

# Danny Stevens: A five generation logging family

By Lynn Coffey



*Three generations of loggers: Clifford and Danny Stevens, grandson Thomas Huffman*

Most people get up in the morning and head off to work with no thoughts of impending danger. In an office setting, having the computer down is an inconvenience but for the rugged men who make logging their profession, a new report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, states that logging is the number one most dangerous occupation in the United States.

But talking to Danny Stevens and his family, loggers from the Tyro area, they wouldn't have it any other way. Logging is in their DNA and three generations are currently working together as a team; Danny, his son Clifford, and grandson Thomas Huffman are now logging at the Billy Paul

Mays property on Emblys Gap Road in Nelson County.



The only son of the late William Henry "Wicky" and Barbara Stevens, Danny grew up around the logging profession and learned the trade from his maternal grandfather, Austin Fitzgerald, and his father at an early age. He remembers helping his grandfather cut timber with a cross-cut saw and riding with him to the lumber mill. At one time the Fitzgerald family lands were vast but

*Austin Fitzgerald beside an enormous poplar log he cut* hundreds of acres were bought out by the government when the Appalachian Trail was developed and routed through the property. Danny's mother was Austin's daughter and when she married Wicky, they lived down the road at what they called the Tice place but later, moved to the Harper's Creek property where the Stevens family continue to live today.

When Austin started, he felled trees with a cross-cut saw and pulled the logs down to his sawmill with horses. In the 1950s he bought an old cleat tractor but still hand-loaded the timber on his truck with skid poles and cant hooks. In the 1960s he finally purchased a bulldozer. Clifford recalled that one tree was so large he couldn't load it so he left it along Harper's Creek where he cut it. "When the '69 Flood came, it washed down the creek and hung up right next to his sawmill!"

Danny added, "My daddy and my mother's three brothers Romey, John Henry and Austin Fitzgerald Jr. teamed up and did construction work in the summertime and logged in the winter months. Years later my mother developed a blood disorder and daddy had a heart attack and they both had to quit work. All the logging equipment was tied up between the families so I decided to go out on my own."

On June 15, 1978, at the age of fifteen years and eight months, the younger Stevens purchased his first pieces of machinery; a D-2 Caterpillar bulldozer with a winch on the back, a 1960 model Massie Ferguson farm tractor with trip forks on the front for loading and a McCullough chain saw. Danny said, "Daddy came back and became the leader because he knew everything about logging. He helped me when I was starting out because I was as dumb as a box of rocks. The first log truck



***Wicky & Danny with another huge poplar***



***The same log with Susan and children sitting on it***  
going to live once and that road doesn't come back so you might as well enjoy it."

When asked what type of trees they cut, the men said, "We prefer poplar because it's easier to cut and you get more logs out of it. Oaks you may get two decent logs out of one tree but poplar you could get up to six or eight. Saw logs measure from eight to sixteen feet and we try to get four loads a day to take to the mill." The biggest log Danny has ever cut was in 1991. A poplar, cut on Pharsalia, was sixteen foot long with 1735 board feet.

we bought was a 1966 Chevrolet two-ton, which was already twelve years old in 1978. Different ones began helping me and even though we didn't know what we were doing, we made it work."

In the years that followed, Danny bought a 310 Case crawler/loader which helped him load more in a day. From there, a skidder and knuckleboom was purchased, making the whole job easier. In Danny's type of logging, some essential equipment is needed for the work; a bulldozer to make roads through the mountains so the men can get to the timber and clean out a place for a landing, chainsaws to cut the trees, a skidder to pull the trees to a landing where a knuckleboom then loads the logs onto the log trucks. If the land is steep, cable is needed to tie to the tree so the skidder can pull it down to the landing. Jeff Simpson, Danny's nephew, typically operates the skidder.

Like Danny, Clifford, 37, grew up in a logging family and after graduating from high school in 2003 went on to join his dad in the business.

Thomas, at age 20, has done the same and all three men love what they do, saying they enjoy the freedom of getting to work outdoors and being their own boss. Unlike many larger logging operations, Danny is content with the size of his business, saying, "We work a lot but we play a lot, too. We love to hunt and when it's hunting season we take off. Or the whole crew can go watch family members playing sports or something at school. You are only

All three men agreed that cutting a tree down is the most dangerous part of logging. Danny said, “A lot of people have gotten killed on the landing or in trucks but in mountain logging when you cut a tree, it’s just like a someone shooting a shotgun at you. When it goes down through the trees you always got something flying back at you. Clear cutting eliminates some of the danger because you are cutting the trees under you.” Young Thomas does most of the cutting and he uses what is called a top-notch with a hinge cut. He states, “Every tree is different but this is the safest way because it gives you time to get out of the way before the tree starts falling. It also keeps the tree from kicking back off the stump on you and it helps guide the tree to where you want it to go.” Clifford can do anything but usually runs the loader, saws logs on the landing, or loads the trucks.



***Thomas cutting a poplar tree***

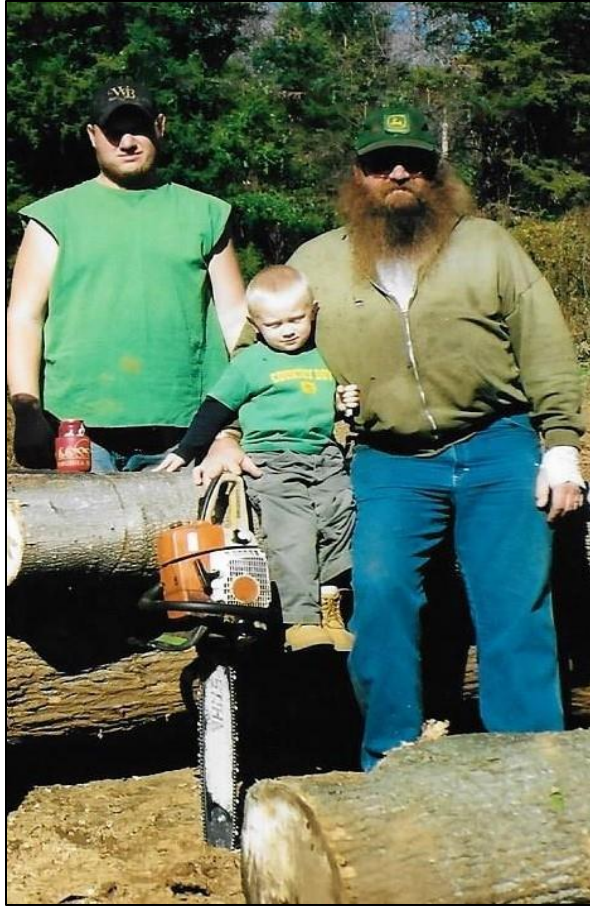
Danny Stevens is a soft-spoken, gentle giant of a man and his wife Susan’s personality is the same. They are very humble people and one of the most family-oriented couples I know. It shows in the way they interact with their two children, Stephanie and Clifford, and their extended family, all of which have logging roots. When asked how they met, Danny laughed and said, “We grew up together at the Mountain View Tea Room. The Tea Room *was* Tyro back then. There was 50 to 75 people down there every night, snapping beans or shucking corn. After supper and you got your shower, people headed to the Tea Room where everybody talked and everybody got along.”



***Danny giving the tree a “tap” in the right direction***

about letting Danny, who was dating their daughter at the time, log a certain piece of land. That

Susan’s parents were Gene and Inez Mays who lived on Pharsalia Road in Nelson County. Her dad worked for the Flippin family and was the farm manager for Silver Creek Orchard as well as a farmer himself. He talked to the Flippin’s



*The Stevens in 2006 when Thomas was four* but they also get plenty of physical exercise in the great outdoors and enjoy the freedom of taking time off for the important things of life.

was in 1979. The Stevens's married on May 10, 1980, and began their life together on Harper's Creek. Forty-three years later, Danny is still cutting timber on Flippin land!

He is quick to give Susan credit for a job that's every bit as hard as her husband's. He says, "A logger's wife plays a big part of the success of the man who's logging. The stuff you have to put up with; permits, bill paying, and parts running. If a wife wasn't a gopher (go-for), the job shuts down and *you* go. By the time you get back, the day is gone. There's nothing close to us anymore. We have to drive to Staunton, Harrisonburg or Bedford to get parts. She worries more about the danger, even though I have never been hurt on the job."

In our modern-day world, a lot of people work office jobs or in a factory where the pay is good and there's not much in the way of physical activity. But that might just be a detriment to health since the body is a machine that's meant to be worked. The rugged men who log for a living face certain dangers that others aren't aware of



*Stevens family loggers*

*A Day in the Life of a Logger*



*Clifford Stevens, knuckleboom operator*



*Jeff Simpson, skidder operator*



*Danny pushing logs on the dozer*



*Clifford, Danny, Thomas, Jeff, and Jeff's son, Hayden*



*The logging crew with Emblys Gap land owner, Billy Paul Mays*



*Clifford in the knuckleboom cab*



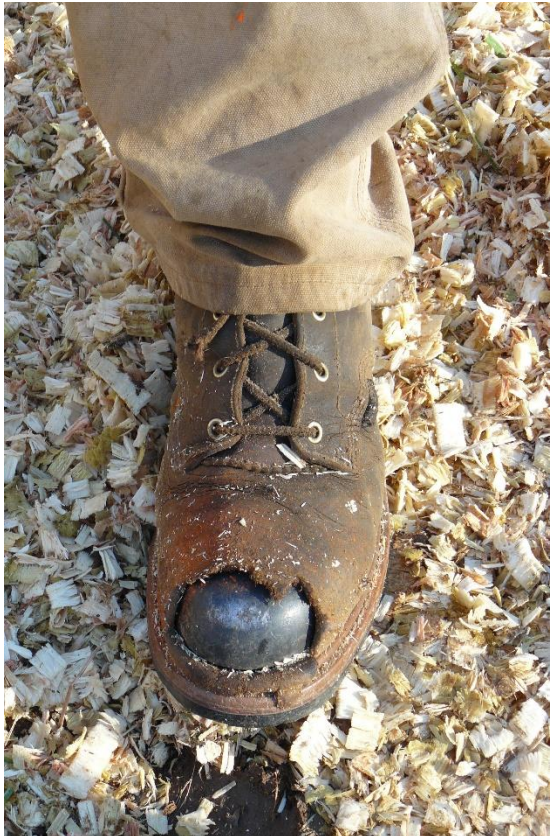
*Thomas tightening down the load*



*Trucks loaded, bound for the mill*



*Danny in his red logging truck*



*The hardworking boots of a logger*

*Early Photos of the Logging Profession*

