

Winnie's Logging Services mechanises with Matriarch machines



Some of the earliest gold discoveries in South Africa were made in the hills surrounding Barberton in Mpumalanga. This brought about an industrial revolution of its own in the mild climate of the Lowveld. Now Barberton's gold has all but been depleted, to be replaced by a new and more sustainable resource namely timber.

Up in the pine forests of the Montrose area above Barberton, a more subtle and quieter revolution is taking

place in the manner and ownership of the once male-dominated industry of timber harvesting and extraction. Winnie Ndlovu grew up in the forests surrounding the Sappi Ngodwana Paper Mill near Nelspruit. Her father, Frank, worked for the company as a forester and when she was a teenager Winnie accompanied him to work in the forests during her school holidays.

“When I expressed an interest to study forestry after matric, I was told in no uncertain terms that it was not a

place for women,” Winnie says. “So instead, I studied agriculture and with my diploma in hand, I joined TSB Sugar for two years to complete my practical training modules.”

Another year’s work with a furniture manufacturer preceded Winnie not being able to resist going to work for then timber contract harvester Gavin Simms. “I worked for Gavin in the administrative department and learnt firsthand about the importance of keeping accurate machine and man-hour records plus all the essential regulatory paperwork that ensures a business runs smoothly,” she says. “Gavin seemed comfortable to let me work on my own and I appreciated learning so much about the timber contracting business in this way.”

After Winnie had spent seven years with his company, Gavin Simms was in the throes of exiting the contract harvesting business, choosing instead to hire out forest harvesting equipment under the banner of Sable Hire while also mentoring young and upcoming entrepreneurs to start up their own harvesting outfits.

“In 2015 Gavin approached me and asked whether I had ever considered starting my own contract timber harvesting company,” Winnie explains. “It had long been a dream of mine but without access to finance and such resources, I was doubtful that I could do it successfully.”

“Fortunately at that time, paper and pulp company Sappi’s Forestry division was putting out tenders for

timber harvesting contracts and I was able to negotiate a contract to supply the company with 85 000 tons of pine and eucalyptus a year, for five years. Now that we had a goal, and a somewhat daunting one at that, I had to get started in earnest and Winnie’s Logging Services was founded.”

Winnie started off conservatively, employing 24 people. One of those was Violet Motubatse, who is still the Production Manager for Winnie’s Logging Services. “Violet and I have been friends since we both worked for Gavin and she has lots of experience in timber harvesting and extraction,” Winnie adds. “We started off with 11 chainsaws, felling timber manually, and the first machine we hired in was a Bell 225A Logger from Gavin’s Sable Hire, which we used for stacking timber at roadside. All other operations were done manually and we soon realised that to make a dent in our massive annual target of 85 000 tons we would have to mechanise to some extent.”

Fortunately help was at hand as besides the valuable mentorship role that Gavin Simms was providing in terms of contracting and technical matters, his company Sable Hire was well equipped to assist Winnie with forestry equipment at competitive rates. “Gavin has been so much more than a mentor to us as a young company, helping us to obtain favourable financial terms from banks with which we could buy our vehicles to transport our staff and light utility vehicles for both Violet and I,” Winnie says. “His vast knowledge, built up over of many





Winnie Ndlovu, Gavin Simms and Violet Motubatse with the Matriarch Skogger working its magic in the background.

years in the forest of how to work efficiently and safely, is the stuff that no one could get from books alone.”

“And to add to this backup, Gavin has the experience of what forestry harvesting and equipment will work best for us. He owns the first Matriarch Skogger and has just bought a second machine, which we have the privilege of hiring from him. Working in unison with the Matriarch Skogger is the Matriarch FASTfell timber felling machine which has sped up our production to levels we’d never have believed possible.”

Winnie is adamant that despite the years spent working in the industry, it’s working in the timber compartments where experience and knowledge are gained to further her company. She and her harvesting teams are eager learners and value input from experienced specialists in the field. A recent visit by Derek Howe, Bell Equipment’s General Manager: Forestry, Sugar and Agricultural Sales, who will be responsible for much of the sales of Matriarch equipment, and Ashley Bell, Matriarch Equipment Marketing Manager, was eagerly awaited.

“Derek, with all his experience is a wonderful teacher and he taught us in the pine compartment how to really approach clear felling efficiently,” Winnie continues. “He showed the Matriarch FASTfell operator how to cut a swathe into the compartment with directional felling, so

clearing a way that allows the Matriarch Skogger to bunch timber and extract it quickly, stacking it at roadside from where it can be processed further.”

Working in tandem, the two Matriarch machines are playing a big role in Winnie’s Logging Services, currently achieving around 320 tons per day, although Winnie and Violet are confident that as their operators improve this figure will increase. Working efficiently yet maintaining safety standards is a priority for the whole team.

Sable Hire’s Matriarch equipment is hired out on dry rates and Winnie has been impressed by the low fuel consumption that the equipment returns. The Matriarch FASTfell machine purrs its way through 5 to 7 litres of diesel an hour with the Matriarch Skogger only slightly more at between 6 and 9 litres.

“The big decision for me now is whether I can afford my own equipment and machines from Matriarch are definitely top of the list,” Winnie says with a broad smile. “The equipment is so competitively priced and as we’re assured of excellent technical back-up through Bell Equipment’s wide footprint, the first thought is that I certainly want both the Matriarch FASTfell and Skogger. Time will tell though and for now, we’re relying on Sable Hire and their favourable rates.”