



**Published by the Forest History Association of British Columbia**

**No. Fifty-eight**

**Victoria, British Columbia**

**March 2000**

**A PRIVATE WALK**

by Ron Jones

The B.C. coastal logging communities of the 1940s and 1950s still contained personalities who, through their very individualistic stamp, created the pioneering industry.

Nick was one of those men. Self-reliant to the extreme and as protective of his personal independence as human dignity would allow. By occupation a hand logger, though when news of his mysterious disappearance spread through the community it was as though a very pillar of political society had been lost.

It was late fall. His small boat had been found on an isolated part of Powell Lake's shoreline, signs indicated his being absent for several weeks in the adjacent wilderness. Well, said his friends, he lived like a man, he would have died like a man. But then really who was that man?

Recycled paper



His chosen profession allowed no machinery or tools beyond a powersaw, an axe and one steel jack to enable logging of shoreline trees. A vast quantity of “know how” ingenuity was the crucial factor. With these considerations in mind, operators such as he would be allowed government contracts over extensive lengths of shoreline, both lake and ocean, on which to ply their trade. Success required steep shore terrain, fairly large and tall timber of good market value and, naturally, lots of time. The logging of just one large tree several hundred feet up from the water might require one week of hard work – with no economic guarantee in the results.

Nick was an artisan who would choose his tree with precision and deliver that tree from mountainside stump to sawmill with patient skill. Generally that was a Douglas-fir of four to twelve feet in width at the cutting position and over one hundred and forty feet in height, with no visible rots or splits that might detract from the sale price. Yes, it had to be a good specimen of the specie to compensate for the time and labour involved.

The tree’s pathway to water was first cleared of small trees, all rock gullies were filled in with saplings laid crossways to the route and all obstacles that could cause snagging or blockage were removed over the whole track, possibly a distance of up to six hundred feet. On completion of the track, a chore taking up to six days, the falling of the doomed monarch commenced.

Springboard notches cut into the tree’s bole enabled seating of springboard steps, thus allowing the cutter to operate ten or more feet from ground level. The undercut, up to one third of the bole’s width, was chipped and cleaned out. Sometimes round rocks were inserted within the undercut to give that extra boost to the toppling tree. Other secret and personal touches may have been added by the individual faller. The main cut and wedge application, also only comparable with a proven artistic talent, resulted in both direction and distance of the fall.

The majestic giant creaked with its first minuscule movement, the initial note of a requiem to its ending life. The professional roar of “timber!” echoed from shoreline to mountain top, ignoring that the closest human may be ten or twenty miles distant. With ever-increasing speed the three hundred year old giant performed its death swoop, a devastating toppling of majestic proportion.

Successful falling would take the giant from stump to splash all in one action. An unsuccessful run would mean many more days of physical labour along with the dreaded fifty-pound Gilchrist steel jack. A period of cursing, sweating and furious contemplation of errors. This was Nick’s chosen livelihood and had been for most of his sixty-year life. In 1956 he was possibly the last of the breed operating. All the more reason to mourn his demise.

Then suddenly and without any warning a name calling ruckus hit the grapevine. He had miraculously reappeared and was fit to be cable-tied and dragged through a hornet’s nest. Sitting in a power saw “carved from log stump” type of chair, he twirled the long waxed handlebar moustache that had earned him the title “The Polak.” His tidy three-room house sat upon a thirty-foot long scow, gently rocking to the swell created by “Smokey’s” launch.

The expanse of Powell Lake stretched ten miles one way and twenty in the other. It was “Nick the Polak’s” world – a lone human in balance with the nature around him.

“Hi ya Smokey, I bet you another one what wants to know where I go for walk, eh?”

“No way Nick, I no longer try to figure out what hand loggers do for fun.”

“Well I tell you anyway! I took a little walk and leave my ‘put put’ boat on the west shore. Those damn fools, my friends, spot the boat one week and then spot it again the next. So they say old Nick lost.

Airplanes come and search, all look for old Nick, two weeks. They say old Nick lost forever, so they take ‘put put,’ give to cops. Old Nick comes back to shoreline and no ‘put put.’ Start plenty hollering and shooting. After two days and sore throat, fisherman come to see what noise about, I real mad, those God damn bastards should mind their own business.”

“But Nick, all there is around this lake is thousands of square miles of wilderness. How long were you away on this little walk?”

“I do’n know, about three weeks or so.”

From Ron Jones’ collection of “caper stories.”



## **JACK THIRGOOD PASSES**

by John Parminter

Dr. Jack Thirgood passed away in November, 1999 at the age of 73. He was a long-time member of the Faculty of Forestry at UBC, where he taught forest history and policy. Jack and his wife moved to Northumberland, England following his retirement in 1989.

Jack was instrumental in the formation of the Forest History Association of B.C. and was one of the main instigators of this newsletter. It arose as a result of a meeting organized by the Forest History Society, then of Santa Cruz, California and held at UBC on April 27, 1981. Jack and Ron Fahl, at that time editor of the *Journal of Forest History*, discussed the role that a forest history newsletter would fulfil in B.C. and Jack suggested that “it would be a good experience for me” were I to take on the role of editor.

Jack had a consuming interest in forest history and policy as well as mined land reclamation. He edited a reclamation newsletter and authored two books: one on the history of forestry in the Mediterranean (1981) and the other a history of land use in Cyprus (1987).

## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RICHARD HUGH SPILSBURY – AN EXTRACT

by the late R.H. Spilsbury

I wrote to the B.C. Forest Service for a summer job in 1926 and was very fortunate to be taken on as this was a popular summer employment, especially for those taking forestry in the Science Faculty. It is possible that my godfather, R.V. Winch, helped, for my father asked him to write the Premier in support of my application.

At any rate, early in April I received a CPR train ticket with instructions to join my party at Ashcroft. On disembarking I met my boss, Raymond Fisher, Ian MacQueen and the person I was to team with – Willoughby Mathews – who had just graduated in Agriculture, though I never knew him at university. He got off the train carrying a beautiful leather gun case and a tennis racquet, plus a huge leather suitcase. We had been told to bring only necessary bedding and work clothes. On the platform we met the other member of the party, Ken Moffat, who lived in Vernon. We were also met by the Chief of Surveys, Fred Mulholland, who was to drive us in a Model T Ford to our starting camp near Burns Lake.

The six of us were crowded into the Ford (gun case and all). Mr. Mulholland, who had a glass eye, drove up the Cariboo Trail. In those days the road was no highway but rather a narrow, dirt track that wound its way between hills and around swamps.

We stopped at a ranch the first night, perhaps 108 Mile House (a primitive kind of Bed and Breakfast that we shared with the ranch hands). We reached Prince George the next evening and stayed at the Prince George Hotel. It was still operating thirty years later and may still be operating for all I know.

Next morning we started out in the pouring rain. The road was a gumbo clay which was most treacherous in the rain. Time after time, the Ford sank axle-deep in the mud and we had to pry the car out with poles cut from the roadside and fill in holes with branches before we could proceed. It took the whole day to reach Vanderhoof, a distance of 80 miles.

The hotel was two storeys high and contained about a dozen rooms, each with an iron bed and a hard mattress. The only facilities were an empty five-gallon kerosene can with the top cut out, at the end of the corridor. For more serious business one had to go out the back door to the two-holer with an old Eatons catalogue that hung on a nail inside the door.

It was in this establishment that I met my first bedbug. I awoke the next morning covered with bites.

We made Burns Lake the next day and found a campsite in a farmer's field a few miles from Decker Lake. We were joined by a cook. He was a rather dirty individual who had a preemption near Stuart Lake.

The survey was to separate potential agricultural land from forest land. The area under study was north of the Grand Trunk Railway (now the CNR) and between Fraser Lake in the east and Smithers in the west.

At the same time, a timber cruising party covered the mountainous area to the north of us, with Babine Lake being their northern boundary. Harold McWilliams was on this party but it was to be many years before we met and became friends.

My job on the survey was to steer a compass course while dragging a measuring tape, or chain, behind me. At the end of each chain length the man behind would jerk the chain and I would stop, blaze a tree and make a map of the physical features such as creeks crossed, rock outcrops, swamps and so on. Meanwhile, my partner behind would dig a hole and make an assessment of the soil for agricultural purposes.

A day's work consisted of five miles of survey and would take us about six hours, plus the time it took to find a starting survey post. That could take an hour or more. In addition there was the time it took to return to the place where we would be picked up. It may not sound like much but in the pouring rain or fighting mosquitoes, no-see-ums, horseflies and deer flies the day could seem very long.

I have yet to find bush clothes that are truly rainproof or dope that really keeps away flies.

Willoughby, or Willo, and I became great friends and, unknowingly, he influenced my future. I will tell you his story, for I found it intriguing.

His father was the secretary of the Carleton Club in London, the Conservative stronghold. After World War I the family couldn't settle down, so they decided to come to Canada and ended up buying a farm at Westholm, north of Duncan. They had a contract to grow sweet pea seed for Suttons and kept a herd of dairy cows. They had no farming background, only the urge to leave the city life behind.

Their farm can be seen today, on the right side of the Island Highway, just before the Crofton traffic light and the Red Rooster Cafe.

During the period when we worked together, Willo and I would discuss farming and his experiences. As a result, I enrolled in Agriculture when I returned home that fall, instead of Civil Engineering as originally intended.

A number of adventures remain in my mind. We did not get along with the boss. Willo was the kind of person who would do something on the spur of the moment, without thinking of possible consequences, and I would go along with whatever he had in mind. Consequently, we were frequently in the doghouse. For instance, we would waste time taking a picture of a porcupine instead of completing the day's assignment.

At the end of the season I returned home via Prince Rupert and the federal government ferry service, the *Prince Rupert* or the *Prince George*. They docked next to the North Vancouver ferry wharf, at the site of the old Hastings Sawmill.



## **OVERWHELMED IN ROCK-SLIDE, RANGER IS SWEEPED INTO RIVER WHILE FIGHTING FIRE ON FRASER**

From the *Toronto Globe*, July 8, 1922 - page one

Red Pass Junction, July 1, 1922 – J. Bedford Edwards, a member of the British Columbia Forestry Department, was fighting a fire near here last Tuesday that had at one time threatened the beautiful Mount Robson Park, when, without a second's warning, a rock-slide began 10 feet from the brink of a 200-foot sheer cliff on the banks of the Fraser River, hurling him, amid an avalanche of huge rocks and debris, over the edge and down into the river, with both his legs broken.

### Spectator of Disaster

Joseph McCoig, an operator at Red Pass, happened to be in the vicinity, and, hearing the roar of the slide, rushed in that direction, arriving just in time to glimpse Edwards disappear into the deep waters of the river. He was powerless to go to the aid of the unfortunate man, as there is no path or foothold from the top of the cliff.

### Maimed Man Struggles for Life

He watched with horror the struggles of the patrolman, who managed to battle at last to shallow water. McCoig ran for help and brought the section gang on the run who were working some distance away. The injured man had now been over 20 minutes in the water and it took 10 men another 30 minutes to get him out and to the top of the bank.

Dr. O'Hagan of McBride was wired to and he came in a special car, giving first aid to Edwards, who, in addition to having both legs broken, had cuts and bruises on head and body. Later in the evening he was taken to Prince George Hospital by Forest Ranger Lowry of McBride. The injured man is a veteran of the war, having been severely wounded while serving with the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion in France.

### On Eve of His Wedding

A sad feature of the accident is that he was to have been married next week at Lucerne, a wire arriving two hours after his injury from his fiancée, who had just arrived in Canada from South Wales. Should the diagnosis prove that there is a good chance of recovery, without loss of limb or permanent disablement, the young couple will be married at the Prince George Hospital in a few weeks' time.

It was found that his right leg was broken at the ankle and the left one smashed in two places below the knee. Prior to his appointment in the British Columbia Forestry Service Edwards lived with his parents at a ranch in Nicholl, B.C.



## INFORMATION SOUGHT ABOUT THE LAKE COWICHAN COMBINED FIRE ORGANIZATION

This cooperative fire organization, the first of its kind in British Columbia, was founded in 1958 after a very serious forest fire season. Now into its 42<sup>nd</sup> year, the current members wish to honour the founding members and those who have supported it through the years.

The plan is to prepare a permanent display at the B.C. Forest Museum in Duncan. This will include a roster of those who served as Chair and Secretary, a list of members by company affiliation and a collection of old fire-fighting equipment, weather instruments, photographs and so on.

Our biggest challenge is to find old company records, minutes of the earliest meetings, attendance lists, etc. Files for several of the companies (Western Forest Industries, B.C. Forest Products and Crown Zellerbach) have been lost or destroyed. We have some data from 1974 to the present, but nothing for 1958 to 1973.

We are particularly interested in finding out why the organization was founded, who the founding companies and members were and the date and place of the first meeting.

Information can be forwarded to:

Art Walker, RPF  
6101 Wisteria Way  
Duncan BC V9L 5E8

Telephone: 250-748-5266  
Fax: 250-748-0651  
E-mail: wfs@islandnet.com



### RICHARD RAJALA WINS AWARD

Richard A. Rajala was chosen to receive the Charles A. Weyerhaeuser Award for best book on forest and conservation history for the two-year period 1997 – 1998. The winner is a previous recipient of the 1994 Blegen Award and the 1990 Hidy Award. Rajala's book, *Clearcutting the Pacific rain forest: production, science, and regulation*, (UBC Press, 1998) is original, insightful, and particularly impressive in the way it integrates logging technology, labor theory, and the intricacies of a century of regulation. His use of primary sources for British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon is thorough and illuminating, while his use of theory is intelligent without being pedantic. By comparing the experience of Canada and the United States as a single forest ecosystem, Rajala shows how powerful the forces of developing technologies were in altering Douglas-fir forests and economies. The book is unique in how it argues the reverse of common perception – Rajala argues that logging technologies shaped forest science and forestry education, not the reverse.

From *Forest History Today*, Fall 1999 issue, page 50.

Published by the Forest History Society, Durham, North Carolina.

## EX-FOREST SERVICE VESSEL SQUADRON NEWS

by John Parminter

Last year's Ex-Forest Service Vessel Squadron Rendezvous was held from Saturday, July 31 to Monday, August 2 inclusive at the Squamish Yacht Club. Boats in attendance were *Cottonwood*, *Dean Ranger*, *Forest Ranger II*, *Kwaietek*, *Maple*, *Nesika*, *Oak II*, *Poplar III*, *Silver Fir* and *Sitka Spruce*.

The squadron's Annual General Meeting was held on Sunday, August 1 at the yacht club. Squadron members remain concerned that not enough historical material related to the vessels has been collected and donated to the Vancouver Maritime Museum, the official repository. Still, vessel owners deserve recognition and praise for their dedication in preserving the vessels and promoting awareness of their history as coastal workboats.

The annual Squamish Days parade assembled just to the south and so we were privileged to be the first to see everyone head up the main street. The Naden Band was playing in the local bandshell and competed with the Royal Hudson steam locomotive for our attention.

The Vancouver Maritime Museum appears to be the site for this year's rendezvous, scheduled for Saturday, August 5 to Monday, August 7 inclusive. While the rendezvous will not be on the same scale as our gala held there five years ago, FHABC members are encouraged to attend the open house and swap stories with the owners. Additional information will be included in a future newsletter.

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



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: [jvparminster@telus.net](mailto:jvparminster@telus.net)

Membership in the association is \$10 yearly, or \$45 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](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)