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COMMUNING WITH NATURE – REFLECTIONS ON A FORESTRY CAREER

by the late Geoff Marples

Part One of Two

It is just possible that one or more of my six grandchildren might be inclined to follow in my faltering footsteps and choose forestry as a profession. They may favour a lifestyle communing with nature, far from the smog, traffic and turmoil of city life.

They all have the necessary physical attributes, in one form or another. A couple of them have the extra long legs and big feet like moose, for stepping over windfalls and walking across swampy meadows without sinking. One is specially adapted for ducking under obstacles like fallen trees; another designed for crashing through the brush with a heavy pack on his back, breaking trail for the rest. Then there are two that I would call the "leaper and bounders" who could clear the windfalls like grasshoppers and land gracefully on a log. Put them all together and they would make quite a team!

Before any decisions are made, I think it is only fair to point out that life in the woods does have its moments of stress, over and above the petty annoyance of mosquitoes and flies.

Recycled paper



Years ago I read the diary of David Douglas, the famous botanist after whom the Douglas-fir was named. If I may misquote an excerpt, it went something like this:

“Here I was, cold and wet, ill with fever, my food exhausted, my horse lame, far from help, with winter coming on. Under such circumstances I am apt to become fretful!”

There have been occasions when, like Douglas, I was “apt to become fretful.” I shall attempt to describe one of these as an example.

The time was the early 1950s. The place was Wakeman Sound, in the Kingcome Inlet country. The occasion was the cruising and mapping of the timber remaining in the Wakeman River valley. Head Office wanted to know if there were any pickings left over after the railway logging carried out during World War I.

It had been raining without let-up for a month or more. This was typical of this part of the coast, where there are two seasons; the rainy season and the wet season, with a generous overlap between the two. We were working in the overlap period. We were wet every day; warm and wet from steam and sweat if we wore our heavy black rubber raingear, or cold and wet if we didn't. If we didn't it was a bracing experience to start the day by breaking through the first huckleberry bush – every leaf loaded with water. I believe this is called self-flagellation. We were not members of some religious cult, but we did call Upstairs for relief from our torment – to no avail. The rain continued.

Head Office had provided a boat for this trip so we could cruise up and down and back and forth on the Wakeman River. We had been assured that it was a placid stream, meandering gently towards the sea. Our boat was an inflatable rubber dinghy, complete with foot pump and collapsible oars for ease of backpacking. The price had been right - \$10 at the War Assets Store on Hastings Street.

One look at the angry brown flood, full of drift logs and roots that was the reality of the Wakeman River this year, and we made arrangements with local boys from Kingcome Village, in the next inlet, who ran an old dugout canoe powered by an ancient outboard motor tied on with baling wire and bacon string. But it worked. It went upstream against the current as well as down!

Our boatmen were good, and knew the river and the country. They knew the country well enough to stay on the river and never to try and crawl through the woods overland. “Why do you want to go over to the other side of the river? It's all brush! Same as this side.” We could believe that, but Head Office would never take our word for it unless we could prove we had been there in person.

Our camps were as comfortable as experience and ingenuity could make them and are worthy of some description, for they represented the results of generations of development.

There were four in our party so we had two 12' by 12' two-man cruisers' tents. They were made of Egyptian cotton, with 4' walls and a steep pitch to ensure good runoff of rain or snow. They weighed about 4 pounds when dry. A collapsible wood stove was set up on posts just inside the door, and a telescoping stovepipe passed through the fabric by means of a metal roof jack and was surmounted by a spark catcher made from mosquito netting.

A big pile of wood was stored beside the stove and kindling material was kept dry under the stove. It was the duty of the compassman to whittle a supply of shavings for lighting the fire (if he forgot, his ears would be blistered). A full pail of water was kept just outside the tent – just so – to put out an accidental fire (a tent can burn up in a few seconds, leaving the crew in a miserable and dangerous situation).

Wooden orange crates from the grocery store, tastefully arranged on stakes driven into the ground, provided the kitchen cabinets, these were set up in the front of the tent, just across from the stove at a convenient height. At strategic points, mouse traps were set to protect the precious groceries from both mice and compassmen on the hunger prowl at night.

Towards the rear of the tent, on both sides, were the two beds. These were raised well above the wet ground on stakes and decked with slabs of split cedar, or poles. A good layer of spruce or fir boughs (“goofer feathers”) provided a reasonably comfortable mattress (for a few days). A groundsheet stopped some of the branches from jabbing you in the ribs and helped keep you more or less dry in your sleeping bag.

The “office” was a chunk of plywood brought from town and placed between the heads of the two beds. This provided a table for both map work and dining. The Coleman lantern was suspended above. In the peak of the tent a rope was stretched from end to end. This was where you dried your clothes overnight: a very important camp fixture in a cold and wet climate.

This may sound like a pretty elaborate camp, taking several hours to set up. But you must remember that in those days, before helicopters, before portable two-way radios, you were on your own, in a remote part of the coast, and usually without a boat. No roads, no trails, no people for many miles. Furthermore, you were out there to produce maps and estimates of timber, not simply to pass the time on “survival in the wilderness.” The normal work day was about fifteen hours. You had to look after yourselves, and keep healthy or else! We lived that way for many months of the year, summer and winter. For some of the old timber cruisers, this was their life.

We worked the upper part of the drainage first to take advantage of the high water to get the canoe up as far as possible past the mouth of a tributary, the Wahpeeto River.¹ This saved on the backpacking. By arrangement our boatmen brought us supplies from time to time. The last load arrived a couple of days before we were finished. We wanted them to stay over and give us a lift with our outfit down to our next campsite. They claimed the river had gone down and they wouldn't have enough water to float the canoe; said they had to leave today.

Delicate negotiations ensued. Our Party Chief, Old Bill, handled the situation with all the tact and Irish blarney at his command. Several cups of coffee later it was agreed that if the river didn't go down any more by next morning, the boys would wait for us to finish and move us. Before they went to bed they drove a stake into the bank at the edge of the water to check the river level.

After they had gone to bed, Bill sneaked out and moved the stake out into the river a couple of feet. The next morning we heard the shout – “Hey, river come up! Lotsa water! Okay, we wait for you.” Crisis averted.

Our boatmen stayed in camp while we finished the work and did the cooking. As in the poem *Père Lalamont* dimly remembered from school days “Our boatmen sat apart, wolf-eyed, wolf-sinewed, stiller than the trees.” Well, more or less. As growing boys they sure wolfed down a lot of grub.

Finally we struck camp and loaded everything in the old dugout, and like *Père Lalamont's* trip “on the smooth ripple lifts the long canoe.” Well – to the nearest log jamb anyway, and we did the lifting. The river had gone down, despite the continual rain so there was quite a bit of frogging to be done: you jump into the water up to your knees and pull and heave – the canoe comes loose from the gravel bar and you flounder up to your waist – back on board – back in the water, and so on. This is called frogging. By this means we made our way down to our next campsite fairly uneventfully, the river growing rapidly in speed and volume as we passed the mouths of the tributary creeks. It would have been tough going to pack this distance on foot, crossing the creeks.

We arrived in good order at our destination – a spot just above the mouth of a major tributary, the Atway Kellesse,² which empties into the Wakeman from the Southeast in a pretty waterfall. In drier weather this would likely be reminiscent of landscapes created on the “how to paint” television shows. We piled our stuff ashore on a high gravel bar, and bid our boatmen a fond farewell, with the agreement that they would come back for us in ten days time.

With the tough part of the job behind us, we set about building our new camp with light hearts. After crouching under heavy timber in heavy rain for a month, we couldn't resist pitching our tents on top of the gravel bar, out in the open, with only light brush around us, and 5 or 6 feet above the river level. There is something very depressing about living for a long period in a tent beneath the trees – the continuous “plop, splat, splatter” of raindrops off the trees is even more tiresome than the steady rattle of rain on the roof. We were happy to rest from this.

1. The early explorers were addicted to giving names to all the natural features they saw. There was apparently some snob appeal in naming things in what they took to be the local language. The natives were quick to twig onto the fact that this was a good way to pull the white man's leg. Thus, when the explorer paused to relieve himself before the river the guide said “I gotta go too.” Thus the name went on the map as “Wah pee too.”
2. As illustrated above, the local guide was having his little joke, or possibly he misunderstood the question “What is the name of this river?” He replied “Atway Kellesse,” which translated may mean “Yes, this is a tough one to cross” or perhaps “You're nuts if you think you can wade across that one.”

ORIGIN OF THE WORD FOREST

The following is taken from "A collection of Curious Discourses, written by eminent Antiquaries upon several Heads in our English Antiquities," Published in Oxford, England in 1720.

The word "forest" is derived from "foris stare" which doth signify "to stand or be abroad"; and "forestarius" is he that hath the charge of all things that are abroad, and neither domestical nor demean; wherefor "forests" in old times did extend unto woods, wastes and waters and did contain not only "vert" and venison, but also minerals and maritinal revenures.

Submitted by Richard Woods, FHABC member



REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

In 1937 and 1938 the United States Forest Service Experimental Equipment Laboratory (at Portland, Oregon) developed a trail tractor. The 4-cylinder engine on this small bulldozer produced 19 draw bar horse power. It had 4 forward gears and the tracks were only 7 1/2" wide.

The trail tractor was developed primarily to reduce trail construction costs. Its other uses included terracing and building fireguards.

A total of nine trail tractors were built – six for the U.S. Forest Service, one for the State of Washington and two for the B.C. Forest Service. Those tractors arrived in B.C. in 1939.

The April, 1940 edition of the U.S. Forest Service's "Fire Control Notes" describes in detail the history of the development of these tractors, and mentions that the Canadian tractors were tied up early in the 1939 season because of World War II.

Apparently, the designer of the tractor (T.P. Flynn, a U.S. Forest Service employee) designed a similar model that was used by the Airborne Engineers during the war.

Steve Hansen of Hood River, Oregon is in the process of researching the history of the trail tractors and wonders if any FHABC members recall their use in B.C. and what happened to them. Steve can be reached by phone or fax at (541) 354-1924. Or e-mail HRWebfoot@aol.com

**FORESTRY AND/OR LOGGING POETRY FROM B.C. –
A NEARLY COMPLETE LIST (?)**

Compiled by John Parminter

- Day, David. 1975. The Cowichan. oolichan Books, n.p. 46 p.
- Day, David. 1975. The Cowichan. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B.C. 64 p. (first printing 1975, second printing 1976)
- Dickson, Ruth. 1992. Saturday morning crummy. Beach Holme (Victoria, B.C.) & Cowichan and Chemainus Valley Ecomuseum Society (Duncan, B.C.).
- Dickson, Ruth. 1998. Voice of the Salmon River: poetry of the Sayward Valley 1941 to 1950. Ruth Dickson, Duncan, B.C. 57 p.
- Fleetwood, Jack. 1995. On the "F" Line: poems from the working rainforest. Photographs by Z. Olak and MacMillan Bloedel Ltd. Forest History Association of British Columbia, Victoria, B.C. 39 p.
- Hatt, H.E. 1919. Sitka spruce. (publisher unknown)
- McInnes, George L. 1968. Saga of the west coast loggers. Mitchell Press, Vancouver, B.C. 108 p.
- Swanson, Dan A. 1953. Rhymes of a haywire hooker. The Lumberman Printing Co. Ltd., Vancouver, B.C. 58 p.
- Swanson, R. E. 1942. Rhymes of a western logger. The Lumberman Printing Co. Ltd., Vancouver, B.C. 58 p.
- Swanson, Robert E. 1943. Rhymes of a lumberjack. Illustrated by Bert Bushell. Thomas Allen Limited, Toronto, Ontario. 94 p.
- Swanson, Robert E. 1945. Bunkhouse ballads. Illustrated by Bert Bushell. Thomas Allen Limited, Toronto, Ontario.
- Swanson, Robert E. 1992. Rhymes of a western logger - the collected poems of Robert Swanson. Illustrated by Bert Bushell, photographs from the Leonard Frank and Vancouver Public Library collections. Foreword by Howard White. Includes a logger's dictionary. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B.C. 192 p.
- Trower, Peter. 1974. Between the sky and the splinters. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B.C. 61 p.
- Trower, Peter. 1976. The alders and others. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B.C. 40 p.

Trower, Peter. 1978. Bush poems. Illustrated by Bus Griffiths. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B.C. 71 p.

Trower, Peter. 1978. Ragged horizons. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, Ontario. 95 p.

Trower, Peter. 1982. Goosequill snags. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B.C. 59 p.

Trower, Peter. 1986. The slidingback hills. Oberon Press, n.p. 132 p.

Trower, Peter. 1989. Unmarked doorways. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B.C. 62 p.

Trower, Peter. 1999. Chainsaws in the cathedral: collected woods poems. Ekstasis Editions, Victoria, B.C. 160 p.

White, Howard. 1983. The men there were then. Arsenal Editions, Vancouver, B.C. 95 p.

White, Howard. 1993. The ghost in the gears. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B.C. 110 p.

There are other titles by Peter Trower but I haven't yet been able to track them down in the flesh ("Moving Through the Mystery" - 1969, "Work and the Working Life" - 1976, "When the Mill Was Our Mother" - 1990, "Where Roads Lead" - 1994.) Some may not be poetry.

As well, Gordon Barney of Ladysmith has published five books, most of which may be poetry. If anyone can shed light on these works of Peter Trower and Gordon Barney please send the pertinent citation details (as done above) to the editor.



FORT ST. JOHN FOREST DISTRICT REUNION

The Fort St. John Forest District is holding a reunion in celebration of its 48th anniversary. All current and former employees are invited. The event will be held over the B.C. Day long weekend from July 30 to August 2.

Activities include a pancake breakfast, golf tournament, ball game, dinner, dance and a field trip to view past successes and failures. For information contact Christine Richards at (250) 787-5600 or write to her at:

Fort St. John Forest District
 Ministry of Forests
 8808 72nd Street
 Fort St. John BC V1J 6M2

EX-FOREST SERVICE VESSEL SQUADRON NEWS

This year's Ex-Forest Service Vessel Squadron Rendezvous will be held from Saturday, July 31 to Monday, August 2 inclusive at the Squamish Yacht Club in Squamish.

The agenda is as follows:

Saturday, July 31		Arrivals, informal socializing
Sunday, August 1	10:00 13:00 – 16:00	Annual General Meeting Vessels open to visitors
Monday, August 2		Informal socializing, departures

The squadron is still actively seeking historical photos, information and memorabilia pertaining to the former Forest Service vessels. The Vancouver Maritime Museum holds the archives of the squadron and may be the location of next year's rendezvous.

For more information about the upcoming summer rendezvous and/or the activities of the squadron, please contact Doug Mitchell at 599 Norris Road, Sidney, B.C. V8L 5M8. Phone (250) 656-2959.

The Ex-Forest Service Vessel Squadron has a website, in the initial stages of development. It can be visited at:

<http://www.mountain-inter.net/~dcolwell/exfv.html>



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: Mr. John Parminter, # 3 – 130 Niagara Street, Victoria, BC V8V 1E9. Phone (250) 384-5642 home or (250) 356-6810 office. E-mail: jvparminter@bc.sympatico.ca

Membership in the association is \$7.00 yearly, or \$30 for five years. Please send dues to the Treasurer: Mr. Edo Nyland, 8793 Forest Park Drive, Sidney, BC V8L 4E8. Phone (250) 656-9276. E-mail: 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@bc.sympatico.ca