# A CAREER IN THE BC FOREST SERVICE
# by George Stefanac

A career with the Forest Service for those of us who were deprived of a post- secondary education for one reason or another provided, those who stuck with it, a salary, some interesting experiences and, somewhere down the distant horizon, a reasonable pension.

So it was with me. At about age 21, I started what was to be a lifelong career in an environment that was very satisfying for me. Having been on a summer fire suppression crew and some weekend road maintenance projects while still in school, I eventually graduated to a full-time position on a 3-man HQ silviculture crew.

**RANGER DISTRICT STAFF**

The Forest Service at that time recruited their Ranger District staff, of which there were over one hundred throughout the province, from prospects in the general population, who, upon application could write a general knowledge exam. I was successful in being accepted and was offered an "Assistant Ranger" position at Alta Lake, now the Resort Municipality of Whistler, (which, in 1956, had not yet appeared on the scene), in the Squamish Ranger District.

While the following experiences are not necessarily listed in chronological order, due to setting it up with different headings, I had stops in Alta Lake, Pemberton, Sechelt, Nootka Sound, Harrison Lake, the Ranger School at Green Timbers in Surrey and then became a "Deputy Ranger" at Port Hardy. In 1964 I was promoted to Ranger in charge of Thurston Bay West - Campbell River North districts before moving on to Lillooet where I eventually retired.

**THE FIRST POSTING**

Access to Squamish, in the mid 1950s, was by Union Steamships boat from downtown Vancouver via Britannia Beach to Squamish. No highway or railroad at that time, but the PGE Railway did commence at Squamish winding its way to Quesnel. The "Pacific Great Eastern" was often changed to "Please Go Easy" and the criticism at the time was "starts nowhere and goes nowhere". In addition, there was no usable road to Alta Lake and Pemberton, so it was "speeders" all the way. The "PGE" has since transitioned to BCR, then was sold to CN.

**SPEEDERS**

These were relatively small two seat, open, railway track vehicles sporting a one-cylinder engine. They were capable of being moved on and off the track by one reasonably strong individual as long as there was a track siding, road crossing or other prepared ramp set up for this purpose. Sharing the single track with the railway was a challenge. This was mainly due to the lack of communication and the system of keeping track of the trains from a "once a day" lineup, (schedule of train movements for the day) and phones about every ten miles along the track from where one could get an update on a particular train from the railway dispatcher.

The Forest Service employed fire patrolmen who were supposed to follow 20 minutes behind a downhill moving train on a track that was composed of mostly rotten ties. The ties readily accepted red hot steel brake shoe fragments and started a lot of fires. The patrolmen's problem was that they would be left in the dark as to where the train they were following was meeting with a known scheduled oncoming train and they would have to pull off the track and wait unless they were prepared to take on a much larger challenger for the right of way.

On one of my earliest forays with speeder travel two of us were waiting for a scheduled weigh freight on a Saturday, our day off, planning to follow it down to Squamish for a supply of groceries and other needs. However, we became impatient with the late weigh freight and, since there were no oncoming trains scheduled, proceeded on our own, arriving at our destination in about an hour, a downhill distance of 35 miles. After spending three and a half hours in Squamish, it was time to head home. Upon checking with the train dispatcher and thinking in terms of a scheduled train coming later than the weigh freight, we were advised that the weigh freight had still not arrived. This is an example of the difficulty in calculating efficient train "meets".

In dealing with speeder travel much of the work was away from the track on fires or other field work. On one occasion it took all day to deal with a company fire well away from the track. Upon returning to the speeder well after dark, and no phone nearby, I had no idea as to which trains that had been listed on the morning line-up had come or gone. As pretty well all of the local track leaned downhill towards Squamish, I decided to coast downhill towards a phone that I knew was at Garibaldi, several miles away. By coasting, then stopping every quarter mile or so to listen for a train coming from either direction, sometimes putting my ear to the track, I was able to get to the phone and return home.

There were some close calls, including once when I calculated a "meet" in order to make it to a certain siding (passing track) with some time to spare, but still travelling at full speed to be sure to arrive ahead of the oncoming train. However, train lineups did not describe the trains, except for a number. I was not aware that the train that I planned to meet was made up of only an engine and caboose, and had been coming up the grade, a rise of about two thousand vertical feet, at more than twice the speed of a normal freight. As I pulled into one end of the passing track, the oncoming train passed the other end. One minute later and we would have had our meet on the last sharp curve that I had just passed.

In this next experience, I was obviously to blame for arranging a meet a little too close to the line. It is born from the fact that I and the patrolmen working with me spent far too much time sitting at some remote siding, waiting for slow moving trains to finally make their appearance. Even though we had the time that a train had left a certain distant location, we had no information as to whether the trains were picking up or dropping off cars at sidings along the way or waiting for other trains.

Jack Carradice and his family had just arrived at Pemberton, where I was now stationed, to take over as deputy ranger and was no doubt eager to learn his way around the district. One Sunday we decided to explore the adventures of speeder travel and perhaps do a little fishing along the way. Using my previous experience, and utilizing the morning train lineup, I suggested we arrange our first "meet" at a siding at the tiny community of Birken, about 25 miles north. With Jack at the controls, we were just rounding the last bend before arriving at our passing track when it became readily apparent that we were not going to have a normal "meet".

Our train had just passed the siding and was closing the distance between us at an alarming rate. Obviously, our dire situation called for some rapid and accurate action if we were to salvage our speeder. Jack expertly cut the throttle, disconnected the drive belt, and hit the brake lever which locked the wheels allowing us to come to a skidding stop. I was out the back pulling out the lift handles, and swinging the unit 90 degrees to the track, which dropped the front wheels into the space between the foot high rails. With that little something that gives one extra energy at times like this I was able to jerk the speeder up and over the near rail, and down an embankment just barely clear of the passing locomotive. There were only a couple of seconds to spare, before we would have seen the speeder heading south, tangled in the locomotive cowcatcher and wearing it like a grizzled mustache.

As we stood amazed and shaken, we noticed the engineer was engrossed in the book he was reading and obviously unaware of what almost happened, squandering the opportunity to regale his railroader cronies of just having missed racking up another speeder. We managed to push the speeder along the ditch to a convenient road crossing where we could get it back on the track. One would have to acknowledge that it was one hell of an introduction to speeder travel for Jack.

**THE HOBOS**

The community of Birken was the starting point for another adventure for Jack and I. We had been working on a logging company slash burn at Birkenhead Lake and were returning home late at night when our truck broke down just north of Birken. As we stood on the side of the lonely road pondering our next move, we heard a freight train pulling up the grade and heading toward our homes in Pemberton. As I had grown up in Nelson on the Kettle Valley Railroad, I had observed train crews getting on and off moving rail cars.

Utilizing this wisdom that I had picked up along the way, I convinced Jack that we shouldn't let such an opportunity pass us by. So, as you might expect, under cover of darkness, we boarded the train in this manner and hunkered down in an empty gondola car which we had all to ourselves, not having to rub elbows with other passengers. We expected the train to stop or at least slow down as it entered Pemberton but instead, it just kept rolling along, making for an interesting departure. Not having the luxury of the conductor set out a stool for us to exit the train gracefully, it required a landing on the dead run, spraying gravel as we strove to remain upright. We were surprised to see, in the early morning darkness, a number of others hopping off the train. One would think, that with that many passengers disembarking, the train crew would have a least slowed down.

**NOOTKA**

One of my earlier postings was to Nootka Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island. It required taking my Assistant Ranger boat, the *Douglas Fir II*, a 35-foot vessel equipped with basic accommodation - galley, head, engine room and wheelhouse, around the south end of Vancouver Island and up the west coast to Nootka Sound. The Tofino Ranger boat, the *Yellow Cedar*, was also at the FS Marine Station so I was accompanied across Georgia Strait, around the south end of the Island, via Victoria, then the rest of the way up the west coast.

For someone growing up in the Kootenays, the enormous swells of the west coast were extremely impressive as the other boat running along side about 100 yards away, would disappear with only the mast showing. I spent much of the summer alone, between logging camps, and the towns of Tahsis and Zebellos, which provided many interesting, but also boring, experiences.

One Sunday afternoon, while in the very small community of Zebellos, I borrowed a truck from an acquaintance and drove about 10 miles up a valley to visit an old, abandoned mining camp, the Privateer Mine, I believe. As I walked among the deserted buildings, I entered one long low building to find that it had been the camp bowling alley, still equipped with balls, pins and hardwood floors. Not to pass up the opportunity, I set up a set of pins and threw a few frames down the somewhat sideways slanting alley making a lot of noise in an otherwise silent camp.

By late October, at the end of the summer season in Nootka, it was time to return to Vancouver. The weather on the west coast had been nasty for a couple of days, and accompanied by Bordie Grant, the skipper of the *Yellow Cedar*, were holed up at Nootka Cannery, right next to Friendly Cove. We were waiting for the weather to improve before attempting the trip around Estevan Point. After having waited for a couple of days we decided to attempt the trip around the point.

About an hour out and taking a shellacking with white water coming over the wheelhouse, we decided we'd had enough. We made the difficult turn, deep in the swells, to return to Nootka.

Shortly after reversing direction, we noticed a navy ship coming out of Nootka, having no difficulty at all negotiating the heavy seas. Then the ship started firing flares in our direction which we failed to understand at first. We then saw something trailing about a quarter of a mile behind the ship, being towed with a heavy cable. It forced us to alter course at a more difficult angle in the heavy seas to avoid crossing the cable or colliding with the towed object. We eventually managed to get around Estevan and completed the journey to the Fraser River Marine Station after waiting out more stormy weather at Bamfield.

**BOAT DISTRICTS**

On the BC coast, until approximately 1980, the Forest Service depended very heavily on boats for administration of forest policy and general transportation, with some support from various aircraft. Many of the coastal ranger stations were quite isolated and staff had little access to amenities such as doctors, dentists, phones and something as basic as getting groceries. The Thurston Bay, Sonora Island, dual districts were at one time allowed one weekend every second week where most of the staff could pile onto one of the larger ranger boats and head for town. There were usually several wives, occupying the station and for them the trip was something to look forward to. The staff, which at that time was only men, could get out almost every week and have contact with other humans as they did their field work.


*Loading groceries and baby buggies, Campbell River about 1965. Geoff Teeple, checking out the boxes here, was later killed in a tragic helicopter/ glider collision in the lower Fraser Valley.*

The task of getting around on the boats was generally a few days to a week at a time. The travel was generally from logging camp to logging camp at a speed of between 8 to 10 knots. There was always the weather, where sea conditions could preclude any further travel, there were tidal rapids where passage could only be accomplished during relatively slack tide but often found one going through with the flow or bucking current that limited progress to a couple of knots. The published tide tables for any one day, and any one location were always referred to, as well as the nautical charts which described the bottom that was to be travelled over.

On one occasion, while going through the Yuculta rapids with a fairly fast-moving tide, we had to leave the main stream to get into a bay where there was a fuel station. As we left the main stream, travelling at full speed, a significant whirlpool hole opened up immediately in front of us that we couldn't avoid, laying the fifty-foot boat over on her side and spilling a lot of supplies out of their cupboards onto the floor. After some deep groaning and vibration, the boat pulled herself out of the hole and we carried on. It was sometimes challenging navigating through an area containing underwater hazards such as reefs, always concerned that we had the landmarks and reference points figured out correctly.

*Most of our fleet at the Thurston Bay Ranger Station on Sonora Island. The vessels on the near side of the float are the standard "Assistant Ranger" boats, all built at the Forest Service Maintenance Depot on the Fraser River, as was the larger* ***Forest Ranger II*** *tied on the far side of the float.*

**RUNNING IN THE DARK**

On a Sunday late in the fire season when I was stationed at Harrison Lake, we received a call from a logging camp about 3 hours boat travel up the lake, reporting a fire on their logging operation. I attended the fire and just as I was arriving at a dilapidated boat landing, a local charter aircraft was just leaving. When I arrived at the fire with some additional fire equipment, the small crew on site advised me that it was their first day on this operation and that it was the new logging company foreman who had just left on the aircraft. Not exactly in accordance with the fire regulations, and I guess he wasn't man enough face the situation that he was no doubt responsible for. Late in the day when we were getting a handle on the fire situation, the weather became stormy with some light showers, along with a significant wind.

There had not been a proper boat dock set up, so I had tied the boat to some loose boomsticks (logs chained together) fastened along the rough gravel shore. Leaving the fire with the competent crew, I hastened to the beach to rescue the boat, which was a standard Forest Service, 35-foot Assistant Ranger

vessel, the *Red Cedar*. I found it broadside on the beach, bouncing in the now increasing waves. I had to get it off the beach in order to start the engine and back away from the shore. Harrison Lake has never been known to be great for swimming, and by late September it doesn't get any warmer. I waded out and by getting my shoulder under the hull, with a little help from the waves, managed to rock the boat off the beach a few feet and, dripping wet, with aid of a bumper tire, managed to clamber aboard.

So now I was free of the beach, engine running with ample fuel in the tank, but where was I to go for the night, which was quickly approaching? I could see no other lights of the camps elsewhere on the lake and we were not to be running around in our boats in the dark. It would be about 50 kilometers in to our headquarters at Harrison and, in addition, there are no nautical charts for the large lakes in BC so one cannot lie out and follow a course in an emergency!

There are two significant islands on the lake, Long Island and Echo Island. I could make out Long Island in the distance before it became totally dark, so I could take and follow a compass bearing in order to avoid it. We worked with maps a lot, so I was familiar with the lay of the lake and knew that it was basically north/south from Long Island to Harrison on the south end of the lake. I also knew that the magnetic deviation at the time in this area was about 23 degrees, so, depending on the ship's compass I was able to keep the boat pointed generally south.

However, there was also Echo Island somewhere out there in the murk, completely invisible in the blackness of the night, totally blocking any visibility of the lights of Harrison Hot Springs. For someone who has never been in a vulnerable location in total darkness with the complete lack of any source of light, it would be difficult to appreciate the feeling. No moon, no stars, nothing. The thought of running headlong into the rocky island was not encouraging, but drifting in the wind waiting for daylight could also get one blown ashore elsewhere on the lake.

There was a lot of tension and straining in trying to make out the outline of the island for an anxious couple of hours, continuing to rely on the ship's compass to keep me on course. From time to time, I believed that there may have been a faint outline of the Island, only to have the imagined images disappear again into the blackness of the night. There was no pulling over and parking until morning.

The very dim outline of the island eventually appeared, with great relief, allowing me to navigate around it until the lights of the village came into view.

After working in the districts alone much of the time, I suppose one gets involved in getting in and out of incidents on our own and commands a certain amount of confidence in his ability in dealing with issues. This may have been the case while travelling down Harrison Lake at the tail end of a week-long trip on the lake and beyond. There was one more inspection to get done and I had only a limited number of hours before darkness set in. Upon going ashore, I found the camp deserted but located a well-used pickup truck near the dock, probably the camp utility vehicle. Checking it out, I found it ready to go, but it had no brakes. No foot brake, no emergency brake. It had one of the floor mounted stick shifts connected to a four-speed transmission with a bull low gear. The truck road was fairly steep and included a number of switchbacks, so I tested out the truck for compression and hold back at the bottom of the hill. Having just mastered the art of driving in the mountains without brakes, I set off, not giving negative consequences much thought. By holding onto the shift lever firmly with my right hand, while staying in bull low, I was able to negotiate the uphill and downhill trip somewhat safely.

While working out of Port Hardy, on the north end of the Island, a logging operation had commenced in a very remote area called Klaskino Inlet, access to which required taking our boat from the more protected Quatsino Sound, into the open Pacific through very exposed waters. There were huge breakers pounding on the islets and rocky headlands which I believe came all the way from Japan. We managed to navigate through some treacherous waters and found shelter within Klaskino. Having spent the night there we set off for the logging site in the morning where we would inspect for compliance with the cutting permit.

The experienced ranger boat crew member, having been in the district for many years was accompanying me on this trip due to its unfamiliarity and its more difficult access. There had been one particularly visible and charted rock islet that was in the inside of the inlet which we had readily seen on the way in the day before. I was “down below” getting my maps and gear out in order to carry out the inspection while the crewman was taking the boat out. Somehow, he had forgotten about the now submerged rock and at slow speed ran our boat up onto it, immediately heeling the boat over a little. We contemplated trying to “back off” of the rock but were concerned with seriously damaging the propeller or rudder on another rock in the process.

The tide was going out. We decided later when we saw our boat perched up on the rock at low tide that the back off procedure would have been the thing to do (but then there wouldn't have been this story). So, we lowered the dinghy and hung out on a nearby beach to wait out our dilemma. It was perched there not unlike a seagull sitting on a floating log. Now we had to wait for the next high tide, about 10 hours later, to re-float the 40-foot-long boat. As it was now on a significant list there was concern that it would take on water before the tide got it back on even keel. No apparent damage was done except for the partial loss of a day's work and a lot of embarrassment for a couple of guys who had spent a significant amount of time operating boats on the B.C. coast.

*The old **Hemlock** – suffered the indignity of being perched up on a rock in Klaskino Inlet, then later gallantly took me around Cape Scott.*

**ADVENTURE**

Of course, life in the ranger districts was not all adventure. I often managed to find myself in many wilderness locations either by myself or with a small logging crew. When it was decided to take action on a small lightning strike deep in the coast mountains, I was sent in with a four-man logging crew.

It required a long float plane trip into remote Knot Lake, then by helicopter to the side of a creek near Lonesome Lake, in the headwaters of the Atnarko River. As we were just setting up our rough camp, we noticed a fair-sized grizzly bear with a cub on the creek bank a short distance upstream that was apparently checking out the newcomers. There was a very well trodden moose and bear trail in the timber just a few feet behind our camp. The bear disappeared into the timber, and we never saw her again.

While travelling up the lower Homathko River in our outboard powered river boat I came upon four objects making their way across ahead of me. They turned out to be a sow grizzly and three full grown cubs, one of which was having difficulty negotiating the river embankment. As I approached, the sow emerged from the timber and made a few threatening gestures toward me, revealing her dentures, until the grown cub made it up the embankment, both then disappearing into the forest.

I encountered several more grizzlies while river-boating on the Homathko, and while on a horseback range inspection trip in the South Chilcotin Mountains a group of us rode into a small meadow, already occupied by a sow and two cubs.

Later, while stationed at Lillooet, I walked into a young grizzly in the sub-alpine while checking out range usage by a local rancher. Luckily it turned tail and headed out of there before I did likewise. Checking where it had been, I found that it was digging for wild potatoes, having left one behind in its haste to depart. I had several other sightings of grizzlies (and several hundreds of mountain goats) from helicopters while flying over high alpine in the Lillooet and Bute Inlet areas.

While doing some trail reconnaissance work in the Shulaps range, west of Lillooet, I had a somewhat unnerving experience. It was late October/early November, and I had just climbed a couple of thousand feet into the sub-alpine after a fresh morning snowfall of an inch or two. On my way back on the trail which I had come in on an hour earlier, I found that a cougar had laid down some tracks on top of mine, staying on my trail for about a quarter of a mile before disappearing into the adjacent timber. I wondered if it may have been visible had I turned around and looked back but decided that it was just as well that I hadn't seen it padding along behind me.

It was at the end of a work week at the head of Bute Inlet when my supervisor, Ken Peterson, the local fisheries warden, and myself decided to take a riverboat trip into the upper Homathko River. The river was braided and approaching its lower flow levels. The boat operator had to choose from among various channels, hoping to find the one with the deepest water as we were limited to our propeller driven outboard motor. An early trapper, August Snarr, had travelled the river fairly extensively using an airplane propeller driven boat, years before.

There was no visibility in the silt laden water as it was coming directly off of several very large glaciers. We had progressed upriver, a little beyond the end of existing logging roads, (about 20 miles), when our riverboat motor stalled after grounding on the bottom just a few feet above a log jam. Before we could restart the motor, the fast-moving current swept us back and slammed us against a jilpoke protruding from the jam creating a hole half-way up the side of the plywood boat. The three of us managed to abandon ship by leaping onto the jam but still held onto the boat which was now tilted toward the fast-moving current.

A good chunk of the river was merrily flowing into the front of the boat, exiting from the back and taking almost all of its contents with it, even items such as a rifle and a spare outboard motor. (The motor was later recovered) The guy up above who controls these things (I'm definitely not religious) must have decided that placing the log jam so close below the shallow channel had to balance things, so he (gender?) convinced a helicopter pilot, refuelling his rig somewhere upstream, to leave the empty 10 gallon steel barrel behind on the river bar. So, as you may suspect, the empty barrel was taken downstream by high water at some time and had apparently arranged for it to be deposited in our log jam. The only things out of a boatload of gear that remained was one oar, a small axe and the drowned outboard motor, still attached to the transom.

The log jam was the main part of a small island with fast moving glacial water on both sides of us. However, as it turned out, our assets at this point were sufficient to get us out of our dire predicament. We partially plugged the hole in the side of the boat with some spare clothing and more or less righted the boat against the jam. We took the hand axe to the top of the steel barrel creating a jumbo bailing can and after some hard bailing were able to remove more water from the boat than what was coming in. We picked up quite a lot of gear on our drift down the river, including the other oar. Somehow, we made it back to the ranger boat, obviously shaken by what just happened, and questioning our wisdom in attempting such a journey.

A more pleasurable experience was finding the remains of a portion of the old Douglas Trail, the original access to the Cariboo gold rush. The route utilized lake boats on Harrison, Lillooet, Anderson and Seton lakes, emerging at Lillooet on the Fraser River, Mile 0 on the old Cariboo Road. A wagon road connected all of the lakes beginning at Port Douglas, just north of Harrison Lake. The trail was moss-covered, and sizable trees were growing on it. After following it for about half a mile, I was satisfied that I had, in fact, found the old Douglas Trail. That would have been about in 1960, making the trail approximately 100 years old at that time.

**FIRES**

It seemed that during the 10 or so years that I worked in the Campbell North Ranger District there was a preponderance of logging operation fires that consumed much of our time and a considerable amount of felled and standing timber, the problem was that the high lead, steel cable logging systems of the day created heat and friction in various ways, starting fires that the loggers were not always able to contain. The Forest Act required the logging operators to deploy all of their crew and suitable fire fighting equipment on the fires that they started, until it was extinguished. It was on one of these fires that I found myself and a small logger's crew standing on one side of the upper Bishop River and looking across at a small fire that had spotted in logging slash about a mile ahead of the main fire.

The loggers had left a used 90-foot spar tree behind as a bridge for any future foot traffic. The span was significant, as 50 or 60 feet of it was directly over the fast-moving river that came out of several glaciers just a few miles upstream. Even though we were all wearing caulk boots the thrashing high speed glacial water bounding over boulders was a huge distraction to where we placed our feet and maintain balance. A slip or fall would surely have been fatal. After carrying a fire pump, hose and other equipment across, we managed to douse the fire and make the return trip over the log safely.

While working on the main part of this same major fire, which covered several miles, I set out to check out the gravity funnel feeding one of our hose lines as we were losing volume and pressure. The problem is usually at the funnel as it can get clogged with debris. As I was hiking up along the hose line it passed through a thicket where we had slashed a rough trail. As I entered one end of this trail a medium sized black bear was entering the other end about a hundred yards away. I was armed with a "lady shovel" (about half the size of a regular garden spade) intending to use it to clear any debris that may have accumulated at the funnel. In considering my options I ruled out running as the bear would be better at it than I was. Climbing a tree was considered, but there were no suitable trees handy, and the bear would be better at that as well.

So, running out of options on such short notice it was decided that the best defence is offence. I continued to stride ahead as if I owned the place, using the shovel like a walking stick. This place was deep in the bowels of the coast mountains surrounded by a lot of glaciers, steep, rugged, and rocky terrain with large trees on the lower slopes. The bear had probably never seen a creature like me before, now advancing aggressively toward it. So, it too was now also considering its options, and apparently, choosing a more amicable approach, moved off the trail a short distance, giving me the right-of-way.

A very useful tool that the Forest Service uses is the gravity funnel. This is a large canvas funnel about 18 inches in diameter at the large end, with a fitting attached that would readily connect to our type of fire hose. Many of the fires that we experienced do not have water available, but in instances where there is a steep slope nearby, high on a mountainside, containing a creek or stream, the funnel becomes a huge asset in controlling a fire. With ropes attached it can be suspended in the creek and fastened to nearby trees, roots or rocks providing a 24 hour a day water supply. Depending on the vertical drop involved, water pressures can be obtained that are in excess of those produced by the high-pressure fire pumps. It is possible, preferably with the help of a helicopter, to bring water from well over a mile away within a very reasonable length of time.

*Rough and ready logger/ firefighters and fire camp, Lonesome Lake area. Note the precision power saw roof planking.*

*The ingenuity of these logger/ firefighters in the design and manufacture of this wilderness model wet fire hose roller.*

**TRANSPORTATION**

In “boat districts” we had transportation getting us from logging camp to logging camp, but road access from there to the actual logging operations was a different matter. Normally we might rely on the loggers to provide transportation, but arriving after the crews had left camp in the morning tended to leave one standing on the dock. On some operations we might hitch a ride in a logging truck or even a log skidder on shorter hauls. Accessing a company fire once, there were a dozen logger/firefighters clinging to a large log skidder climbing a steep skid road. Eventually we were equipped with Honda trail bikes which gave us a degree of independence, more than once travelling the 35 miles to the back end of the Southgate River road system. The camp itself was 28 miles back from their booming ground at the head of Bute Inlet. Helicopters and fixed wing aircraft also played a large part in the administration of fires and timber harvesting activity.

*A west coast troller, seaplane, ranger boat, river boat and land transportation occupying a logger's float, Bute Inlet.*

*Helicopter coming in for a landing on the protruding logs on this end of a logger's float, head of Bute Inlet.*

**GETTING TO THE JOB SITE**

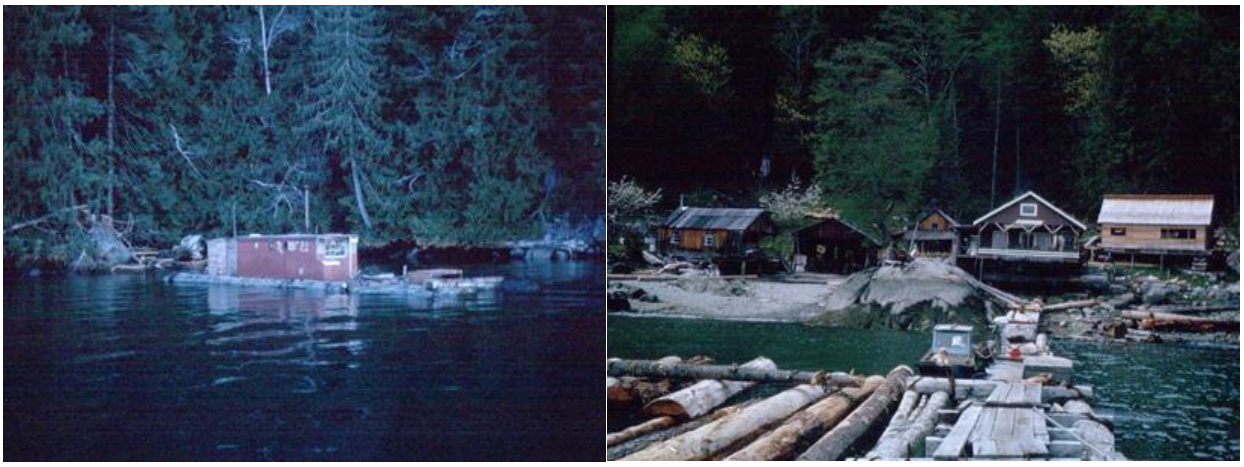
*After slinging the heavy trail bike onto the flimsy aluminum boat and running thru thin ice into the lower Homathko, we had to drag the bike out of the boat, then ride the slippery road several miles up the valley logging road.*

*Ranger Glen Bertram had to fly this widening of the glacial Klinaklini River dropping anchored floats to confirm there was enough depth for a safe landing. The Beaver aircraft was renowned as a northern "bush" plane but landing facilities sometimes had to be improvised. I spent a summer on this plane.*

**THE LOGGERS**

The advent of the Tree Farm Licences was initially brought out in the 1950s and was to transfer the responsibility of managing the timber harvesting process from the planning stages to eventual reforestation, to the licensees. These were generally large companies employing hundreds of men on their forest operations. The majority of the logging companies, however, operated on other tenures such as private lands, timber sales and timber sale harvesting licences.

On the coast there were one-man operators which included beachcombers and handloggers. The handloggers would require a steep side-hill immediately adjacent to a fairly protected stretch of shoreline. The concept was that one could obtain a licence to harvest trees on a specific area as long as no powered equipment was used except for power saws. A suitable boat that could help in the extraction of a log from the adjacent hillside was an asset. The loggers' equipment included a very heavy Gilchrist Jack that was used to dislodge a log from a steep hillside and eventually work it into the water. Depending on the quality and species of the timber, the logger might manage to get one or two good logs into the water in a day and make a decent profit.



*A couple of isolated handlogger "headquarters" in Bute Inlet. The floating camp on the left could easily be towed from one location to another. The more "luxurious" place on the right was located near the mouth of the Bear River.*

*The owner of the place on the right had acquired a handlogger licence over an area adjacent to an avalanche chute, near his home hoping, apparently, that the annual avalanches would deliver the timber to the beach below. When I arrived in the district, the felled timber had not yet been delivered to the beach, and so, after a couple of years, when the contract expired, I had to scale the "abandoned" felled timber for penalty billing. I had dealt with horse logging, cat logging, skidder logging, a variety of high lead logging, helicopter logging, but avalanche logging?*

With hand-loggers, there was always the temptation of picking up stray logs escaped from the many passing log booms, bucking the ends off and re-marking with their own hand-logging timber mark. I was not aware of anyone who actually did this, but one could see the cut off ends or "lily pads" washed up on the beaches.

The Homathko River and valley seemed to command much of my attention during the 9 or so years that I was in the Thurston Bay - Campbell River North ranger district, often involving our standard 22-foot plywood river boat. It was operated from a centre, vertical tiller handle and adjacent shift and throttle control. It was a very versatile unit for accessing the river as well as getting around to several other operations at the head of Bute Inlet.

***Forest Ranger II**, mouth of the Homathko River, Head of Bute Inlet about 1970.*

A logger, Martin Germyn, operated a truck operation on the east side of the river, maintaining a log dumping facility about a mile upriver from the mouth. Their camp was a short distance upriver from the log dump on the side of a back channel. It required a fairly high tide backing up the river to get a boat into the camp, which required some pre planning to avoid getting stranded behind a low tide. Dumping their logs into the river required the maintenance of a catch boom strung across the mouth of the river. This necessitated a process of getting the riverboat over the logs without damaging the lower unit of the outboard motor. One would search along the log boom to find a low floating hemlock boomstick to jump the boat over. This process was made more difficult on a couple occasions when I was caught upriver after darkness set in. There was also an access road extending downriver from the camp to a boat landing about a quarter mile upriver from the mouth that could usually be accessed on most tides.

**THE RESCUE**

There was a relatively remote timber harvesting unit adjacent to the shoreline, at the head of Bute Inlet operated on by a small 3- or 4-man operation, and from a nearby permanent camp. I had gone ashore to do a final inspection and as I walked along some of the skid trail/roads I noticed that someone had constructed what were obviously several “deer snares”. Each one consisted of a pole extended across the skid road at about 3 or 4 feet above the ground with green branches supported along the pole, leaving an obvious passage of a narrow space in the middle. A loop of wire, perhaps from a clothesline was suspended high in the open space partly camouflaged with some green branches. It was designed to snare only bucks as the loop appeared to be made to snare a set of antlers.

After tearing a few of these apart I came upon a buck deer, which I believe was one of the coastal blacktail species as it wasn't as large as the interior mule deer. It was obviously caught in one of the man-made snares and at the sight of me was wildly trying to break loose on the end of about ten feet of slack. Thinking that I might be able to free the animal from its misery, I approached from the opposite side of the pole and tried to draw the deer up to the pole where I could grab an antler to release it from the cable. However, my two legs were no match for the deer's four, and its desire to stay as far away from me as possible, and so, he won the tug-of-war but jeopardized his freedom.

As it happened there was a large fishing boat tied up alongside of our Ranger Boat on the other side of the inlet occupied by 3 or 4 hunters as it was hunting season. When I returned to our boat, I noticed that the hunters were still on board, and as there were so few people around the head of the Inlet I wondered if the hunters were responsible for setting the snares. In discussing the deer situation with them, they agreed that we should try and set the trapped deer free. The discussion may have centered around “fair chase”.

We gathered up some tools that we thought might assist in freeing the deer and set off in my riverboat – without guns. The deer must have “thought” that it was really done when it saw the four of us approaching. In any case we were successful in freeing the deer, watching it bound off only to start feeding about 100 yards away. I decided that the guilty party was not the hunters, but one of the loggers from the camp about a mile along the shore and who logged the area, looking to get some fresh camp meat.

*The area of the deer's “rescue” was to the left and above the landing craft. An unoccupied logging camp is at the mouth of the Southgate River, to the right. This is the general area where I encountered “another” Homathko event. [Described below.]*

I was travelling upriver in the riverboat, transporting a small HQ silviculture crew to the Germyn camp. We were just approaching the log dump as a truck load of logs was being dumped into the river. The process involved unlocking the supporting bunks on the river side of the load which released part of the load of logs. The dump operator who also served as the truck driver, could not see us coming up the river as the dump machine was behind the loaded logging truck. We were not concerned with the logs hitting the river as the river was wide enough to accommodate us.

However, I was not aware that the company had placed a cable, which normally rested on the river bottom, across the river. It was anchored to a tree or stump as a tail hold for the process of lifting remaining logs off of the truck using an upright "gin pole". So, as this situation developed, the dump operator activated the dump machine just as we were passing, lifting the cable out of the water momentarily, and in time for the front of the river boat to pass just under the cable. The remaining logs being unloaded now came down hard on the cable and the boat, trapping the front boat passenger under the cable. The dump operator could only now see what was happening and quickly released the cable. We were able to lift the cable off of the passenger and the boat and eventually continue on our way with only some slight bruising on the passenger.

At some time during my tenure around the Homathko, we employed a tree planting crew and then a silviculture crew in the area. We rented the foreman's older model pickup truck to be used as crew transportation to and from their worksites. In the late fall when the project was completed, the crew was flown out leaving the foreman's pickup truck to be retrieved when the Forest Service landing craft, *L.C. 5* was available. However, it was delayed long enough that the river began freezing over creating a dire situation in getting the truck back to the owner before freeze-up. The pickup truck was the foreman's only transportation back on Vancouver Island where he lived. We had to get the truck out or provide alternate transportation for him until spring.

I believe it was Norm Beasley who skippered the landing craft and had to ride up on the ice repeatedly in order to break it up sufficiently to get through the quarter mile to the boat landing pickup site. I had flown up to the area to co-ordinate the process and can recall the crunching under the landing craft as it broke up the ice. It was a great sense of relief to drive the truck onto the landing craft and make our way back down the river.

On Harrison Lake there was an operator who we referred to as "One Man Jackson". He conducted a fairly sophisticated high lead logging system involving only himself. One of those situations where one doesn't have to put up with anyone else in camp and avoiding ''cabin fever" a malady that often affects men sharing a small space and disagreeing with almost everything that the other does. As the "donkey engineer" he would run the rigging out perhaps several hundred feet into a patch of felled and bucked timber where he would lower the choker cables into the immediate area where his intended logs were located. Generally, "a donkey" was a combination of large engine, powering winches carrying heavy cable, mounted on a large log sled. He would climb up the hillside and if his positioning of the rigging was OK, assuming the role of the "chokerman" he would attach the choker cables to one or two logs, then returning to his donkey engineer position to yard the logs into the water in front of his A-frame float. Sometimes on more difficult terrain the logs would get hung up behind a stump or protruding rock and slowing the process. After assembling a section of logs, he would become the "boom man", containing his logs for the tow down the lake and river to market. Only a few logs a day would cover his expenses and provide a little profit.

**THE LOOKOUTS**

In the era before the general use of aircraft, the province was serviced by many mountaintop Lookout towers which had the primary purpose of early detection of forest fires. They were manned generally from late spring to early fall. When I was stationed at Harrison Lake our lookout man was a retired postmaster and due to the isolated nature of his lonely situation was very eager to talk when one of the staff hiked up the trail with his bi-weekly grocery supply. A certain amount of extra time had to be allocated for him to get all the little mountaintop adventures off his chest.

A unique concept for a lookout was located on a tree farm licence on the inner west coast of Vancouver Island at Gold River. It consisted of a platform perched on top of an 80- or 90-foot-tall spar tree, with a steel ladder bolted to the trunk. A trap door in the floor of the rail equipped platform provided access.

When I was stationed at Thurston Bay on Sonora Island, I learned that years before there had been a fire lookout on a mountaintop above our station connected by an access trail. One Sunday I decided to find the trail and investigate the lookout. The trail was in fairly good shape and reasonably navigable, so after climbing about fifteen hundred vertical feet, came upon the abandoned lookout cabin. On entering the cabin, I found that all of the original sparse amenities were still there, even items like tea towels and the last lookout-man's wool socks still hanging to dry behind the little stove. I don't recall if the instrument we refer to as a fire-finder was still there, normally positioned in the centre of the cabin to get a 360-degree bearing on any distant fire. It appeared that I was the first person to visit the site since the last lookout-man headed down the trail, perhaps fifteen or twenty years before.

**THE END OF AN ERA**

The dual Thurston Bay ranger station was closed down in 1966, while I was there, and moved to Sayward and Campbell River. With all of the 5 residences and other station buildings removed, it became part of the Thurston Bay Provincial marine park. The park brochure mentions the trail to Florence Lake but makes no reference to the old Sonora lookout trail.

*The **Syrene**, adorning the Thurston Bay boat harbour. She began as a Mediterranean Yacht, then BC coast Church Mission boat, then Forest Service VIP boat, then FS timber cruising crew accommodation/ transportation and finally a moving van for staff moving in and out of remote coastal ranger districts.*

As a tribute to the closing of the Thurston Bay dual ranger station, which started out as the main Forest Service Maintenance Depot in 1913, we stacked up some of our left-over firewood about 6 feet high. We then placed an old dinghy that had been laying around on top of the wood pile to commemorate the boat orientation of the place. It was then adorned with our Ranger Station sign with our XLU63 call sign.


*The end of an era – a partial Viking funeral. It was a vital Forest Service landmark from 1913 to 1964, but many celebrated its eventual retirement.*