A Woodsman's Lament

It's 1952 in Roseburg, Oregon. David Forrest, age 11, along with 14 others of Boy Scout Troop 130, is planting Douglas Fir seedlings in a recently logged timber unit up the North Umpqua River in the Douglas National Forest. No one doubts the wisdom of this activity -- lumber and plywood provide the livelihood of all the members of the troop. Dave's father operates a plywood mill nearby employing over 300 in this town of 13,000. The patrol leader's father has a lumber mill that employs 200 more. Timber receipts by the Forest Service are shared with Douglas County to provide roads and schools in lieu of property taxes. And we can use the logging roads to hunt, fish, and hike as that is the primary recreational activity in this beautiful playground. At the end of the day, we sit and admire our accomplishment - a newly planted field. We will harvest it as adults. No one minds.

In 1962, as summer work before my senior year at Oregon State University, I am "grade-staking" a new logging road in the Cascade Mountain range southeast of Roseburg. This road will provide another access between the North and South Umpqua River watersheds. The timber is again Douglas Fir but does include stands of Sugar Pine up to six feet in diameter. At this time, our family operates two sawmills, a plywood mill, a moulding mill, and two particleboard plants, employing several hundred. Now the boy scouts do not replant logged areas; logging practices now require that the harvester replant. The county roads are largely financed by timber receipts.

St. Louis, Missouri, 1972. I am leaving on a trip to British Columbia for the St. Louis firm that purchased my father's business. I am proud working for the world's largest producer of particleboard, manufacturing over one million square feet each and every day. Our plants in Wright City, Union, and Sedalia Missouri along with fifteen other locations consume all of this in addition to forty boxcars purchased each week from

other suppliers. Our Oregon wood is going into more than half of the 850,000 mobile homes produced this year by way of underlayment, wall paneling, cabinet stock, and hollow core doors. Wood fiber is the most cost effective structural building material available. And it is renewable, too! But I'm going to British Columbia to finalize the sale of a closed stud mill and 320 acres of ground to a Vancouver condominium developer capitalizing on the newly opened Whistler Mountain Ski Area in the Garibaldi National Forest. Sadly too, as my wife and I lived there for a spell in 1965 while producing 100,000 board feet a day of cross arms, studs, and ties. Hemlock-Balsam-Spruce; western white woods on St. Louis lumber invoices.

Houston, Texas, 1982. My wife and I are attending the National Association of Home Builders convention. We see samples of new production of oriented strand particleboard (OSB) made from wood scraps with strength to allow its use in subfloors and roof sheathing, replacing the higher cost plywood made from whole trees now used in most stick built homes. Although the 1973 oil embargo and demise of the mobile home business had extinguished the rapidly growing St. Louis company I worked for ten years ago, I am enjoying being a St. Louis Homebuilder actually using the products my whole life has produced. It is marvelous. But the Houston building market is sick and the outlook here is terrible!

Now, in 1993, I am vacationing in beautiful Oregon. My wife is climbing the South Sister, a 10,358 foot mountain in the Cascade Range about a hundred miles north of that planting forty years ago. In preparation, we backpacked, hiked and picnicked through several short trails along the Coast Range, in timberland that had been logged in the early 1900's. The firs and spruce were majestic, towering over 200 feet above us. Along the trails and in the campgrounds, old stumps, cut above the flare, were evidence of a long ago harvest. Most would not notice as the cars at the trailhead bore out of state plates. I am at the base camp with my nine year old Oregon born niece, teaching her how to

recognize a fir and a pine; what the difference is between a Western Hemlock and a Mountain Hemlock and how one can identify a Lodgepole Pine at a glance because of its two needles, or a White Pine with five. She and her generation will be the explorers of Oregon.

Waldport, Oregon, 1993. I am stopping at the Siuslaw National Forest District Ranger Station to find out why so many mills are dismantled and why there are so few cold decks (stockpiled logs awaiting mill processing) at the mills that remain. Shocking results: In the entire Siuslaw National Forest, only 48 million board feet of harvest is scheduled for 1994, and half of that is expected to be held up due to protests. The resulting harvest will supply only one mill's production for the year. From 1981 to 1991, an average annual volume of 297 million feet was harvested. The Spotted Owl and the Marbled Murrelet have struck again. The highly touted President Clinton "Forest Summit" resulted in directions that harvests be reduced to one quarter of previous levels. Seventy thousand jobs are gone. Over 90 percent of the Siuslaw's 2500 miles of roads were originally constructed for timber harvest. This system of roads was designed, constructed and maintained primarily to support an annual timber harvest of 350 million board feet. It is expected that over half of those miles will be allowed to become impassable, and much of the rest will be converted to trails. Long term prospects for harvest improvement are dismal.

NAHB has come out in favor of extending the Endangered Species Act, although with some changes. It will not make a significant difference. The Act is just a tool for those wanting to change the character of the fruited plain. The witchcraft of "environmentally correct political thinking" has rung the bell, closed the book, and blown out the candle on Oregon. Oregon's Fifth District U.S. Representative Mike Kopetski, announced last week a change in the pending federal budget reconciliation bill that is intended to give Oregon counties additional funding to make up for the loss of federal timber funding. $270 million

would be disbursed from federal funds over the next ten years which represents 85 percent of revenues received from timber sales from 1986 through 1990. The percentage would drop 3% each year over the next ten years to give the timber counties the opportunity to develop economies independent of the timber industry. In 1994, the counties are expected to receive $51 million. This doesn't sound like a recovery plan; it sounds like a welfare plan. The old Oregon as a timber producing area is finished.

My father is gone; his mills are gone; his jobs are gone along with seventy thousand others that depended on the National Forest harvest. My niece is coming along -- in the new Oregon. A place to play, to visit, to retire to. A truly enjoyable vacation land. Perhaps it will work.

St. Louis, Missouri, 1993. Second in forested acreage among the lower forty eight states is Georgia, Southern Pine country and mostly privately owned. Most of our lumber comes from the South, but its price will be affected by the lack of harvest in Oregon. And the South does not have the Douglas Fir with its superior qualities for subfloors. Western white woods do not grow in the South and we will miss the straightness and strength of these fine framing woods. Let us not forget the extreme price rise we suffered in the spring of this year. From $219/mbf to $518/mbf, FOB mill, west coast, equated to $4,000 per house on median production. At the time, we estimated that 22,000 St. Lousians were moved to the unqualified category of home ownership or rental ability. Through the help of Clinton Necronomics and the slowing "recovery", lack of demand has forced the prices back to the middle two hundreds.

We must look forward to a new way of building. Steel studs and joists for framing, oriented particle boards for subfloors and roofs, and Southern Pine for the lumber we just need to have. It is wishful thinking to plan otherwise. I predict next spring will bring prices back to the $400/mbf range at west coast plants; we can add $75 for freight. A challenge for all of us.