucks that were fighting to keep the road passable. Fortunately we were able to locate Brian Flannagan, a local logger, who was willing to help out.

Before the saw logs could be used, Tom had to supervise the scan for metal—and rejected three. And there were other log issues for Tom to deal with. The logs had not been trimmed to consistent lengths. Each had to be measured, marked, and trimmed to either 10 feet, 4 inches, or 12 feet, 4 inches. Another problem was that the logs were not clean. They had been cut months ago and had dried mud and rocks imbedded in the bark—not something that sawyers like to see in their logs. The solution was with Morbark, an exhibitor that had brought one of the industrial log debarking machines. Even though they had not planned a practical demonstration, Morbark obliged by running all the sawlogs through their machine. Tom spent the bet-



ter part of Thursday afternoon running the skid steer to load and unload the debarker. The logs came off the machine looking clean, but the machine had chewed deeply into the soft yellow poplar, and Tom had to re-scale the logs. More time lost.

Dealing with these issues cost Tom and the setup crew a day and a half that they had not planned for. The normal preparations—sorting the logs into four roughly equal groups, building the slab cribs, cutting nine ricks of 16-inch firewood blocks for the splitters, and moving the sawlogs in place for the mills—had to be done in less than half the allotted time.

In spite of the steady drizzle, a good crowd was forming at the scheduled starting time for the Shoot-Out. Tom was still moving logs in place for the sawmills right up to the last minute. As soon as

the final log was in place, he pulled the trigger on the air horn to start the event. His role as safety officer was the easiest part of his job, and he said he observed no problems.

As soon as the last sawmill shut down, Tom went back into logistics mode, clearing the sawmill slabs and bringing up the wood for the afternoon Firewood Competition. Those participants with loaders picked up their own logs, while Tom supervised the moving of machines in and out of the exhibit area. Although he is a logger and sawyer, he enjoyed the Firewood Competition. "I was really impressed by all the firewood processors," he told me. As with the Sawmill Shoot-Out, Tom's role as safety coordinator was relatively easy. "Really, everybody did really well. The only problem I saw was one spectator who came into the competition area, and I had to ask him to leave."

By the end of the day, Tom knew he had put in a long week. He was starting to get his humor back, but it still had an edge to it. "I could have stayed home to work this hard," he quipped, with a hint of that familiar smile returning to his weary face. "All in all, it was a good show. I'd like to have had more time to talk with people and look at the machines."

Even though he did not have much time to look at the machines or talk with the exhibitors, Tom was impressed by the overall show. He said he was also impressed by the way the exhibitors helped one another. A number of the participants loaned people and equipment to move material and machines, and sometimes just pull each other out of the mud. "Without the extra help, the Shoot-Out would not have been possible," Tom recalled. "You never know what you're in for from year to year." ■