

DEATH OF

DEMAND FOR WOOD WAS HIGH. THE EQUIPMENT WASN'T EXPENSIVE.

ANYONE WITH A 'DOZER AND A CHAINSAW

The look and feel of the wood got to me. Funny how that works, how a rough-sawn pecky cedar one-by-twelve in your hands can conjure up memories, put you for a moment right back where you were fifteen years and more ago. I paused for a moment, holding the board but awash in the ghost smells of sawdust, gasoline, motor oil, rusting iron, and damp cotton Lone Star work gloves. My sixteen-year-old son and my nephew, eighteen, stood looking at me.

"This here's some historical wood," I told them. The boys looked puzzled. It was just a pile of old wood to them – a mess they'd rather not be cleaning up. The pile of gray boards lay on the ground, my pickup truck backed up to it. Why this pause, this staring at an old board?

"This is Clason lumber," I tried to explain, "You know Jim Clason. Well, me and his grandpa, ol' Stewart, used to cut this stuff." Stewart Clason was the first logger in the South Umpqua to hire me when I arrived from Los Angeles without a clue as to what it meant to work in the woods.

We were in my friend Brian's back yard, over in Tortilla Flats, a Farm Home Administration low-income housing tract that didn't exist back when Brian and I first went to work for the Old Man. The fence posts had

finally rotted and the fence had blown down, lain there all summer and now it was September, time to haul it off before the rains came and the wood got too wet for kindling and the ground too damp to drive across the lawn.

"Damn, that was a long time ago," I added, hoping they'd maybe understand a little of what it meant to be handling wood that had been logged and hauled and milled by a gyppo operator who'd died in the woods back before these two boys reached puberty. If they understood, it was only a very little and there wasn't much use in trying to explain it.

"Well, what the hell you guys waiting for? You stand around spacing-out, making me wait. Come on, let's get this show rolling – dime holding up a dollar boys." I tossed the board into the back of the truck, "Stack 'em neat now."

Gypso isn't a word you'll find in most dictionaries, nor one you hear often in cities. Like many colloquialisms, it started out as a bit of derisive slang, meaning a logging or mill boss who was likely to "gyp" his employees and creditors – someone who functioned on a shoestring budget, a fly-by-night operator, a gypsy. Over the years though, the connotation has shifted from the instability and unreliability of small-time operators to the virtues a gyppo needs in order to

survive – courage, self-reliance, common sense, hard work, the ability to improvise, and an almost pathological optimism.

The woods were once filled with these wily independents, each as "various-minded" and "ready at need" as Odysseus in a hard hat. In the years immediately after World War II, gyppos were the rule in Southern Oregon rather than the exception. Demand for wood was high and the equipment wasn't expensive. Anyone with a 'dozer and a chainsaw or a portable mill and a little luck could set up and make a living – maybe even a fortune.

It was, by all accounts, a too-brief golden age, cut short by periodic housing slumps and a technological productivity "arms race." The big outfits drove their undercapitalized competitors out of business by harvesting ever larger amounts of timber increasingly faster and cheaper with increasingly sophisticated (and increasingly expensive) equipment.

The title has grown respectable in direct proportion to the increasing rarity of genuine gyppos. I've heard men with scores of employees and millions of dollars invested in yarders, bulldozers, and trucks proudly describe themselves as humble gyppos. Most of them are the sons or grandsons of gyppos, men who've inherited some of the tradi-



Photos courtesy of Douglas County Museum of History

FOR
FORTY YEARS
THE OLD MAN
DID THE IMPOSSIBLE
EVERY DAY.

extra minutes to ensure that he did as little damage as possible to the land came as naturally to him as ensuring his own safety. Time, he had to spare, and so losing a few hours in the course of a job was cheaper, in the long run, than losing his self-respect.

What, in the end, made a quaint anachronism out of Stewart Clason was that he kept doing the same supremely human thing, practicing an art, while all around him logging and milling steadily shifted away from being a unique art form to just another increasingly efficient industrial process.

"It's a trade-off," he told me one unexpectedly balmy January day. "Sure, I could make big money. Work as a millwright maybe, or a supervisor for some big outfit somewheres. But then, I wouldn't have time to sit here drinking coffee and listening to them frogs singing about spring. You've either got the time or the money, but you never have both."

His time is gone now. I guess that's what made me pause for a moment to consider the history of an old rough-cut cedar board that was now useless except to light a hearth fire in my home.

In his time the Old Man survived the Great Depression, combat in Europe, a half-dozen severe housing slumps, a hard-fought, violent (and futile) timber faller's strike, and the daily risk of death or crippling injury. Using his wits, his muscles, and his integrity, he supported a wife and four

children, taught his two sons the trade he'd learned from his father and grandfather, and made himself useful to everyone around him in uncountable, often charitable, ways.

He survived long enough to play with his grandchildren and to become an anachronism. He lived to see his years of struggling against corporate perfidy ignored by a society in which the proud title of logger had become a term of disdain, while the very corporations that had made him obsolete used his and his fellow gyppos' lives as an example of what they hoped to preserve by cutting too much timber much too quickly. With old age, he found himself in a world that didn't have a place for him and his kind. And yet, this unkind cut, too, he accepted philosophically, fully aware of the injustice and ornery as ever. He'd never expected much, never wanted much, and never had a whole lot to show for his labors. But he kept working anyway.

We talked of death one day, on a landing up on Tater Hill where we were salvaging cull logs left behind on a clearcut. He'd been down in the hole all morning, bucking logs and setting chokers while I ran the jury-rigged old Dodge that

served as our yarder and skidder. A half-hour shy of noon, a heavier than usual log hung itself up against a stump, the engine slowed and then stalled. Stewart hand-signaled "slack line" and then "shut down" drawing a knife-finger across his throat and trudged up to the landing with his chainsaw. "Well, the mule quit on us," he said, "must be dinner time."

We sat in the shade on the edge of the cut, ate our lunch, and talked "of shoes and ships and sealing wax and cabbages and kings" as we did every day. I told a story about a clumsy roofer I'd worked with in New Mexico. The Old Man sat stretched out with his back against a tree trunk preparing for a nap. Years of familiarity with sudden violent death, in combat and at work, had reconciled him to the notion that one could be alive one moment and a lifeless mess the next. He confessed though, a deep fear of dying slowly, lingering on in a living death from cancer as many of his relatives and friends had done.

"When I go," he allowed, "I want it to be just like this, stretched out in the woods somewhere on a nice day with my eyes closed."

In the end, six years later, he died of a heart attack while fishing for trout at Crane Prairie Reservoir, alive and joking one moment and stretched out on the dock with his eyes closed the next.

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