Rogue River Journal

A WINTER ALONE

JOHN DANIEL

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Is there a job of work in all the world as satisfying as splitting firewood? One swing does it with these rounds I'm working, if my aim is true and my maul stroke crisp. What was whole springs apart in halves, each with a fresh bright face, ready to stand again on the block and divide once more with another clean shout. The product of my toil rises around the block, tangible and fragrant, each new split piece making a happy knock and rattle as it strikes the pile and finds its place. There is, of course, the occasional knotted round that will separate only on its own perverse and protracted terms; and the occasional piece that won't stand straight for the maul because I didn't buck it straight with the chainsaw; and the occasional errant swing that produces not identical twins but a grazed round and a stick of kindling. But these trials merely add dramatic texture to the serene unfolding of the story.

I'm splitting madrone, a Pacific coastal hardwood that burns long, hot, and virtually poplessly. The flesh of the wood is pale and often tinged pink, echoing in a muted way the outward beauty of the standing tree. Madrone trunks—a tree might have two or three—curve and wander, their sapwood densely muscled beneath thin, papery bark that can be bright olive green on young growth and red-orange to cinnamon on more mature trees, darkening to rich brown and flaky gray on the lower trunks of the veterans. Bark in the red range peels from trunks and limbs in delicate flakes, as if the tree had suffered a voluptuous sunburn, and in long curling strips that look like oversized cinnamon sticks. Madrone is the only tree I desire to *eat*.

It flourishes here, developing trunks up to three or four feet through and eighty to a hundred tall. Down on the Rogue River Trail there's an ancient specimen, still very much alive, that must have measured six or seven feet in diameter before half of it split away. The name *madroño*—strawberry tree—was given by homesick Californian Spaniards for the tree's resemblance to one of its cousins in their native land. And madrones do bring a Mediterranean sensuality to this forest, which is dominated by straight and spartan Douglas firs, western hemlocks, sugar

pines, ponderosa pines, and other rough-barked needle trees. But there are other broadleafs too, a welter of them—tanoaks, white oaks, black oaks, bigleaf maples, golden chinquapins, Oregon ashes, bay laurels, Pacific dogwoods, and several more species. The forest of these Klamath Mountains, David Rains Wallace writes in *The Klamath Knot*, is the most diverse in the West and in all of North America except for a few pockets in the southern Appalachians. Wherever I run my vision along the meadow's borders, it touches a variety of forms and textures and shades of green—even now in late fall, because several of the broadleafs, including madrone, are evergreens.

The vitality of this forest is something almost palpable, an exuberant aura, and yet it's a diminished forest. There are ghost trees here. When Mother Margery and the Doctor bought the homestead from Bill Graiff's heirs, the timber had been separately sold. The property was logged, selectively but intensively, in 1968. Leave the meadow in any direction and you find Cat roads, grown over with brush and young trees now, that lead past some impressive stumps. Below the property, in the public forest, there are some old-growth giants, Douglas firs over 150 feet tall and six feet through. The homestead had a few of those too. But that's all done. There will be no more commercial logging on Dutch Henry Homestead, due both to the tenets of the Brothers' faith and to their scenic easement agreement with the Bureau of Land Management. The homestead forest is healing well, which is more than can be said for some of the steep logging sites outside the canyon. Aerial photos show, to either side of the sinuous swath that is the protected wild Rogue corridor, the surrounding forest riddled with a patchwork of clear-cuts and squiggly logging roads that look like insect borings. My winter wilderness, like all American wilderness south of Alaska, is a remnant.

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A week or two ago I walked down the Corral Trail for some fresh air. This trail angles southeasterly downslope from the cabin, crossing a little stream known—for its association with a particularly onerous work detail when the Brothers were young—as the River Kwai. The trail plunges into and then climbs out of the verdant ravine of Meadow Creek, then contours the lower slopes until it loses itself in a big meadow just above the river where packers and miners once corralled their livestock. Only a few fenceposts are left. Along the way to the meadow are the biggest trees in the area—undulant red madrones reaching their green crowns far out over the slopes, and Douglas firs as thick at the base as I am tall, over a hundred and fifty feet high, their lower bark charred by a long-ago fire.

I paused a moment by several of the trees. I usually do. I touch the bark, and sometimes I lean close and smell it. (I stop short of hugging, but not always far short.) It seems disrespectful not to acknowledge a life so long in its place.

And yet, I've felled big trees for firewood—not here, and not this big—and used to love to watch the timber cutters work when I was a logger in Washington State for a couple of years in my twenties. Let me confess it. There is a knee-wobbling, scrotum-shrinking, let-out-a-whoop thrill in watching a tall tree topple—the stressed fiber creaking and popping as the massive wood-weight leans, leans more, then gains momentum with a rush of wind and a snapping of limbs as it grazes other trees and at last sends shock waves through the ground and up your legs when it hits with a crunching of its crown, a waft of lichen and needles and bark flakes raining slowly down.

We've cut too much old-growth forest in the Northwest, but if I had lived a hundred years ago I might have been one of the cutters. Who would have worried about depleting such vast stores of vast trees? Red cedars twelve feet through at the base, Sitka spruces nearly as tall as a football field is long, an abundance of matriarch-patriarch hemlocks and Douglas firs, many of the biggest growing right by rivers where they

could be felled and floated to the mills. I hope I would have found an easier way to make a living than working one end of a misery whip, but on the other hand, I might have welcomed a vigorous outdoors life providing material for the building of communities.

The trouble is, we never stopped building, never stopped cutting. With the construction boom after World War II we logged farther and faster every decade until the 1990s, on private lands and public. Stripping the old growth, installing orderly plantations, we gradually starved ourselves of sensory knowledge of big forests made of big trees. In the same way, we stripped our rivers of the salmon whose runs were once so seasonally thick that horses refused to ford streams, and farmers could pitchfork all the bright fish they wanted. Now we live among remnants—scatters of fish, patches of forest. No one alive knew the forests and rivers in their prime, but the land has a longer memory. In these remnants it remembers the epic abundance that was and could be again.

But there have been human losses, too. The decades when timber was king saw the flourishing of small communities across the Northwest, supported by the sweat of men doing hard and dangerous work in the woods and mills—work they liked, work that provided essential materials to the American people. They knew the land in the way that most had known it from the beginnings of our history: through their labor. Over the course of the twentieth century, they came to be outnumbered by a larger class of urban and suburban residents who did not work the land, whose engagement with it was largely recreational, and from whose numbers the conservation and environmental movements arose. Hence the timber wars of the 1990s, when environmentalists brought legal actions against the U.S. Forest Service and other land management agencies and forced major reductions in the timber cut on federal lands. This change was necessary—the annual harvest had been running unsustainably amok—and was welcomed by those, such as me, whose contributions had funded the legal actions and whose recreational interests were served by the reduced cut. To many timber communities, though, the new harvest regime—which came on the heels of earlier jolts from mill automation and exposure to the vagaries of a global market—spelled disaster. Mills closed, small businesses with-

ered, social problems soared, and many proud, independent men who had lived three or four generations in place were forced to move their families in search of different and usually lower-paying work.

The luckiest and the most resourceful have managed to land on their feet in their own communities. I met three of them in the summer of 1994, when the Brothers brought in a crew to deal with some tipsy trees behind the writer's cabin, one of which had snapped in two over the winter and impaled the entry porch with its upper half. The trees stood on steeply sloping ground as close as ten feet from the cabin. While a wiry kid climbed and swung on a rope in the treetops, deftly lopping madrone limbs and dismantling their trunks from the top down, the faller, a man in his mid-thirties, was dropping the conifers. He studied each tree carefully before cranking up his long-barred saw and slicing out an undercut, taking his time, the saw as light in his hands as a carving knife. Then he deepened his backcut inch by inch, leaving the saw idling in the tree as he tapped in a wedge or pumped his hydraulic jack—looked up, tapped or pumped, sawed deeper, dab by dab, until the heartwood creaked and gave and the tree went down. He dropped them carefully along the hillside, nesting one behind the other in a stable deck braced by stumps and trees left standing. None came close to hitting the cabin. It was artistry. He could have driven a stake into the ground eighty feet away with every tree he felled, or come very close.

They were a friendly and talkative crew, much like the men I had met when I worked as a logger, but the mood suddenly changed when the faller, on a break, took a drink of water from one of the tin cups lying around the cabin and saw the words stamped on the cup's bottom.

"*Sierra Club*," he just about spat. "You belong to that?"

"No," I told him. My Wilderness Society coffee mug was safely shut up in the cupboard.

"The Sierra Club don't know a damn thing about these woods," he went on, eyeing the cup he had set on the counter. "They live in the city and love the wild animals. Hell, they don't *know* the animals. But they know all about how to manage these woods, don't they."

I wasn't looking for a fight. I told him about a prominent environmentalist, more at home talking with politicians than walking in the

woods, whose colleagues had written him a mock remedial guide to birds with categories such as Little Brown Birds, Ducks 'n Stuff, Call 'em All Redtails, and the like. The faller and his crewmates smiled a little.

"But don't you think these forests have been logged a little hard?" I asked them.

"Look out there," said the third crew member, a hefty man who might have been thirty. "Does that look logged too hard to you?"

I found myself looking instead at the guy's t-shirt, which was blazoned with the image of a Campbell's soup label. The flavor was Cream of Spotted Owl.

"That's the wild Rogue corridor," I reminded him. "Can't be logged. But up out of the canyon, what about that?"

They'd have none of it, but I thought I detected an ounce less conviction in their denials. They hunted and fished and worked in the woods, or had worked. They knew the dusty roads where the men and machines went in and the timber came out. They'd seen the stripped mountainsides, some of them as steep as cliffs, streaked with puke-outs, patched over with brush and paltry planted seedlings. They knew that salmon and steelhead runs were a fraction of what they'd been, and that clear-cut logging was one big reason why.

"Look here," said the faller, as steadily as he handled his saw. "That's a working forest out there, or it used to be. You're a writer. Do you want paper to write on? Do you live in a house? If you do, and if other people do, *somebody's* got to go out there and harvest some trees."

"Sure," I said, "but we've been taking too many . . ."

"What's too many?" he shot back. "I don't notice any of them new houses standing empty very long. There's a market for all the lumber and plywood they make."

We talked on a while, agreeing on little, and they went back to work, taking down a few smaller oaks and madrones the Brothers wanted for firewood. By four o'clock they had their saws shut down and their ropes coiled. We joked a little about the small clearcut they'd made of my retreat. The kid who'd been swinging in the treetops gestured me over to their pickup and pointed, with a grin, to the bumper sticker:

And then, just before they left, the faller surprised me. He looked straight at me, and there was the hint of an appeal in his flat, declarative voice. "Look," he said. "There may be better ways to log. That's all right. Things change. But this is what I do." He gestured toward the big trees he'd laid neat as pins across the hillside behind the cabin. "This is what *we* do. We grew up in this country. We've got kids. We'd like them to grow up here too."

As their truck jounced up the drive, leaving me alone with silence and the sweet tangy odor of conifer sap, I wondered what my father would have made of our conversation. I could see him with his elbows on his knees, his lips pursed, his face downcast, nodding his head slightly, his characteristic manner when wrestling a tough problem. He would have seen justice on both sides, I'm sure. He would have pointed out that the timber workers themselves had not decided to overcut the national forests and cause mills to be built across the Northwest—their bosses had, some of them leaders of large corporations, with the help of politicians whose campaigns the corporate leaders had amply funded. He would have observed that injunctions—the legal tool environmentalists skillfully used to force change—always brought bitterness with them and left bitterness behind them. He would have said that no one, right or wrong, enjoys being run over by a majority, and no one likes to be condescended to. I don't think he would have claimed any special privilege for the timber workers, but I suspect he would have said of them what he said in a speech about factory workers laid off by automation in the 1960s: "These are not just statistics, not just 'people'—these are men and women who have homes. These are men and women who have obligations to society. These are men and women who are citizens, who want to measure up. Are they to be treated just as casualties?"