

# *Bush Hog: A Driving Force*



**Selma's Bush Hog brand is now synonymous with ruggedness, durability and the highest level of customer satisfaction the world over**

BY MARTI WEBB SLAY

If you know anything about the agricultural business — or if you know anyone who does — you've no doubt heard the term "bush hog." And given the traditional straight-talk of rural America, you likely heard the term used as a verb rather than a noun.

Because nobody, but nobody, uses a Bush Hog to mow a field — they simply bush hog it.

The Bush Hog, a rotary cutter that attaches to a tractor, revolutionized the agricultural industry when it was invented by two farmers in Dallas County, Ala., in 1950. Now the name is "synonymous with ruggedness, durability and the highest level of customer satisfaction," according to the company Web site and satisfied customers the world over.

There are other rotary cutters on the market, but there's

only one Bush Hog.

"Our name is probably the greatest asset we've got," affirms James Bearden, executive vice president of finance and administration. "People think of us when they think of rotary mowers and heavy brush cutters. Fortunately, we have been able to tag on some other products to that same reputation. It helps us market our products."

In addition to the rotary cutter, Bush Hog now offers a variety of other tractor-mounted equipment, including front-end loaders, rotary tillers, posthole diggers, backhoes and pulverizers. They also produce zero-turn mowers (they turn on a dime) and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), and they are currently in production with a new utility vehicle for farmers and hunters.

One year after the first Bush Hog was invented, four Selma, Ala., businessmen purchased the manufacturing and marketing rights. Two of them, Earl Goodwin and Leon Jones, helped manage the company until 1968, when Allied Products bought it. "After that, they stayed on for several years and eventually retired," says Bearden.

The company changed ownership only one more time in

its 50-year history, when Crown Company Industries bought it in March 2000.

Bush Hog currently employs 950 people in Selma, in two different locations. The downtown plant, where the company started, has expanded to the limit, and a second plant about five miles outside town houses the Research and Development Center where the majority of engineering work, including design and prototype testing, is done.

**A** third plant in Tennessee employs about 300 people. “We had a plant in Kansas, but we needed to consolidate,” says Bearden, “so we built in Tennessee. We wanted to stay at 850-900 here in Alabama. It stretches our facilities and our ability to manage that many people in one location.” The Tennessee plant produces front-end loaders. The zero-turn mowers will also be produced there. The Alabama plants manufacture all the rotary cutters, finishing mowers, posthole diggers and landscape products.

All products are delivered to dealers around the country using the fleet of



**James Bearden, executive vice president of finance and administration (above), says Bush Hog currently employs 950 people in Selma, in two different locations. The Alabama plants manufacture all the rotary cutters, finishing mowers, posthole diggers and landscape products (opposite page).**

65 over-the-road trucks and 250 trailers driven by Bush Hog employees. The company fleet also transports most materials for factory use.

A strong dealer network around the country is a key factor in Bush Hog's success. “We seek to be represented by the most progressive dealer in each geographical trade area,” the company Web site says.

“Our dealers are typically farm

equipment dealers who sell the John Deere tractor line or Kubota or other big names. They'll have a main tractor line, and they'll have a Bush Hog line to sell as attachments to their tractors,” Bearden explains. “We have dealers all over, from east coast to west coast, from Texas to Canada.”

Like their customers, their dealers are loyal. Dave Lock, owner of Zimmerschied Farm Equipment in Carrollton, Mo., says his company has handled the Bush Hog line for 37 years, and he has no plans to change now. “Our original owner hooked up with Bush Hog and he was very happy with their quality and service. I took over later, and I've carried on the same tradition. Bush Hog has become known as the Cadillac of brush cutters around this part of the country. I've had real good luck with their service, and their warranty work is outstanding. We've always been happy with them.”

In addition to the tractor attachments, Bush Hog is now entering the utility vehicle market, amid glowing reviews. The Trail Hand, “for farmers, ranchers and country folks,” can be

### What's in a Name?

When the Bush Hog rotary cutter was designed in 1950, it revolutionized the agricultural industry. Prior to that time, farmers cleared land using a sickle bar mower. “The closest way I can explain one is to look at a pair of hedge trimmers,” explains James Bearden, executive vice president of finance and administration for Bush Hog LLC. “People used something similar to that to cut grass, but if you are trying to cut a four-inch tree, that's just not going to do it.” Users had to manually cut larger brush, a hard, time-consuming effort.

Then the Bush Hog rotary cutter was introduced. The tractor runs over the tree, and the Bush Hog cuts it.

In the early years, the machines were largely sold by field demonstrations. According to legend, one farmer who was watching a demonstration commented, “That machine goes through bushes like a hog.”

The name Bush Hog was born, and today it is the industry standard for a rotary cutter that clears brush and debris like no other.





used to tote rectangular hay bales or haul feed into the field. With a payload capacity of 1,500 pounds, the vehicle can also tow the same amount. The Trail Hunter provides a smooth ride for hunters entering rough, remote areas looking for game. Bush Hog's new off-road Trail Series utility vehicles "live up to the company's reputation for performance you can count on in rugged conditions, while delivering a more comfortable ride," according to the company Web site. The utility vehicles are being manufactured in the Alabama plants.

"Our prices are competitive and we have some features that make ours a much better unit," Bearden says. "We've got a better suspension and drive system that we're very proud of."

While the company does pride itself on being innovative, it also remembers its roots. "We've expanded that basic rotary cutter line that was originally designed to clear heavy brush and debris," says Bearden. "We've developed that into a complete line of rotary cutters. We sell cutters 42 inches wide up to 20 feet wide,

and with a vast assortment of models...anything that can do very rough cutting to a finishing mower that gives almost a lawn mower type finish."

They've also stayed true to the city that gave birth to the Bush Hog.

"Throughout the last 50 years, the management of the company has stayed in Selma," Bearden says. "We have owned places all over the country, but we've always managed them from the core plant here in Selma. That primarily is



attributable to the work force here," he continues. "We have developed a long-term management team that's been in place for a long time. The president [Bobby Middlebrooks] has been with the company approaching 50 years. We have a good, core group of people who know a lot about the agricultural business and know a lot about Bush Hog. I can't say enough about the work force here [in Alabama]. Throughout our two ownership changes, [company leaders] recognized the value of the work force

and haven't made any efforts to change locations."

Not everyone who works from the company is originally from Selma, or even Alabama. "Like any big company, we recruit from all over," explains Bearden. Have they had trouble bringing people to Selma from other parts of the country? Not particularly, he says. "If we can get them here and keep them here for a little while, they fall in love with Selma and stay here." For those who don't like a small, rural community, they can live in Prattville or Montgomery. The commute is about an hour, a drive that those from bigger cities are used to.

Still, there are plenty of hometown folks who have worked for Bush Hog for years, even generations. "That's part of our Bush Hog legacy. We have people who stay here a long time," says Bearden. "We have a lot of families, the father, son and grandson or the husband and wife that work together. We have a lot of that here, and we're proud of that."

They are equally as proud of their community and show that pride in their commitment to it. "They are good corporate citizens," says Wayne Vardaman, president of the Center for Commerce in Selma. "They are our largest employer, but they mean more to us than just the economic impact. They are good community leaders. They're highly involved in the YMCA, Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Authority, United Way and other special things." And when the Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Authority came together to form the Center for Commerce, James Bearden was the first president.

Clearly, Bush Hog is not just synonymous with brush cutting, but with a commitment to its employees and its community as well. ■