

Valley Top Roll Self-Loader

Reviewed by Bill Gove

Most firewood processors are designed and set up to be used as yard machines, working efficiently at a yard location where the firewood logs can be gathered and stockpiled. But not all firewood producers are the same. Some choose to process firewood at a busy logging site as the logs are brought down a skid trail—and that's where Valley Processors' Top Roll Self Loader is finding a home.

Jeff Weeks, founder of Valley Processors and one of the pioneers of the modern generation of firewood processors, saw the need for a machine that could work conveniently at a log landing. There are many loggers who produce firewood as a secondary product, hauling firewood logs down in the skidder hitch along with the sawlogs. Using his past experience as a firewood producer himself, Jeff set out to design an appropriate machine to complement his existing line of firewood processors.

He decided that what was needed was a machine which could be placed right alongside the skid road, would occupy very little landing space, wouldn't

require additional support machinery, and could be operated by one person. The machine he designed is definitely not a conventional firewood processor.

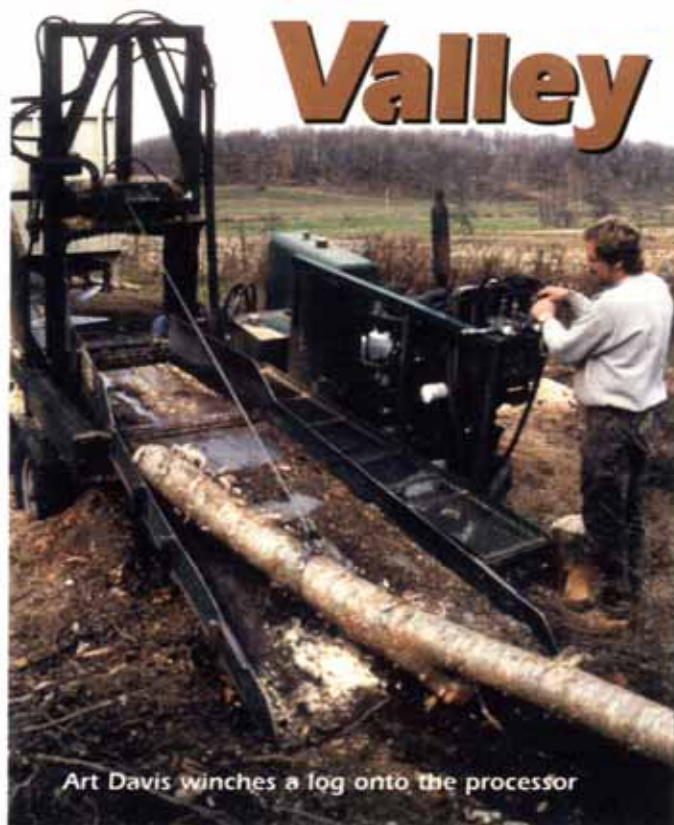
The first Valley Self Loader I went to see was being run by Stephen Kraft of Springfield, Vermont. Steve is a forester and logger who operates J&S

Look Behind the Saw Bar to See What Sets This Machine Apart

Forest Management Services. He uses a skidder, firewood processor and wood truck to cut a lot of firewood and sawlogs during his timber stand improvement work.

When I visited, Steve's processor was set up in a small opening along the woods road where he was working. The Valley Self Loader operates almost at ground level, and the logs are pulled by a winch mounted on the processor directly from the ground up onto the pan and into the cutting trough. Any length of tree can be fed through, which eliminates the need to cut up tree-length material.

Valley buyers have a choice of two systems to move the log through the



Art Davis winches a log onto the processor



Steve Kraft's operation at the skid road entrance



A log is held tight for cutting by the power roll system

Photos by Bill Gove

Valley Processors Top Roll Self Loader Spec Sheet

MODEL Valley Processors Top Roll Self Loader	SPLITTER CYCLE TIME 5 seconds	TRANSPORT LENGTH 14 feet	FRAME 6-inch ship channel	CLAMP STYLE Clamp or Feed Rolls
POWER UNIT W/HP 50 HP Kubota diesel	CHAINSAW/ BAR 25 inches	TRANSPORT WIDTH 8 feet	AXLES Single, with brakes	SALES PRICE (BEFORE OPTIONS) \$28,500 clamp feed \$32,900 power roll feed
PUMP (GPM) Customer Choice	CHAIN SIZE .404	TRANSPORT HEIGHT 12 feet	EST. PRODUCTION RATE/HOUR 1 to 1 1/2 cords	MANUFACTURER Valley Processors Inc. 330 Harkness Road Amherst, MA 01002 413-253-4867 www.vallpro.com
CYLINDER SIZE Customer Choice	HYDR. TANK CAP. 50 gallons	TIRES 15 or 16 inch	MAX LOG DIAMETER 22 inches	
SPLITTING FORCE Customer Choice	WEDGES (STANDARD) 4 or 5 way	HITCH Customer Choice	MAX LOG LENGTH 50 feet	
	MACHINE WEIGHT Varies with options			

machine: a clamp carriage or a set of power rolls. Steve has the older style, a movable frame which clamps the log and slides forward for each cut. He said it hasn't given him any problems, except that the wood sometimes doesn't center well using the clamp feed. With this system, the last piece cut has to be a minimum of

24 inches in length.

Winching ground-skidded trees directly into the machine obviously means having some dirty wood to cut. The advancing log also pushes mud up against the adjustable pan, which is used to lead the logs up onto the machine. Occasionally the mud and dirt buildup raises the edge

of the pan up enough so that the end of a log goes under the pan. It is a nuisance for the operator, who then has to somehow pull the log back a little and clean out under the pan.

Keeping the saw sharp requires cleaning off the path of the saw cut on exceptionally dirty logs, plus plenty of file work. I noticed

that the saw chain would occasionally loosen after the processor was running for awhile, and Steve said he thought a chain tensioner would help solve that problem. He also said he would like to see a better guard for the saw blade because rough wood sometimes catches against the guard when moving through.

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However, Steve was quick to say the Self Loader is well-designed and built. With decent wood he can cut about one cord an hour. He likes the 4-way splitting wedge better than the 5-way wedge, because the small sticks he often processes get split too small with the 5-way wedge.

For Steve Kraft, the Valley Self Loader seems to be ideal. He works alone, doing all of the harvesting tasks, and enjoys running the firewood processor. He says he is 99.9 percent satisfied with the machine.

Not that far away, at A&D Logging in Franklin, Vermont, I got a look at a different operation: a Valley Top Roll Self Loader used by a four-man logging crew. On the day of my visit they were creating a new sugar

bush on a farm near Swanton, Vermont, cutting out most of the trees other than sugar maple, including plenty of small wood. It was an ideal operation for a Self Loader at the landing.

The processor was parked next to the skid road so that the skidder could drop off the firewood logs right behind the processor. If there were any sawlogs in the stem they were cut off from the rest of the tree and pulled by the skidder to the nearby sawlog pile. If the skid load was all firewood the skidder operator simply climbed over the pile of firewood logs to drop the sticks in a more convenient spot.

Art Davis has 23 years of logging experience and is owner of A&D Logging. He was quick to point out why

he chose the Self Loader: the log landing is a busy and confined place, and an extra piece of machinery to load the processor would be inconvenient for his crew. So Art likes the concept of the Self Loader. And the price of the machine, he feels, is reasonable. The processor tows easily, sets up easily, and is fuel efficient, according to Art, who has about 700 hours on his machine.

There's a major difference between Art's machine and the one owned by Steve Kraft, and it was soon apparent. On Art's machine the feed system is a set of power rolls instead of a sliding clamp. There are actually three powered rolls, and the top one also applies pressure to hold the log during the

saw cut. I was told that ice and snow covered logs present no problem for the power rolls.

The power rolls not only move odd-shaped logs through the machine quite easily, but they also shorten the cutting cycle time. With the older, clamp-style feed, the electric over hydraulic controls have to be provided with a lockout for the splitter assembly while the chainsaw is in the wood. However, the design of the power roll feed permits the operator to cut and split simultaneously. That makes for a shorter cycle time.

The logger who runs Art Davis' machine has found that the logs feed best through the rolls when fed butt end first. He also said the saw blade doesn't seem

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to have enough downward pressure to cut well after the saw chain teeth are about half worn down. However, Art said he hasn't had that problem as long as he keeps the chain sharp.

Art had no complaints, but did offer some suggestions for improvements. The oil pressure and temperature gauges are mounted where they can't be seen during operation, and Art thought they would be more useful on the control panel. Also, he felt there should be volume gauges on the fuel and hydraulic oil tanks.

The manual winch on the top of the frame, which is used to pull the logs into the machine, has a bar in front that the cable slides over. The bar on Art's machine had some deep

grooves worn into it from the cable under pressure. A roller instead of a stationary bar would seem to be more appropriate. Although the machine can take wood up to 22 inches in diameter, much of Art Davis' wood was small on this sugar bush operation. The length of the sticks being split had been extended to 24 inches for his current customer, who uses them in an outdoor furnace with a large firebox. With good wood, an operator working alone can cut one cord per hour with Art's Self Loader. Sometimes one of the other crew members helps out by operating the winch, and production increases to one and a half cords an hour. One thing I noticed was that the wood dropped well from the saw



A skidder drops a load of logs near the processor at the landing worked by A&D Logging.

into the splitting trough, seldom requiring any repositioning by hand.

I was impressed with the concept of the Valley Top Roll Self Loader and its practical application on logging operations with a mix of products coming out of

the woods. The Self Loader is not the ideal for every firewood producer, but it has found a niche in the working woods. ■

Bill Gove is retired forester who last worked for the Vermont Department of Parks and Forest.

MANUFACTURER'S COMMENTS

The Valley Top Roll is the newest innovation in the firewood business. The Top Roll eliminates the clamp bar, thus making the processor easier and faster to operate. It feeds crooked logs with greater ease and holds the log down to the last piece so the operator can maintain a steady pace.



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