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Worldviews And The American West

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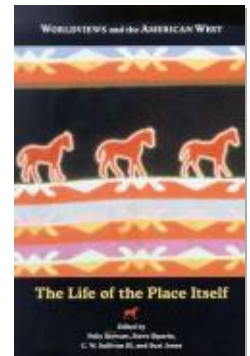
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"Two Moonlight Rides and a Picnic Lunch": Memories of Childhood in a Logging Community

Twilo Scofield

Imagine growing up wild and untamed in a wild and untamed world on the banks of a river in a rural settlement of the great uncut. Picture yourself sitting a moment and smelling the acrid sweetness of the woods, the distinctive odors marking the seasons—dank, damp moss, the spring skunk cabbage, the wildflowers springing up loyal and faithful season after season, rain dripping from fir needles. Stop and listen. You can almost hear the sound of silence broken only by drops of water falling on salal leaves, taking their little bows in turn, gathering courage and girth enough to jump off the end of the leaf, the leaves bouncing back up shaking themselves off and with up-turned face eagerly awaiting the next blessing of rain. Woodland birds titter and gossip in the boughs of fir trees or gather to chat in the vine maples which dominate the underbrush.

Two main gravel roads mark the main streets of town, which wind around the combination mercantile store and post office, the church, and a cluster of houses. Highway 20 skirts the town, where two taverns and a service station are situated, then heads on up the South Santiam Pass to the Cascades. Farms dot the area around the town. Everybody knows everybody. Social life for many is Saturday night at the tavern or the Fir Grove Dance Hall. Sunday is a sermon in our little white church on the hill, where the pastor pulls on a rope to ring the bell calling his flock to worship; his flock—the faithful, those in need of repentance and those who have recovered enough from the hangovers of Saturday night to find comfort in the Lord and His miracles.

Life is simple in Foster, Oregon; work is hard. Forested hills supply the raw material for a living in this small community. The whole town is involved in the lumber industry, perhaps not by choice but by necessity. It is a typical small logging town in Oregon. Everyone is a logger, related to a

logger, or in business serving the needs of loggers and their families. Logging is us. Such was the way of the world in the little town of Foster. It was a good place to grow up. During the summer, kids could earn some cash of their own by picking strawberries, raspberries, blackcaps, wild blackberries, and beans. We would get up at the crack of dawn and join our friends to catch the bus to the fields. The mornings had that cool dampness about them in the gray dawn, giving you the feeling you'd be cold all day. We were bundled up for the cold, but by nine o'clock we would have our jackets and sweatshirts tied around our waists because of the heat. At noon we got our lunch boxes from the bus and lunched in the shade provided by two huge maple trees in front of the farmhouse. The older kids would tell jokes and sing and flirt. The younger ones would listen and learn how things were done. There was no sex education in the schools, and your parents certainly weren't going to tell you the facts of life. Your birds-and-bees education was handed down by your berry-field peers. By one o'clock in the afternoon, we'd be home and on our way to the river to swim.

We had a freedom unknown to today's kids. We played games like Cops and Robbers, Kick the Can, and Beckon-My-Base. We learned to roller-skate on the only sidewalk in town—the one right in front of the school. We walked the railroad trestle and dared each other, like a rite of passage, to walk along the top of the guardrail—one slip on the wet wood would plunge you a hundred feet to the creek below. Kids used to hang around the mill and the lumber yard. A favorite thing to do was to ride the conveyor up the burning slash pile and drop off just short of the flames. The mill pond was another source of amusement. It was great fun to walk out onto the floating logs and try your skill at birling. If you fell off, one of your friends would pull you out. Some of the kids couldn't swim, and the water was dirty, but none of us ever thought there was a possibility of drowning. We were invulnerable. Most of us learned to swim in the Santiam River. We spent long summer afternoons at the river without adult supervision. We picked wildflowers in the woods, and on summer days we often found the tallest of vine maple trees, climbed up as high as we could, and rode the branches down to the ground.

Except for self-imposed dangers, we had little to fear in this small town so removed from crime that the biggest prank was the appearance the morning after Halloween of a wagon perched on top of a barn and a number of privies turned over in selected sites around the community where there wasn't an owner/guard sitting inside with a shotgun, which he sometimes fired into the air to scare off potential perpetrators.

Our parents were hardworking and caring people whose goal was to make a decent living, provide for their families, and make sacrifices so their children would have “a better chance than I did.” Loggers, or “timber beasts” or “swamp apes,” were our heroes. Most of the boys boasted they

were going to be log-truck drivers or high climbers. Or they planned to start out as whistlepunks as soon as they were out of high school and work their way up to choker-setters, become hook-tenders, and soon be the "Bull of the Woods," owning their own outfit. Their dream in life was making as many stumps as possible. Others, whose dads were bushlers—fallers and buckers—and were paid according to the number and size of the trees they felled and cut up, thought this work was the hardest and most dangerous and were planning to follow in their dads' footsteps.

My dad worked as a marker and scaler. His job was to measure the fallen trees and mark where the bucker would cut them into logs. The bushlers were paid a percentage based on Dad's figures. The scaler generally had a reputation of being a company man with a "long thumb," scrimping on the measurement to save the company a dime. But Dad was known for his honesty. He had great integrity. He could not be bought by either side. I was proud he was so respected. Dad had work to do at night calculating scale. From about age eleven all through high school, I would sit up with Dad at our chrome-and-gray-masonite (mottled to look like marble) kitchen table and read numbers from a log scale booklet, while he gave me dimensions and then recorded them in his scale book. I formed a mental friendship with these men, seeing their names regularly. I knew these guys by my dad's bookkeeping. They took on personalities as Dad would talk about them. This, I realized, was why I felt so sad about Gunnar Frey.

Gunnar's death hit Dad very hard. Gunnar was a good friend of Dad's, and Dad was among the first to find Gunnar Frey pinned between two logs. Gunnar was a bucker. His last cut had caused a chunk of log to roll, catching him and crushing him up against another log. Dad never talked about accidents in the woods around us kids. He knew we worried, as every kid did, about losing our dad to a falling tree or a widow-maker or a snapped cable. It was dangerous work. There were many accidents. In a logging town, children were not strangers to tragedy. The sound of a siren brought terror to your heart because you knew someone in the woods had been injured or killed. You just waited to find out who—and then were grateful that it wasn't your dad this time. Two of my friends did lose their dad when he was caught in the bight of the line and decapitated. I had lost my Uncle Fred, age twenty, when he got out of his truck to tighten a binder chain. The chain broke, and he was killed instantly when a log fell off his truck and crushed him.

I overheard Dad telling Mom about Gunnar, "I can't get him out of my mind. He was such a helluva nice guy. He was still talking and joking when we were getting the log off him as if when we finally freed him, he'd walk right out of there. As soon as the pressure was off, he turned an awful brown color, not another word, he was gone. That just sticks in my mind. I thought we were going to have to carry out one of the fallers that cut down that tree.

He kept saying over and over, 'I had a feeling about that tree.' We never should have cut it. When you get that feeling, you should know enough to leave it alone. God forgive me, we never should have cut that tree."

Loggers were not a superstitious lot, but they did subscribe to certain beliefs. One of them was that if you had a bad feeling about cutting down a certain tree, you had better leave it and go on to the next. Another belief was if your hands were cold or if you experienced an unexplainable cold feeling, you shouldn't work in the woods that day. It was a warning that something bad was going to happen. My friend's mother related that her husband had complained of feeling cold before he left for work the day he was killed in a logging accident.

Long before you went to school, you had an informal knowledge of how things operated in the woods. You knew that the yarder weighed almost fifty thousand pounds, not including the weight of the log sled. You knew an eleven-by-thirteen special could reel in a log on good ground at about four hundred feet a minute and send the rigging and chokers racing back into the woods at more than a thousand feet a minute. The whistle controlled all log movement and often regulated life or death. A wrong or misinterpreted signal could send tons of rigging hurtling through the air. You took pride in learning the whistlepunk signals. And if you lived close enough to a work site, you could tell what was going on at the landing. A long blast followed by a short one started the crews to work in the morning and announced quitting time at the end of the day. There were two dreaded signals. A repetition of long and short blasts meant fire. Seven long blasts followed by two short blasts repeated over and over meant someone was injured and a stretcher was needed. This signal was often called the dead whistle because injuries serious enough for a stretcher often meant death.

We were all aware of the constant danger and discomfort for those working in the woods. You tried not to think about it and instead used humor to chase away fear. I remember my dad saying, "A logger works with death looking over his shoulder every day. If you stopped to think about it, you'd never go back in the woods." Then he laughed and said, "The only consolation of being killed in the woods is that you'd probably go straight to hell—at last you'd be warm and dry."

Loggers used humor to keep a perspective about the daily dangers inherent in their work. They loved telling stories to kids and greenhorns about the terrible things you might encounter alone in the woods.

Most of us kids had wandered through the woods since we could walk. I guess we decided these creatures wouldn't bother us because we lived here. But we made good use of the stories, adopting them to scare the bejeezus out of city cousins who came to visit. Young college guys who were logging as a summer job were favorite targets for stories and pranks. They were warned about the vicious wizzensnifter and the beavercat. The wizzensnifter is a shy

creature. It is short and squat but very fast. Too large to miss but too small to see, it has big buck teeth, so the stumps of the trees it eats have uneven jagged tops. It is named for the sound it makes when it is chewing down a big fir tree, "wizzen-SNIFT." It won't attack unless cornered. If you scare it or threaten it, it can chew off a leg in a matter of minutes. Beavercats are more dangerous than wizzensnifters. They are also known as beaver panthers and are a cross between the flat-tailed beaver and the cougar. They lurk in trees at night waiting for prey to cross their trails. They make a sound that is like a big cat. They have a broad, flat tail like a beaver and are dark colored and virtually invisible at night. If you walk under a beavercat perched in a tree on a dark night, that great big tail will whack you right across the face. Few people survive a beavercat attack.

Run like hell if you come across a highbehind. This creature has a taste for human blood, especially the blood of greenhorns, since they are so innocent and sweet. It runs backwards over its victim so it doesn't leave any tracks. It snatches off the victim's head because that is its favorite morsel.

When a man new to the woods came on the job, there would be the obligatory initiation pranks. One was the axeman's test. A seasoned logger would ask the newcomer if he had ever taken the axeman's test. Of course, he hadn't. The logger would then make a mark in the center of a stump, have somebody blindfold him, and take a whack with his axe, usually hitting the target the first time. Then the new guy was blindfolded and he had to try his luck at hitting the mark on the stump. The others would encourage him by saying how close he was. On the third whack somebody would put the guy's new gloves on the stump where the axe had been falling and the new guy would slice right through them. He would need to be good-humored about this, or he would be the victim of more pranks. On the rigging crew he might be sent for a choker hole or some other nonexistent object. Sometimes they would send a newcomer across the canyon to another work site to get a left-handed marlin spike. The spike is like a huge needle and it is used to separate strands of cable so it can be spliced. Sometimes the other crew would just break up laughing, or they might send him back with the spike so his own crew could have a laugh at his expense.

There were few things that would keep loggers out of the woods. Low humidity, wind, and tinder-dry conditions were among the reasons for shutting down. In a windstorm it was foolish to be where trees were falling down all around you. Loggers left the woods in a hurry. When the humidity was low, fire was a constant danger. Acres of timber could be lost, set off by a single spark. When conditions in the woods were dry, the loggers' working day began around three o'clock in the morning and ended shortly after noon. This "hoot-owling" went on through the hot, dry weather. Mom got up early to get breakfast for Dad and put up his lunch. One night after Dad left for his hoot-owl shift, we were awakened by a scratching noise on the screen of the outside

cooler, which was attached to the wall of our house just outside the kitchen. My brother and I huddled with Mom until she was finally brave enough to go peek out the kitchen window. We were following close, hanging on to her skirt. It was a real hoot owl. He had attacked our chickens and was intent on sampling what was in the cooler. I thought he had decided to take up residence in our house. The next day Dad set a trap in the chicken yard using a dead chicken as bait. Sure enough, the owl returned and got his feet caught in the trap. He was flapping his big wings and snapping his beak. Dad killed him and had him stuffed. So the owl did take up residence in our house. He perched on a branch in our living room, wings aloft, like a sentinel, staring with his gold glass eyes throughout my growing-up years.

Dad hated picnics. He said he had a picnic every day in the woods. On rare occasions he would join us down by the river for an afternoon. He couldn't understand why anyone would want to pack food in a basket, carry it up some hill or down to the river, spread a blanket on the ground, balance a dish of food on your lap, compete with bugs and ants, and fight off the bees when you could sit at a table and enjoy a hot meal right in your own kitchen. He joked about the number of days he left for work in the dark and came home in the dark: "In what other job could you have two moonlight rides and a picnic lunch every day with a bunch of fun-lovin' guys?"

We were eager to see our dad home safe from the woods each evening. When we hugged him in welcome, his scent of trees, pitch, and tobacco was like heaven to us. Odors are such strong links to life experiences—tin pants and coat hanging on chairs to dry in front of the wood stove, boot grease drying on cork boots, mingling with the cooking smells from the kitchen in preparation for dinner. To a child it said, All is well with my world.

During the spring and summer, Dad used to surprise Mom with a bouquet of trilliums, babes-in-the-woods, or rhododendrons. When the huckleberries and blackberries ripened, he would pick and bring home enough in his lunch pail for a pie. Other things were carried home in lunch pails (or "nosebags"), too. The owner didn't always realize what he was carrying. Practical jokes were a common source of amusement among the crew, each man trying to outdo the other.

Some of the loggers were single and had their lunches packed for them at White's Cafe. This service was nearly canceled for all time when one of the waitresses opened a lunch box to clean it and prepare a new lunch. She became an unwilling Pandora. A swarm of bees had been captured by some of the logger's crew and put in the lunch pail. The waitress went screaming out of the kitchen, followed by angry bees intent on getting revenge on anyone within their flight pattern. Somebody had the foresight to open the door, and the swarm made for the exit, stinging anyone in their path. Another favorite trick was to fill the lunch pail with ants. It became a habit for some loggers to check their nosebags before they got on the crummy for the ride home.

Uncle Louie owned and operated a gypo logging company—not a high-ball outfit but certainly not a haywire outfit. Uncle spoke fluent cursing. He couldn't utter a sentence without punctuating it with half a dozen expletives. But "he had a heart of gold," as my religious grandmother was fond of saying, and there was nothing he wouldn't do for you. He dressed as all the loggers did, in staggied-off pants, wide suspenders, an old oil-stained red felt hat, and corked boots. The porches and floors of every business in town were pocked and splintered, bearing mute evidence of the years of wear and tear from the comings and goings of loggers. Most loggers kept a couple of thin shingle slats at the door, and when they came home, they stepped onto these slats with their corks and then walked into the house, protecting the floors from cork marks. Some were not so careful. Aunt Eva railed at Uncle Lou for walking into the house with his corks on. He replied, "It's my goddam house, and I'll wear these sons-a-bitches anywhere I want!" His swearing was such a natural thing it never occurred to him, as it did to most loggers, that that kind of language was not to be used around women and children.

George, an absolutely fearless high-climber, worked for Uncle Louie. Dad said if George had a lick of sense he wouldn't climb those spar poles—large trees chosen for their strength and height, usually a hundred-sixty to a hundred-eighty feet tall. After topping, they are rigged with cables and pulleys to ready them for pulling the logs onto the landing. To this day it is a custom for high-climbers like George to show bravado at the conclusion of a successful topping by sitting atop the swaying spar pole and waving their hats to the cheering crew below. They strap on their spurs and gear and start their climb with all sorts of paraphernalia—axes and saws tethered to them—chopping off limbs as they make their way to the top of the tree. Near the top they stop and survey the situation, calculating how many feet from the top they should cut. Then they cut a wedge on one side so the top will fall in a certain direction. They saw the top off and jump quickly down out of the way, catching themselves by digging their spurs into the bark of the tree. It is a dangerous, daring, and exacting feat.

George was an enigma. His general demeanor told you he was neither especially bright nor blessed with exceptional common sense. George did handstands on the top of the pole after he had cut off the top. The reason for George's fearless behavior was that he had only one eye, an injury-induced lack of depth perception. George, as a young boy, had situated himself in the direct line of a rock thrown by a member of an opposing team in a rock fight—one of the ingenious games children of that day devised to entertain themselves. It was a small rock. If it had hit George in the head it would have made only a large painful lump. But it chose instead to damage George's cornea and cause an infection. George, at age twelve, had to have his eye surgically removed. He wore a patch until, as a young man, he could be fitted for a glass eye. This made for a welcome change in George's appearance. It

pleased George, of course, but was disconcerting to others, because that eye never moved but always looked straight ahead. George's glass eye was the subject of many conversations at lunch time. One time, it seems, George wore a patch. It is very uncomfortable to sock a cold eye into your head early in the morning, he related. So he put his eye in the warming oven of the woodstove so it would be nice and warm. This particular morning George's wife forgot about George's eye sitting there warming up, and as she pulled a plate from the warming oven, George's eye began to roll. It dropped onto the hot stove, bounced into the pot of oatmeal, crackled, and shattered.

There were many different jobs in the lumber business. Some men preferred working on water. These were the pond monkeys who used peaveys to align the logs in a float after they were unloaded into the log pond. After high school, my brother worked as a pond monkey. His experience as a child playing on the logs served him well. It took agile feet and an alert mind to do this kind of work. If the logs jammed up, they had to be separated. The logs rolled in the water. You had to keep your balance or you would get dunked. That was uncomfortable, but you could also get caught between logs and be injured, or killed. When things went well, it was like watching dancers as they leaped gracefully from log to log, gathering them together like they were sheep in a flock. Pond monkeys had to be "catty on their feet." When there was a spare moment, the men would practice their birling skills, running in place on top of a log to get it rolling. There were always friendly competitions going on. One man would get on either end of a log and begin birling. The idea was to change directions quickly when your opponent least expected it and cause him to lose his balance and fall in the water.

Memory takes you back to your childhood, and living helps you interpret it. You can't change it. It is imprinted as strongly as if it were part of your DNA. Childhoods are like fingerprints—no two are exactly alike. Early experiences influence your life choices, becoming building blocks for your future. While embracing the small town, the people, and a way of life that was disappearing along with the timber, I knew from the time I could reason that I would leave as soon as I was out of high school. I had no intention of marrying a logger and emulating the life of my mother.

This was not because I felt this kind of life was beneath me. On the contrary, I have great respect for the struggles and joys of raising a family in this small town. I watched my mother and other mothers like her as they worked at tending the children, the house, the garden, as they worked at harvesting, preserving and preparing food, sewing, mending, and always worrying—always nervous when their husbands were a few minutes late getting home. Each handled her anxiety differently. My mother handed most of her worry to a higher power. God always knew best. This somehow relieved her of responsibility and allowed her to get on with day-to-day life.

Perhaps my parents' generation was the last to truly believe that their hard work would ensure a better life for their children. Most parents, like mine, encouraged and expected their kids to go on to college. There was, however, the attitude among many that it was a waste of time and money for a girl to further her education. After all, "What good will it do her? She's just gonna get married and raise her kids." And there were those girls who did graduate from high school, marry their high-school sweethearts, and stay in that small town to raise families. Some are still there.

But the town itself no longer resembles the timber town I knew as I grew up. The mills stand like forgotten skeletons, old tools lying here and there in the dusty remains. An eerie silence replaces the hustle of workers and the productive-but-deafening noise of the saws and machines. Massive trees on thickly wooded hills have been replaced by small firs and underbrush trying valiantly to hide the scars of two new dam projects. Foster is now a recreation area. The sounds of mills and log trucks have given way to those of pleasure craft and jet skis. Instead of loggers birling on logs, you see scores of water skiers, picnickers, swimmers, and fishermen. The change is complete. The little logging town is gone. But to everyone who worked or grew up there one thing will always remain—memories of that unmistakable odor of wood that permeated the air. On cold, foggy nights the air hung like a heavy curtain, a constant reminder that mentally, spiritually, and physically, you were one with the forest.