Bucking Trends in Mississippi

Tech Tips

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"To me it all ties together—the deer, the timber we are growing, and the logging. It’s all one joint effort"  
Alan Priest, CST Timber

Three generations (left to right): Tal, Alan, Slade and Alan’s father, Harry L. Priest Jr.
ALAN PRIEST IS A LOGGER WHO LIKES TO HUNT. HE IS A FAMILY MAN. WHAT SETS ALAN APART IS HOW HE HAS MANAGED TO TAKE LOGGING, FAMILY, AND HUNTING AND CREATE A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS IN THE MIDST OF A HOSTILE ECONOMY. ALAN AND HIS WIFE RENEE WERE KIND ENOUGH TO SHARE A FEW TIPS WHILE SHOWING US AROUND A PRIVATE GAME PRESERVE THAT ALSO HAPPENS TO BE A PINE PLANTATION.
TALL, LANKY, AND YOUTHFULLY LOOKING, ALAN PRIEST’S DEMEANOR SPEAKS MORE TO HIS DAYS WINNING SADDLES AS A COWBOY IN MISSISSIPPI THAN IT DOES HIS CURRENT ROLE AS LOGGER AND FAMILY MAN.

In fact, you would be hard-pressed to identify either Alan or his wife Renee, the walking definition of Southern charm and grace, as grandparents, until they proudly introduce the newest member of their family, 15-month-old Scarlett Renee.

In addition to CST Timber Company, the Priests are the proprietors of the Tatum Plantation, a 2500-plus-acre plantation located between Centreville and Gloster, Mississippi, just off of Highway 24. The logging company takes its name from the couple’s children’s names: Christen, their first child and proud new mom; Slade, the oldest son; and Talmage—or Tal—who is 23 and interning for the family business during summer break.

In addition to several well-stocked lakes and a beautiful home that seems too big since the kids moved out, the Tatum Plantation has a ton of deer. “Our best guess is between 750 and 800—that’s with a nearly two-bucks-to-one-doe ratio,” Alan tells us.

Slade, 26, brings the story around to why we’re looking at deer feeders and talking about buck-to-doe ratios in an article that is about a man and his logging business. Along with his role as a full-time realtor specializing in land and timber acquisitions, Slade runs the big show at Tatum Plantation: guided deer hunts within the gated estate.

Alan and Renee share some of what they’ve learned being in business together while offering up a tour of Tatum Plantation on a sweet electric side-by-side ATV, pointing out all of the good hunting spots along the way.

Alan: We’ve never been afraid to sell out when things were bad, but we’ve also never been scared to buy equipment. We’ve bought equipment at times in the past two years when other people thought we were crazy.

Renee: There are so many loggers going out of business...

Alan: There are so many loggers going out of business. And credit scores are everything right now. Your local Joe just can’t walk into the local dealership and buy logging equipment without an impeccable credit score. Even worse is trying to buy used equipment. Most times start-ups buy used equipment, and they’re usually not successful. They complicate the markets in the area by adding loads—you can watch how they work, and

You’ve always been ahead of the curve, like back in the early nineties when you downsized. Is that why you chose now to pick up some new equipment?
you know they are not going to be in business long.

The latest equipment that we bought was in one of the worst economies that I’ve ever seen in my lifetime. But we saw—and I’m not saying that we know something that no one else knows—an opportunity. As people were getting out and selling equipment, we saw that they weren’t going to be able to get back in because of the current lending situation. So we decided to upsize while everyone else was going the other way.

Renee: Timber’s still there to be cut.

Alan: Yeah—the mills are still there to be supplied. [Turning to me] Wouldn’t you say that 2009 was bad, economically? We had the best year ever in the logging end of our business for 2009.

Wow—what do you attribute that to?

Alan: Well, we used to buy (another brand of) used equipment. I’m serious—we had four jobs going on used equipment (from another manufacturer), and our repair bills were so high that it just about put

Clockwise from top left:

Alan Priest relaxes in the lodge.
The back patio where guests can enjoy the scenic landscape.
The Priest family gathers at the lodge before dinner.
Covered bridge on road into Tatum Plantation.
One of Renee’s many thoughtful design touches.
us out of business. The machines were so complicated that we couldn’t work on them. You know, it doesn’t matter what you buy—you can buy the best piece of equipment in the world—but you are gonna have to work on it from time to time. And you don’t want to have to call the big truck every time, ’cause you know that’s a smooth thousand-dollar bill just for him to pull up. We found the John Deere equipment lasted longer and was easier to work on.

We’ve been able to buy some low-hour, one-year-old John Deere equipment that was too good of a deal to pass up. As long as the sheet metal was good and I could call a John Deere distributor and get repair histories on the equipment, we would buy it. It saved thousands of dollars over buying new equipment.

Something else that has made us really successful and allowed us to hire and keep people when other companies may have problems keeping them is our entire logging force is on salary.

**That is unique.**

**Renee:** When we looked at the big picture, it was feasible. And it gives our guys the security to plan for a solid week. They get a normal paycheck. The way they get ahead, though, is our bonus system. That’s their incentive. They get a good paycheck, but when they add that bonus—sometimes these guys get $300 or $400 a week in bonus. In our area $300 or $400 a week is a lot of extra income.

**Tell me about the bonus system.**

**Alan:** After 40 loads on all of our tree-length jobs, they get a bonus. After 50 loads, that bonus increases substantially. They get bonus on up to however many loads they get for the week. Actually, our guys get their runs Monday through Sunday. If it’s Thursday afternoon and the crews are sitting on 50 loads for the week, they can make bank Friday. And, if the mill’s open on Saturday, they are going to be right back out there because they are going to be getting that bonus money...

**Renee:** A larger percentage...

**Alan:** So, if they are having a good week, it can easily become an unbelievable week. We’ve got people on our jobs, running our equipment and keeping it in good shape. That’s why we give them the incentive to produce, a cash incentive. Everybody wants to make more money. Shouldn’t you make more money if you work hard?

It seems like in addition to these new guys, you seem to keep folks around for a while.

**Alan:** Well, I’ve got my logging supervisor, Charlie Ravencraft. Charlie is 57 and a workaholic—he’s been with us for seven years. Sometimes on Saturdays or Sundays, when none of the crews are working, he’ll be out repairing something that maybe we could get by without, but still needs to be fixed. I’d be willing to bet he’s worked three-quarters of the time, seven days a week this year—he’s just one of those kinda guys.

**Back to your vision, it seems like you aren’t afraid to take risks.**