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**THE TIEHACK**

by the late Geoff Marples

Part One of Two

“What is that contraption hanging up there on the wall, Grampa? Is that what Henry VIII used when his divorces were held up?” We were poking around in the tool department of Northern Hardware, in Prince George. “The Northern” prides itself on having *everything*, and this was no exception. They probably have thumb screws if you look long enough, or maybe a suit of armour.

“That,” I said to my grandson, “is a tool the Devil invented for a joke, and which society in my day took seriously. It is called a broadaxe. Perhaps it got the name because it was a broadening experience to wield it all day.”

Recycled paper



I had not even seen one for nearly sixty years and imagined they were extinct! But then I led a sheltered life for most of those years. Certainly they were not popular in my day – they were more of a necessary evil. Broadaxes had a big, heavy head – weighing 9 pounds I believe – with a single 12-inch-wide blade, flat on one side and bevelled on the other. The head, mounted on a big sturdy handle about 36 inches long, was flat on one side to allow creation of a smooth, even surface on the log under attack. The bevelled side was to provide a never-ending area of hope/frustration for grinding and honing by the operator in his attempt to increase cutting power and productivity and reduce labour in the creation of the product.

As I stood and looked at that broadaxe, my mind flashed back to 1938, when I was introduced to the business of using one. I reflected that times have changed – and in some ways, for the better.

Having squeezed through the first year of university, academically and financially, I was broke. And despite the fact that I had made good money as a lookoutman on Swansea Mountain during the summer, there was no way I could finance my return to UBC for that winter. Like many of the students in the Depression years, I had to go through a regeneration period, making every cent possible, while paying out the minimum to subsist. In this I was aided and abetted by my mother, who undertook the onerous job of feeding me while I was at home. Just think of it – I was 19 and hadn't finished growing yet!

I had managed to make good dollars in the fall in the Christmas tree business, while it lasted. I tied Christmas trees in the yard at Athalmer. Trees were baled in bundles from one to eight, depending on their size. The butts had to be lined up, and the bale trimmed with a saw. Then ties of binder twine were made about every foot, up to the top. The price per bundle for this effort was 2 cents. I never tied less than 200 per day and I believe I still hold the Columbia Valley record of 325 bundles in one day. If so, my record will probably stand until the next Stone Age as I'm sure no one does it that way anymore. They would be nuts if they did.

Following that brief episode I was fortunate in getting a tie contract. I never knew how it came about, but I suspect it was an act of charity on the part of Mr. Cleland, an old and loyal friend of the family, who ran the Invermere Contracting Company. Perhaps he recognized desperation when he saw it.

I had heard that most of the ties used by the CPR Mountain Division in the Depression years were supplied from the East Kootenays, because they lasted longer than ties from other forest regions. I was to find out the hard way that this was probably the truth, for the East Kootenay Douglas-fir was the toughest, orneriest collection of knots and monkey muscles anyone ever tried to drive an axe into! For the same reason, axe ties from this region were more in demand than saw ties – because the glaze imparted to the face of the ties by the broadaxe was said to repel the ravages of rail-cutting and the onslaughts of insects and decay. I cannot verify this hypothesis – it might have only been propaganda spread by the threatened breed of tiehacks to preserve their jobs. In truth, it was probably a matter of price. Slave labour came pretty cheap in those times. Sawmill machinery cost money.

My area of operation was to be in the far corner of our old farm on "The Benches," near Lake Lillian. But since the fence had long since rotted and disappeared, I suspect I was guilty of trespassing on land owned by the C.V.I. (Columbia Valley Irrigated Fruitlands). My family originally settled on the benches in 1912 to grow apples. The apple trees all died during the first winter but the tie timber survived. Too mean to die.

In any case, whether I was cutting trees owned by my father, or by the C.V.I., I don't remember paying any stumpage. This was just as well, for if I had paid for the trees I butchered the whole operation would have been in the red! I am not the first nor the last man to have helped himself to the bounty provided by nature. Better men than I have done it, as this anecdote will show.

I refer to a most entertaining speech that H.R. MacMillan – B.C.'s most famous industrialist – delivered to a group of forestry students graduating from UBC. After assuming the post of Chief Forester in 1912, H.R. set about collecting overdue stumpage owed to the Crown. He was quickly hauled up on the mat by his boss, the Minister of Lands, who also happened to own a sawmill. He was given a dressing down, to the effect that there were enough problems affecting survival in the sawmill business without having to pay for the trees as well.

My outlay for tools was modest. An old friend of my brother's had left his broadaxe at our place. We had an old well-worn one-man crosscut saw about the farm, and the old rusty raker gauge, spider and swage set to sharpen it properly. I had to buy a new file. The rest was experience. Every farmer knew how to sharpen a saw.

I also had to buy a scoring axe. This was a 5-pound double-bitted Sager with a 42-inch handle. The best of its kind. I sharpened my axes on our foot-treadle sandstone grinder out by the ice house and honed them to a fine edge with a round handstone. It was politely called a whetstone, or a "spitstone," which better described the lubricant used. I can't say that I could shave with the finished results for my beard was too young and fuzzy for that to work. But I could shave the hair off my arms, and they were farther from my jugular.

I was introduced to the art of tie-cutting by my older brother Ken, an old hand at the game. He had hacked ties for several winters to pay the irrigation bill – for the water used to irrigate the farm during the previous summer. This was the drybelt and so – no water, no crops. With water – crops, but no market.

Ties were called "Misery Sticks," because of the steps involved in their creation.

Falling – first, the undercut. This is a V-shaped notch cut in the tree to guide its direction of fall. In our part of the world it was customary to make the initial right-angled cut with the saw, for the frozen wood is so hard that it is likely to turn the blade of the axe. The undercut was cleaned out with the axe at an angle of about 45 degrees. Next comes the backcut on the opposite side of the tree, using the saw. Progress is checked from time to time to make sure the saw cut is kept even and parallel to the undercut, and a little above it.

If the tree has no perceptible lean, a steel fallers wedge is driven into the backcut, behind the saw, to start the tree falling. The residual section of uncut wood is called the "holding wood"

and breaks when the tree is nearly down, as the upper angle of the undercut hits the lower part (i.e. as the "V" closes) and the tree breaks loose from the stump.

By manipulating the undercut, holding wood and wedges it is usually possible to guide the direction of fall up to about 90 degrees each way from the direction of the tree's lean.

If the operator is careless, he may spend a considerable amount of time and energy when his victim hangs up on another tree. The time lost could be called "economic waste." The language used, if in English, was usually called "blasphemy." If in one of the many other languages loose in the woods in those days – nobody could know for sure – but the general message broadcast on the crisp winter air was unmistakable, and unprintable.

Limbing – this was the simple and relaxing job of chopping off the limbs on the upper surface and sides of the fallen tree. Hit at just the right angle at their base, the limbs could shoot out some distance from the trunk of the tree, so they wouldn't be in the way. The operator walked the log during this procedure, so he wouldn't have to crawl through the snow. Limbs were removed to a point where the tree was roughly 6 inches in diameter. Those that remained on the tree's top and some of the limbs underneath, anchored the trunk of the tree firmly, and usually above the snowline. This provided a firm sidewalk for the operator to use during subsequent operations.

Scoring – the next function was to score the log with the scoring axe (my 5-pound Sager). This was about three-quarters of the work in making ties, and critical to the final results. The object was to make axe-cuts at about 45 degrees to the lay of the log, penetrating to the line where the final face would be established. This was all done by eye – no chalk line was used. It was important to score the log adequately underneath and to the same depth as on top. Otherwise the finished face would be less than vertical and the tie would be wedge-shaped. It usually took three swings of the axe to score the log properly on one side at one point. The next score would be 8 to 12 inches further along the log. The scoring continued up to the merchantable top, and then repeated down the other side, back to the butt. The wedging action of the axe would normally result in slabs of frozen wood breaking off with the grain, and the general shape of the tie would start to emerge.

During the scoring phase the tiehack stood on the log. Since he was chopping ahead of himself, with a downward motion of the axe, his feet were reasonably safe. Though just to be sure, he learned to keep his feet strictly centred on top and in line with the log.

With this job completed it was customary to sit on the log and roll a cigarette in order to cool off and settle the nerves before tackling the artistic part. Often at this time of rest I would be joined by a herd of 10 to 15 mule deer, who seemed to like the bearded lichen that grew on the branch tips of our drybelt Douglas-fir. Usually they were nibbling a short distance away on yesterday's trees, but if I sat still they would come right up to the tree I was sitting on. They were probably the same bunch we had to chase off the haystack in the morning. At the lunch break, of course, a couple of Canada Jays would always appear from nowhere, looking for their share. I suppose these rest periods could generally be called "communing with nature." At least, in the winter, there were no mosquitoes.

## **PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**

by Geoff Bate

This past year has been fairly active and a lot has been accomplished. Unfortunately our membership is somewhat on the decline. I would therefore request that all members keep this in mind and assist the membership chairman by signing up new members in your area.

The Executive has found a permanent location to hold meetings when they occur in Victoria. I would like to thank the Canadian Forest Service for the use of their facilities.

We have been able to provide brief forest history articles to the Association of B.C. Professional Foresters for use in their newsletters. In turn, they have given our association much needed publicity including information about us on their web site.

A few members of the Association, Gerry Burch in particular, have continued to conduct taped interviews of retired persons who have worked all their lives in the forest industry. It is almost impossible to imagine the value these interviews will be to students and researchers when they are reviewed a hundred years or more from now.

Your newsletter editor, John Parminter, has continued to provide interesting and important contributions gleaned from our members and others by creating a fascinating newsletter which is well-received by all members of the Association. It is my request that everyone who has not submitted an article please do so. We all have forest-related experiences that are of interest to the membership.

The highlight of the year is the publication of the Tom Wright memoirs. For those of you who do not know him, Tom's accomplishments are nothing short of remarkable. As one person who has had an opportunity to review the drafts, I can assure you that John Parminter has done an excellent job in writing Tom's memoirs. This publication marks the fourth time that the Forest History Association of B.C. has been involved in the production of a publication about special people who have made an unusual and outstanding contribution to our province. It is my sincere wish that similar projects will continue in the future.

I have enjoyed my five years as your President. However, I have come to the conclusion that it is time for a change in leadership. With this in mind I wish to be the first to congratulate Stan Chester in his undertaking this important task. With his consistent interest in B.C.'s forest history, he will be a great asset as President.

I will take this opportunity to thank all members of the FHABC, including the Executive, for their support over my tenure. I look forward to continuing to support the FHABC and will remain a proud member.



## **AGM SCHEDULED FOR SEPTEMBER 16, 2000**

Our AGM for this year will be held on Saturday, September 16<sup>th</sup> at the Wright family tree farm on the Sunshine Coast, near Gibsons. The details are as follows:

### Logistics

Catch the 11:20 AM ferry from Horseshoe Bay to Langdale. Transportation will be provided from Langdale to the tree farm so leave your car in the pay lot at the Horseshoe Bay ferry terminal. If you are coming from Vancouver Island, take the 8:30 AM sailing from Departure Bay and then transfer to the 11:20 AM Langdale ferry at Horseshoe Bay.

We will ensure that everyone catches the 4:30 PM return sailing from Langdale to Horseshoe Bay.

### Agenda

A light lunch will be served at the tree farm and the cost is estimated at \$10 per person. The business meeting will follow the lunch and include:

- presentation of the biography of Tom Wright,
- a description of the history of the tree farm (area, harvest, future plans) and
- a tour of interesting sites on the tree farm.

All are welcome to attend this special event.

### Confirmation

If you are planning to attend please contact either

Stan Chester, West Vancouver  
604-921-9880      home

e-mail: [2schester@home.com](mailto:2schester@home.com)

or

John Parminter, Victoria  
250-384-5642      home  
250-356-6810      office

e-mail: [jvparminter@telus.net](mailto:jvparminter@telus.net)

and advise us by September 13<sup>th</sup> of your name and how many people will be in your party.



## THE SAGA OF CLANCY HALDANE

by W. Hank Horn

I first met Clancy in Alaska Pine's camp at Khutzeymateen, north of Prince Rupert. The inlet, home to many grizzly bears, was recently made into a park but in the 1950s it was unknown, except for its timber.

Clancy joined me and several others to form a contract logging crew. We were all young and wild and Clancy was no different, but he seemed to be far more impressionable than most of us. His role model was old "Black Dan" McDonald, who scooped half a box of snuss into his maw and topped it with a heavy chunk of Irish Twist for a chaser. I don't know how Clancy stood it but it was his style from the first time he could hold it down.

Shortly after we started our first setting, our whole crew was hooking up a turn in a gully at the back end. Everyone went out into the slash except for Clancy, who headed the other way. The engineer tightened the lines and the turn sprung into the air. The punk stopped the turn immediately and we all saw a huge slab shear off one log and like an arrow from God it headed straight down in Clancy's direction. What caught my eye was Clancy's look of fright and his Adam's apple extending like a blowfish. He had obviously swallowed his chew. The slab missed him but bounced a couple of limbs that shook him up pretty good.

We had to pack him down the hill to the waiting boat that was sent out from camp. Little did I know that Clancy's life would follow this pattern.

Years later I met Clancy again at a gyppo camp in the Interior. By then he had found his niche as an operator, figuring rigging was a mug's game. The owner of the outfit had a front-end loader that he used around the camp. He let Clancy run this machine to check him out and see what he could do. Apparently he was satisfied with Clancy's performance. But the first time he was alone, carrying rails chained to the bucket, Clancy drove them through the fuel tanks of the machine, which was then out of action for some time.

Somehow the owner let that slide and gave him a little D2 to make some road next to the river. (They didn't know how to spell "environment" in those days). Sure enough, Clancy rolled the machine into the stream, barely getting off in time.

That upset the boss but still he gave him another chance, this time running a rubber-tired skidder (which was new in those days). Clancy swung the skidder around and promptly ran into the side of the owner's brand-new Buick, crushing the side of his pride and joy.

Unbelievably, the owner forgave him and let Clancy try out a 10-12 Lawrence on a loading set-up. Somehow or other Clancy caught the falling load and tore down the entire A-frame when a frazzled old guyline broke. No one was badly hurt but it was the last straw.

Years later, after Clancy had burned all his bridges in logging, he turned up in construction. I met him on the Kelowna Bridge project. It seemed that everyone in the construction trade knew of Clancy and it was no surprise when we saw the headline "CLANCY LOWERED THE BOOM" in the local daily newspaper.

The story detailed how Clancy was breaking in on a very large crane sitting on a barge on the lake and he confused raising the boom with lowering the boom.

Along with costly repairs, Clancy spent a little time in the hospital.

Back then the W.C.B. kept elaborate files, all on paper of course, and it was suggested that part of the Board's need to expand their headquarters was due to the size of Clancy's portfolio.

Clancy's union representative's humour intrigued me and I asked him if he was fully aware of Clancy's history, accident-wise. We swapped tales for an hour and for every boo-boo in logging he had a bigger or funnier one related to Clancy's construction career.

Perhaps he was speaking tongue-in-cheek when he summed up our injury-prone champion's foibles by saying that the W.C.B.'s mainframe computer crashed under the strain of transferring Clancy's files from paper to disk.



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.

Please submit newsletter material and send changes of address to the Editor: John Parminter, # 3 – 130 Niagara Street, Victoria, BC V8V 1E9. Phone (250) 384-5642 home or (250) 356-6810 office. E-mail: [jvparminter@telus.net](mailto:jvparminter@telus.net)

Membership in the association is \$10 yearly, or \$45 for five years. Please send dues to the Treasurer: Edo Nyland, 8793 Forest Park Drive, Sidney, BC V8L 4E8. Phone (250) 656-9276. E-mail: [edonon@islandnet.com](mailto:edonon@islandnet.com)

The President, Geoff Bate, can be reached at 2278 Cooperidge Drive, Saanichton, BC V8M 1N2. Phone (250) 652-5360 or fax (250) 652-5358. E-mail: [gbate@telus.net](mailto:gbate@telus.net)

