Babe in the Woods: Tales of a Teen-Age Logger

By Eric Redman

In June 1966, just days after graduating from high school, I found myself at the top of a tall tree in the Cascade Mountains. The tree was destined to become a spar tree, the center of a logging operation; I knew that much. But I didn't know what a spar tree did, or how the rig-up crew – the "bull gang," of which I was the newest member – would convert into towering equipment this huge Douglas fir, the only tree left standing in forty acres of timber. From the moment I'd joined them, the loggers proved excellent at telling me what to do. But they didn't explain much.

Kenny, the high climber, went up the tree first. With leg spurs and climbing belt, he ascended smoothly, as if climbing stairs. He limbed the tree, then lopped it off a hundred fifty feet above the ground, using a chain saw tied to his waist. With a double-bit ax, he peeled the top four feet bare. Next, he hauled up a five-pound hammer. With railroad spikes, he nailed big J-shaped plates to the bare treetop. He circled the tree with a short cable, suspending it from the plates. He joined the cable eyes with a melon-sized pulley – the pass block – and through it he threaded the pass line, a thin braided wire that ended with a hook, which he lowered to the ground. Walt, the hooktender, clipped the hook to two chains, the pass chains, which looped around my legs to form a seat. And in that seat, as if in the bosun's chair of a giant sailboat, gripping the pass line tightly, I was hoisted up to help Kenny rig the spar tree, hoisted up into the summer I'd chosen: logging, working in the woods.

Why had I chosen this? After all, the work was dangerous: at the time, Northwest logging was even more dangerous than commercial fishing. The Northwest seemed filled with logging widows, and more conspicuously with maimed men: men missing arms, legs, most often fingers. Some of the danger was inherent: the woods held countless hazards; the work was hard; men became careless. ("Your girlfriend like your fingers?" a logger asked me, nodding at my grip as we rode the back of a truck. "Better move 'em, or you'll be taking 'em to her in a bag.") But the dangers were particularly great in those days. The trees were big then – very big. Virgin timber yielded forty-foot logs that were six, eight, ten feet in diameter. It took great force to move them. When things went wrong, the woods seemed to explode.

The pay wasn't great either. A starting chokesetter – my pay group, though not my job – earned $1.925 per hour, above the minimum wage, but not far above the poverty line. We earned almost nothing (about eight cents an hour) for the time we spent jouncing over logging roads in company buses called "crummies," riding to and from those spots where the crummy finally stopped and the logging finally started. But we did get overtime: we worked ten-hour days, plus Saturdays.

Logging's risks didn't attract me, although some concept of manliness, some larger-than-life image of loggers I carried in my head, surely did. As for the money, I needed it for college, and though I sympathized with the loggers (soon seeing them as more exploited than they saw themselves), woods work paid better, with overtime, than summer jobs in the city. So money and romance, perhaps even testosterone, each had some force that propelled me towards the woods. But they added just a trickle to the river of my desire.

• • •

I wanted, first, to move up to the Big Leagues. Throughout my boyhood, my parents owned a tree farm in the Cascade foothills near Carnation. Loggers would have considered this a woodlot: forty acres, already logged and burnt over, covered with Red alder and dogwood. Indeed, at first the land was useful only for firewood. My parents had bought it with friends, paying fifty dollars an acre. They had a simple business plan: alder was to be removed and Douglas fir planted; eventually, a timber crop would result.

On the wet side of the Cascades, alder quickly pioneers land left vacant by logging or fire. Alder wasn't valued much then, and it blocks sunlight that conifer seedlings need. Douglas fir can out-compete alder only slowly, but Douglas fir grows rapidly on open ground. The government paid cash for each acre cleared of alder and planted with Douglas fir, and also provided Douglas fir seedlings at a subsidized price: six for a penny. When the seedlings arrived, we planted them in our Seattle flowerbeds until we could use them at the tree farm. We had the oddest flowerbeds in town.

The two families spent weekends at the tree farm. The older children worked with the adults. he younger children mostly played, then rode home atop the pungent alder firewood, for the families had chosen their vehicles (a Ford station wagon with removable back seat, and an El Camino truck) specifically to haul wood.

From the beginning, though, even the youngest children took part in the work. We could place a seedling in ground our parents opened with a mattock, bar, or shovel. We could drag and pile the balsam-scented limbs our parents pruned from the growing saplings. (We also disfigured small firs to deter Christmas tree poachers; Dad called this "Russian pruning.") We killed unwanted alders by removing a ring of bark with a government-supplied girdling tool. The girdling tools were things of beauty, crafted from smooth stainless steel, with riveted handles of richly-glowing wood. Eve n the smallest child could carry firewood to the cars.

Over the years, we progressed to felling alders ourselves, limbing them, cutting them into fireplace lengths, and splitting them. We became proficient, learning to drop a tree where we chose, then limbing each branch with a single, satisfying upward blow of the ax. With the chain saw, we learned from long observation and apprenticeship both technique and rhythm – how to move the roaring saw and when, how it should sound, the rise of its voice from growl to whine and its fall again to snarl and mutter, how the sawdust should stream out, like colors from a skyrocket. The saw cast a spell: impossibly loud, it over-rode every other sound and produced a mesmerizing hot-knife-through-butter effect on the alder. We were logging, but in miniature.

Our tools, however, were not miniatures. Though our axes were single-bitted – cheaper than double-bitted axes but less well-balanced, and more difficult to sharpen in the woods – they were nonetheless full-sized. And our chain saw, a David Bradley, was a heavyweight. On my first day as a logger, Walt, the boss of our crew, made me saw a two-foot log as a test (it was the thickest log I'd ever cut, though I didn't tell him). Grudgingly, he indicated I'd passed.

"You've used a power saw?" he asked, not willing to sound impressed, but still curious.

"My parents have a David Bradley," I replied.

"Your daddy must be rich."

"What, to own a David Bradley?"

"No," Walt said. "To pay those six strong Swedes to carry it around for him."

It was a fair point: the saw he had handed me, a black-and-yellow McCulloch with a 36-inch bar, had twice the power and half the weight of our old David Bradley. As soon as I held it in my gloved hands, I recognized it for what it was: not just the emblem of the Big Leagues, but the essence. No one used a saw like this on a woodlot.

• • •

I wanted most to log because logging was a fundamental Northwest activity. I wanted to take part in work that had shaped our region and its history. I had no understanding – not yet – that the forests themselves, and our biggest trees, were vanishing. I merely sensed the impending end of an era: the passing of traditional Northwest logging, the closing of remote logging camps, the demise of river log-rafting, the displacement by new-fangled machines of springboards and steam engines and men with handlebar mustaches as long as their crosscut saws. "This is my Northwest heritage," I told my parents. "I want to see it before it's gone."

Logging, its signs and celebrations, were all around us in those days. The big mills in Everett and Tacoma, even in Seattle – each trailing steam from every opening – were prominent from highways, where logging trucks abounded. One-log truckloads, with enough wood to build a house, were sufficiently unusual to show up on postcards. But three-log loads were common. Tugboats towing log booms on Puget Sound and Lake Washington were an everyday sight. The boom chains, long and rusted, with bracelet-like clasps (ring at one end, bar at the other), turned up on beaches – favorite
finds that festooned fences and outbuildings around the Northwest.

On any woodland walk – or in a housing development, behind a gas station, or near a parking lot – one encountered springboard logging stumps, relics of huge cedar trees, spreading widely at the base. To fell these thick trees, often twelve feet or more in diameter, notches had first been chopped about five feet above the ground, and springboards inserted. The springboards, shaped like giant overhead fan blades, gave the fallers narrow platforms from which to attack where the trunk was thinner. In my youth, we sometimes caught sight of peculiar men, often in rags, who cut old springboard stumps into "bolts" and sold the bolts to shake mills.

Amid driftwood, one could find thick wooden disks, sometimes scavenged for use as tabletops. These log ends bore indecipherable codes ("F5," "24A," and the like) stamped as brands deep into their fibers. They'd been sawn from stray logs by thieves, men who stole their finds instead of reporting them, first cutting off the tell-tale brands. My older brother Michael invented a grisly tale, which I believed as a boy, of "boom pirates" who lurked behind islets in the San Juans, waiting for nightfall to ambush a passing log boom, slaughter the crew, sink the tug, and then tow the boom to some remote beach, where they could saw and re-brand the logs at leisure.

Unlike boom pirates, loggers had a firm basis in reality. (They had been romanticized, however: they did not stir coffee with their thumbs, nor use hammers to pound in their whiskers so they could bite them off inside.) A pioneer photographer, Darius Kinsey, had hauled his cumbersome equipment to the woods and produced a visual record of loggers as they lived and worked, amid oxen and mud, at the turn of the twentieth century. In my youth, Kinsey's photos were as common throughout the Northwest, in office buildings and restaurants, as Edward S. Curtis's sepia-tinted photos of North Coast Indians have since become. Curtis's portraits reflect the dignity of his subjects. So do Kinsey's, but his reflect bravado as well: men pose precariously atop trees or trestles, or stretch out nonchalantly, head to head, inside a wedge-shaped cut in a massive cedar tree. Kinsey taught everyone – including loggers – what a logger should look like: what he should wear, how he should carry himself.

Books, too, shaped my understanding of logging and Northwest history. One of my favorites became well-known, and eventually a Paul Newman movie: Ken Kesey's Sometimes A Great Notion. The story's protagonists, the Stamper family – irascible hand-loggers in coastal Oregon – were cussed and cursed and no more able to escape logging's hold on our region than Faulkner's characters could escape slavery's hold on the South.

That logging and slavery might be compared seemed a stunning thought (although far, perhaps, from Kesey's intent). But Kesey's details of hand-logging – how men managed to get logs to the water with hand tools alone – also intrigued me, and helped explain subtle features of the landscape. As a boy, I questioned old hand-loggers I met, usually the fathers of my parents' friends. When boating, I'd find myself searching the band of vegetation above the shoreline, looking for traces of the logging that came before the logging further inland, trying to imagine how a hand-logger might drop a particular tree, how it might splash into the sea. The felling of trees and the getting of them to market run like strands of continuity through Northwest history. This I understood even at seventeen, when I began applying for jobs in the woods.

I also prized a less famous book: Torger Birkeland's Echoes of Puget Sound: Fifty Years of Logging & Steamboating. Birkeland emigrated from Norway as a child in the 1890s; his parents homesteaded on Hood Canal (an arm of Puget Sound), where my parents bought a cabin in 1959. We knew the Birkeland farm well, and got eggs there in summer. By then, Torger Birkeland had become captain of the Evergreen State, the largest Washington State ferry. But as a boy, he'd been a logger – and right there on Hood Canal. From our cabin, on a clear morning, I could see where he'd logged.

Our Hood Canal neighbor, Glenn Lockwood, was also a retired logger (as might be guessed: he'd lost three fingers on one hand). He was dying of emphysema. Glenn liked to sit in the sun, straight-backed to ease his breathing, telling logging stories, and listening, too, once I accumulated logging stories of my own and as his breathing got worse. He became my logging mentor, and I loved my hours with him. Occasionally Glenn would make a huge effort to exert himself and teach me something by demonstration, somehow finding the strength to use the ax or saw and show me what I'd been doing wrong in limbing a tree or splitting wood. He taught me to "slab" big rounds of Douglas fir for firewood, using a sledgehammer and steel wedges to square the circle around its edges instead of trying to split it straight across. If one wedge got stuck, he used the other to free it. Afterwards, he wheezed for breath.

Glenn and I read Birkeland's book together. We'd sit above Hood Canal, and Glenn would point across the water, saying, "That's where Birkeland must have been a grease monkey," or "They had a camp over there when he was a whistle punk." Then Glenn would tell me of being a whistle punk himself, a small boy pulling a thin line through the woods: a tale of long ago. At a sign from the hooktender, the whistle punk would yank his line and make the steam whistle blow signals from atop the yarder, the "steam donkey," two hundred yards away. Three whistles: go ahead on 'er. One whistle: stop. Two whistles: back. One whistle: stop. The rigging would be dragged into the woods; the rigging slinger would shout orders; the chokersetters would harness their logs; the hooktender would nod; the whistle punk would give three sharp tugs on his line. Then the steam whistle would blow, and the logs, crashing, would begin their journey to mill and market.

The sad thing about Glenn, apart from his illness, was his cheerful insistence that his friend Ben Thomas would one day come visit him. Ben Thomas was legendary: based in Woodland, on the Lewis River north of Portland, he'd built the region's most successful "gyppo" logging company – a contract logging operation. He didn't exactly defy the big timber companies; he co-existed with them, bringing them logs and getting paid for it. But if you were a logger, you could defy the big companies yourself, just a bit, by praising Ben Thomas. His logging trucks were distinctive, white and blue, and loggers who spotted one would wave and honk. Every logger talked about Ben Thomas; every one wished he could be Ben Thomas. But to know Ben Thomas personally? Loggers didn't believe me when I said Glenn Lockwood counted Ben Thomas as his friend. "Maybe he worked for Ben once" – that was all they'd concede.

When I'd leave my parents' cabin on Sunday, heading back to Seattle so I could log the next day, I'd see Glenn sitting next door. He'd give me the logger's high sign, a hand waggle with extended thumb and little finger – all Glenn had left on that hand – as he sat, half facing the setting sun and half facing his driveway, keeping an eye out for Ben. I felt sorry for Glenn, but sorrier about his delusion. I was embarrassed for him.

I had yet to learn that the loggers didn't know everything, even about their own world. One Sunday, a distinctive white and blue car appeared in Glenn's driveway. I went over to take a look. Beaming proudly, hooked up now to an oxygen tank with tubes running to his nose, Glenn introduced me to his friend Ben Thomas. I shook Ben Thomas's hand ("Honest," I told the loggers), and admired the man for an unsung virtue: he'd driven all the way from Woodland to visit a dying friend.

So many links: visual, historical, literary, personal. In those days, logging could chain a young man to the earth.

• • •

But why did my parents let me do it? None of my friends was allowed to log; the hazards were considered too great. People my parents consulted (including a counselor) all told them: don't let him go. Yet they did.

Twice in later life, long after I'd seen men's bodies broken in the woods, I asked my parents, from uriosity and without reproach, why they'd let me log. The first time, their answers trailed off, as if neither cared to complete some unspoken thought.

Mom said, "For one thing, you really wanted to go." She'd always told me, as a child, "I don't care how dirty you get, as long as you have fun." Letting me log may have represented some extreme application of that philosophy. But I think she agonized over a more complex calculus. Dad seemed to reveal part of it.

"Well," Dad said, "at the time, your brother was fighting in Vietnam…." Vietnam. It provides, I suspect, much of the answer. The unspoken thought may have been this: if one son's in combat, that's enough to worry about; that's absolute worry – it isn't possible to worry more, even if another's in the woods. No parent would say this. But any parent might think it.

Vietnam preoccupied me, too. On my most exhausting days, thrashing and falling through the woods, hauling a heavy load and with branches whipping my face, I told my fellow loggers, "Imagine this, plus someone shooting at us!" I was thinking of my brother, but also, of course, of myself. The war preyed constantly, if differently, on us all. (I might have begun this with a different sentence: "In June 1966, a few days after registering for the draft…") Certainly I imagined myself safer in the woods than in the war. I looked forward to college, where I'd be safer still.

When I asked again, years later, Dad said something slightly different: "Wait until your boys want to go to war. Wait until they want to work in the woods. Just try to stop them!" (My brother had volunteered for Vietnam, giving up an officer's life in Europe to go fight.)

But of course Dad or Mom could have stopped me, just by saying "No." The pretense that Dad had been powerless in the matter must have troubled him, because the last time we spoke of logging, it was he who raised the issue.

"So," Dad said, out of the blue, one day in the 1980s as we pushed my younger son down a city sidewalk in a stroller, "when your boys want to go work in the woods, will you let them?"

He wanted reassurance that he'd done the right thing; I see that now. But at the time, I laughed aloud, struck by escaping, as a parent, the dilemma I'd forced on Mom and Dad.

"Fortunately," I replied, "the question can't arise. That kind of woods work is gone forever." And so it is: gone forever.

But it wasn't gone in June 1966, when Kenny the high climber laughed and whooped and held out a hand as I arrived, in pass chains, at the top of my first spar tree, a hundred fifty feet above the ground, trembling and not speaking well, with legs that wouldn't stop shaking long enough for me to sink my spurs into the life-sustaining bark of the big Douglas fir.

"Know when we can quit logging?" Kenny shouted, looping my climbing rope around the tree. "When folks want to wipe their ass with plastic wrap!"

Scattered below us like a thousand jackstraws were saw logs, not pulpwood; future two-by-fours, not toilet paper. Yet Kenny was tying my safety knot at the top of a spar tree. It was no time to quibble.

"Right!" I shouted back. Far above the ground, remote in a mountain forest, I yelled to the high climber, yelling as other eighteen-year olds, elsewhere on that day, yelled to their drill sergeants. "Yes, sir! You are RIGHT!"

But I was thinking: Just tie that knot, please. Then get me down.

Romance dissolves quickly in the face of terror.