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COMMUNING WITH NATURE – REFLECTIONS ON A FORESTRY CAREER

by the late Geoff Marples

Part Two of Two

The timber edge lay a short distance from our camp, across a small dry “snye” or back channel. Plenty of firewood there. We also had a view – or would have if the rain had stopped. We could look out and see the clouds scudding by, and if it cleared we would see the sheer granite walls that enclosed the mile-wide flat river valley on either side. The kind of view that tourists come thousands of miles to see!

We blew up our inflatable boat and anchored it high and dry with big rocks. This would be our lifeline in case of trouble. By this means we hoped to float down past the raging waterfall below us and eventually out to sea on Wakeman Sound. If lucky, we would survive there long enough to be spotted from some passing fishboat. (A forlorn hope, for there are not many fish in Wakeman Sound, but we had to do what we could.)

Late in the evening, with our labours completed, we had our usual evening coffee and retired to sleep the sleep of the just. Or so we thought. Mother Nature had other plans!

Recycled paper



“Our tired heads had hardly touched the pillow” as the storybook says, when we were gently awoken by Old Bill who, with tact bred of long association with young hotheads (and hopheads), murmured “I think you had better get up – the river is rising.”

That turned out to be the understatement of the year. We groggily swung our bodies to a sitting position and lowered our feet – into cold water! The river had risen, true enough, about five feet in a couple of hours. Had it not been for Old Bill, with one too many cups of bedtime coffee for his single kidney to deal with, or whatever, I don't know what would have happened.

You can imagine the headlines in the Vancouver newspapers: “Four Bodies Found Drifting On Bough Beds In Wakeman Sound.” Head Office would disclaim responsibility. “Log Production Not Affected, Says Company President.” “Lost Men Foresters, Not Loggers As First Feared.” “We had reservations about hiring all these university students,” says Production Manager, “but it's hard to get good men to work in the woods these days.” Pierre Berton of the News Herald, flushed with the success of his “Headless Valley” yarns, trying to stir up something juicy – “Sitting Ducks? Fowl play hinted.”

Looked at from any perspective, our position was somewhat delicate. Our immediate reaction was predictable. We lit a fire in the stove and put on the coffee. At midnight, in the dark, in the rain, we were not in a condition to think clearly without caffeine.

We sat silently in Bill's tent, contemplating our position. What went wrong? Something drastic in the way of rain must have hit the upper Wakeman. How was our lifeboat? A quick check showed that it had vanished - filled with the downpour, dragged anchor and gone! Our pretty little waterfall on the Atway Kellese was a miniature Niagara, between us and civilisation. So much for our lifeline.

We sat in silent communion, drinking coffee. Nobody had much to say. It was not the time for idle chatter. We watched the water steadily rising up over boots, ankle deep, then up to the first lace holes, then up to the top, and finally, over the 8-inch tops and down inside. Conversation lagged. We squished cold water around our toes in contemplation.

Then, as Mother Nature was sending us a hint, a small trout, about 8 inches long, swam into the tent, made a leisurely circuit around our feet, gave us a malevolent grin, as if to say “Anyone for tennis?” and swam out into the night. There was a period of silence and Bill said, in his dry and inimitable style, “Well fellas, I guess we better move.”

Yeah, that was obvious! But to where? There was only one place to go – into the timber on the other side of the dry back channel. A quick check in the pitch dark showed our little snye to be a raging torrent, feet deep of sudden death. You could hear it roar!

A luck would have it, there was a fairly big cottonwood on our side, leaning over the torrent. By the light of the Coleman lantern I managed to chop it down and, with a crash, it landed across the snye into the timber on the other side. We cut off some limbs, left some to hold onto, strung a Coleman lantern in the brush and prepared to move our outfit. This was our bridge to salvation.

Bill went across to find a tent site in the trees – not too easy in the pitch dark, and the rest of us started the big move. First, move all of the perishables onto the beds in one tent. Second, take down the empty tent, together with poles and stakes, and set it up in the timber across the bridge. Then, load by load, teetering on the cottonwood, transport all our gear across. All this time it was pouring rain like you wouldn't believe.

We moved just about everything from our former campsite. Tent poles, bed poles, firewood – anything that had not floated away. By the time we had finished we were up to our hips in swirling water. You know, when cold water reaches a certain height above a man's knees, the misery suddenly doubles. Life ceases to be a joyous event.

Cold, wet, miserable and tired, we thought we had it beat. But by four o'clock in the morning the water level reached the new tent site, and was still rising.

This called for another brew of coffee. And more contemplation. Dawn of a new day revealed a small patch of ground about two feet above the mile-wide flooded valley floor. Onto this little island we moved our outfit, pole by pole, stake by stake, load by load. By ten o'clock in the morning the move was finished. So were we. After a big breakfast we finally got to bed. Too tired to sleep! We watched the water level creeping closer to our last refuge, and listened to the big drops from the trees go "plonk, splat and rattle" on the roof.

The flood prevailed for six days. The valley was covered to a depth of one to two feet. Fieldwork was impossible. We sat on our beds, cut firewood, worked on maps, cooked meals, told lies and slept. Finally, in desperation, we set out and splashed our way all day long through six inches of water. We got the job done. Our cruise results showed 20% volume in water lily stems. We encountered no game in our travels, only frogs and ducks.

Our canoe men from Kingcome finally rescued us. "Jeeze, we thought you guys was washed out to sea! We seen bits of your boat on the logs." Sure enough, as we went downriver, we saw little strips of plastic here and there hanging on the logs and roots in the river. Had we entrusted ourselves to the marine equipment provided by Head Office there would have been strips of flesh and skin as well. Food for the eagles.

And so this "commune with nature" came to an end. Just in time, for one of our gang was definitely ill. He had been feeling rotten for a week or two, indicating all the symptoms of the flu except a temperature. He managed to keep working but was obviously in trouble.

We were picked up, by arrangement, by Reg Halliday from Kingcome, in a bigger boat and taken to Simoom Sound to catch the Union Steamship to Vancouver. When we transferred to the bigger boat from the dugout, Stu took off his sodden wet caulk boots and, one by one, dropped them overboard. Splash, splash. He had come to a decision – communing with nature should best be done under controlled conditions. His health improved rapidly. Stu, to the best of my knowledge, never again went into the woods in anger. He spent a long and successful career in the forest industry but managed to stay dry. A good lesson for us all, had we but heeded it.

We arrived back in Vancouver and immediately came down with bad colds. This always happened when we had worn ourselves out in the wilderness on Head Office business and came back into town where people were sneezing and coughing. When I presented myself

at the elevator of the Head Office who should step on but the Vice-President of Forest Operations. He looked at me with the usual glower, as if to say "Overhead, overhead!"

As the elevator rose he said "Well, Geoff, I see you are well-sheltered in this bad weather." About the 10th floor he said "When are you going out again?" I really could not think of an answer before I stepped out at the 11th floor. He was a master of the art of stopping conversations.

In due course I became part of the Head Office Hierarchy, dispatching poor subordinates out to commune with nature under conditions that would make a dog howl. Head Office never learns, from generation to generation, and Mother Nature continues to play her little jokes on the idiots who wish to "Commune with Nature."

Forestry is a good life, my grandchildren, but it does have its moments. There are times when one is "apt to become fretful."

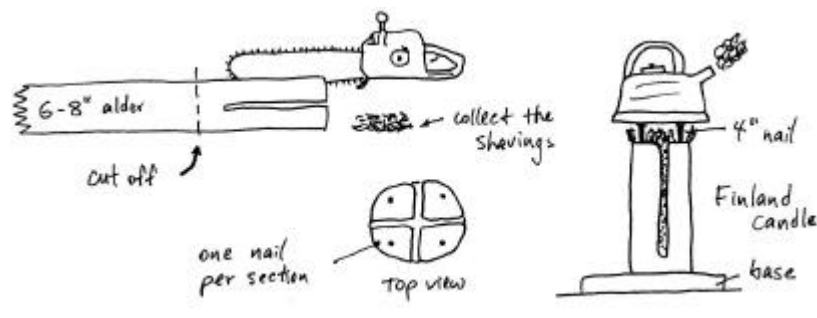


THE FINLAND CANDLE

1) Cut a dry red alder log lengthways as shown. 2) Leave some shavings inside the X pattern. 3) Pour two or three tablespoons of diesel fuel or oil on top of the shavings in the middle of the X. 4) Light it up at dusk on the night of a full moon.

Finland Candles burn for hours and can be used as a stove if you hammer a nail in each section. They will support a kettle or pot and allow you to cook your supper.

The Finland Candle directions were supplied by Charlie and Gerri Parsons of Powell River, who demonstrated the Finland Candle at our AGM in Chemainus last year.



NEW PUBLICATIONS

Barney, Gord. 1998. Timber-beasts of the Great Bear Forest: logger's stories from the cookshack to the tailblocks. 99 p.

Marchak, M. Patricia, S.L. Aycock and D.M. Herbert. 1999. Falldown – forest policy in British Columbia. David Suzuki Foundation and Ecotrust Canada, Vancouver, B.C. xv + 199 p.

Sinclair, Roy. 1999. Paper trees. Caitlin Press, Prince George, B.C. (novel)



BARRY VOLKERS HONOURED WITH TIMBERWEST AWARD

In May of this year FHABC member Barry Volkers was awarded the 11th annual TimberWest Heritage Award in recognition of his work in preserving the history of the Cowichan Valley.

Barry was given the award by Steve Lorimer of TimberWest and Mildred Untereiner of the Ecomuseum in Duncan. In 1983 Barry established the archives of the Kaatza Station Museum in Lake Cowichan, and still manages them on a volunteer basis today.

He has been on the Board of Directors of the Kaatza Historical Society, serving as President and working on the building crew. He won the Lake Cowichan Heritage Award for his work at the museum. Barry has also served on the Lake Cowichan Community Heritage Commission since 1987 and as chair for nearly 10 years. For four years he was on the Board of Directors of the Ecomuseum Society and served on other committees as well.

In accepting the award Barry paid tribute to the work done by other volunteers and museum staff members.

(adapted from *The Lake News*, Lake Cowichan, May 26, 1999, page 3)



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Geoff Bate

FHABC members overwhelmingly agree that there is a need to conduct and tape interviews of people who have spent their lives working in British Columbia's forests. Many members have expressed interest in undertaking this important task. Members are encouraged to take an interview skills course should one be available to them. In lieu of such training the following is to provide assistance.

The interview process should be a pleasant experience for the informant as well as the person undertaking the interview. Because a great deal of concentration is required by both persons, it may be appropriate to carry out the interview in more than one session.

The interviewer is requested to advise the President of FHABC prior to the interview taking place. The FHABC will reimburse the interviewer for archival tapes and miscellaneous items that would ordinarily be required. Unfortunately the FHABC does not have sufficient funds to pay for production of transcripts, travel expenses, tape recorders and other items of this nature. Ordinarily the allowable costs should not exceed \$50.

Equipment

The tape recorder must be in good working order. A small, uncomplicated machine with a built-in microphone is considered the best as some people are disturbed by larger and more sophisticated equipment. In order to minimize disturbances it is recommended that you use batteries. Make sure you have new batteries (one set in the tape recorder and an extra set). Test all your equipment prior to conducting the interview.

Tapes

Use only archival tapes of 60 minutes duration. Longer tapes are thinner and wound so tightly that the information on one segment can be transported to another. Bargain basement tapes may last only a few years.

Interview Preparation

The informant should be contacted well in advance. Agree to a time and location that is mutually acceptable to both parties, the most suitable location generally being the informant's residence.

Stress the importance of the interview and that the informant's contribution is important to B.C.'s forest history. Ensure that the informant is aware that the tapes will be stored at a location as determined by the FHABC Executive and only made available to researchers at a time that is determined by the informant.

Either by phone or a pre-interview visit obtain sufficient but brief general information about the informant which will enable you to focus on the most important periods of the informant's life; determine the topics he or she would like to discuss as well as the information you want to cover.

This discussion will provide you the opportunity to suggest the informant review files, photo albums and other sources of information, all of which will assist them in arranging their thoughts.

On the basis of the pre-interview, break down the informant's life into a chronological "timeline," perhaps divided into two- or five-year segments. Then within the timeline prepare a series of relevant questions to assist you in conducting the interview.

Conducting the Interview

Select a room or location that is quiet; recognize and eliminate background noise such as radios, television sets and similar distractions.

The purpose of the interview is to get the informant to tell their story; the interviewer should restrict their remarks to such questions as are necessary to guide the informant along

As you commence taping, introduce the informant by providing their name, the date, the location of the interview, also the date the interview may be made available to the public.

Proceed through the informant's experiences in chronological order, in accordance with your prepared timeline. It may be appropriate to start out by identifying the date and location of their birth, a brief discussion about their childhood, their parents, experiences in their youth, then proceed to their experiences as an adult.

Note: while the time line is an extremely useful tool it should be a guide rather than an inflexible tool.

Each question should be brief

It is critically important that the interviewer not accidentally "lead" the informant into giving answers that do not accurately reflect their true sentiments. Here are some examples:

A Question

You must have certainly been happy on election night?

You didn't like _____, did you?

Did you then come to Canada ?

A Superior Question

How did you feel on election night?

How would you characterize _____?

Then what did you do ?

Don't confuse the informant by posing more than one question at a time.

Start out with non-controversial topics, saving any delicate questions until later in the interview.

Give the informant time to compose his or her thoughts before answering or embarking on a new topic, do not interrupt a good story.

If the informant strays into irrelevancies try to lead him or her back by posing a question kept in reserve for such an occasion.

While a story is being recounted establish where your informant was at critical times, what their role was. Was the information a personal observation or the accounts of others?

Occasionally an informant will offer to recount "off the record"; resist the temptation to agree even if it means not getting all the information.

In summing up the informant's life it is generally appropriate to ask: what was the most challenging point in your career? and what was the most interesting event that took place in your career?

Unless there are extenuating circumstances no single session should last more than 1½ to 2 hours.

Post Interview

Contact the informant and thank them for their contribution; ask them for a brief critique in order that you may improve your interview techniques.

Make 3 or 4 duplicates of the interview tape, label them properly (including the date the tapes will be available to the public), provide a copy to the informant and a minimum of two sets to the President, FHABC.

Good luck and good interviewing.



This newsletter is the official organ of the Forest History Association of British Columbia. It is distributed at no charge to members of the association, libraries, archives and museums. Items on forest history topics, descriptions of current projects, requests for information, book reviews, letters, comments and suggestions are welcomed.

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