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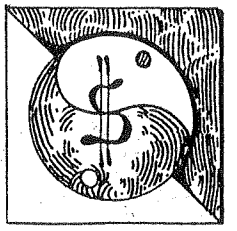
Hoedads



article by Greg Nagle

I'm going to work. It's 7 am, and the grey light of dawn is just beginning to creep over the hills. Sometimes it's raining to beat hell and I just can't believe in my foggy, half-crazed mind that I'm actually going out in it. On those mornings, a long ride is the best way to prepare your mind for the inevitable. But all rides end, and the last mile up to the work site goes by all too fast.

Still, there is a slim hope that the ground will be frozen, or that some bizarre accident has happened to the Forest Service inspector. But no, I realize that in a few minutes I'll be strapped into my treebag, hoedad in hand, descending into the yawning depths of an immense clearcut.

But maybe on that same afternoon I'll be flying over the slopes, slapping in my last fifty trees with the sun sinking behind the mountains. Then I'll think this job is about as close to happiness as I'll ever get in this person's country. That's what treeplanting is; taking the good with the bad, or in planter's jargon, taking the gravy with the slash.

I'm a Hoedad, one of about three hundred active members of a forestry labor contracting coop based in Eugene, Oregon. The numbers fluctuate up and down depending on the season - in 1978, 520 people worked with us. The purpose of the organization is to procure forestry work and provide a framework within which our members can earn a living. Primarily we do tree-planting contracts for federal land management agencies, the bulk of it with the Forest Service.

Working in a coop may have peculiar disadvantages, but it makes a job like this a lot easier.

The basic structure of Hoedads is the crews. They are work brigades organized as independent units within the larger organization (Hoedads). Hoedads is essentially a federation of crews which maintain a collective administrative and bidding apparatus.

The names of the crews reflect a line between fantasy and reality sometimes even we can't decipher: *Potluck, Red Star, Full Moon Rising, Cheap Thrills, Thumb, Cougar Mountain, Different Strokes, Mudsharks, Natural Wonders, P.f. Flyers, Logrollers.*

The editor circle that line, not me!

Logroller Crew, Spring 1978

As their names would suggest, crews have different personalities. Curiously, despite changes in personnel, many crews manage to retain their character. It's as if some subtle sense is passed unwittingly from the old planters to the new.

Each crew has the equipment and capacity to function on its own in the field. As of now, there are eleven crews, with from 18-30 active members in each. In addition, there are temporary crews which come together seasonally to fight fires and select seed cone.

I'm a member of Red Star crew. If anything can be said about us, it's that we have too many hot-heads and a history of strong, political orientation. Since I joined, I've seen over 50 people pass through the crew. But until recently, we actually had one of the largest proportions of older planters of any crew. Now, with only four years experience, I'm already one of the oldest members of the coop.

People move in and out of Hoedads pretty fast. One reason is that treeplanting, even in its sweetest moments, can be be grueling, body-wracking work. One person who played a key role in organizing my crew at age twenty, was disabled by twenty-four. Over his years of planting, he had literally managed to pull his shoulder away from his rib-cage by the constant lifting and swinging of a heavy hoedad. Though such injuries are rare, other planters come down with back problems or develop tendonitis.

Another reason people leave is that treeplanting is a sporadic, nomadic occupation. It's not conducive to keeping a home or raising a family. Hoedads are, for the most part, young and single.

Since the members are constantly changing, it's almost impossible to generalize anything about people's politics. On some crews a solid, political commitment to both the crew and the coops is asked before a prospective member is considered. On other crews, the only criteria is that one be a friend of a member. Over time, on an issue like sexism, a common focus does develop. On other issues, radically different notions on what the coop is for has sometimes led to corrosive tension between crew members and between crews.

Equalizing the balance between women and men is official policy, though the depth of commitment varies from person to person. 40% of our members are women, a percentage far higher than the forestry industry as a whole, and women have yet to break into woods work in substantial numbers.

Hoedads, as an organization, was started in the fall of 1973 by a group of planters who already had their own small coop crew. In a fit of idealism, they expanded to take on and train 150 people into six crews. Several of those crews didn't survive the first incredible weeks. But over the years, more crews were taken on and our size peaked in 1976.

None of the original organizers are still in the coop, and the faces of those who can tell the stories of those first few months grow fewer as the seasons pass.

The operation of planting crews is relatively simple. That partly accounts for our ability to expand so fast and maintain our size. Due to the large amount of work being put out for contract bidding by the government the last few years, our income has been rising steadily. The consciousness of money profoundly affects everyone. Some older workers feel that new members don't realize what it was like before, when wages were lower and times harder.

SMITTY'S POEM

the planters get older;
their backs make them talk
of the good old days.
yurt fires and coffee steam
loosens the stories.

you young monkeys get your pay
without waiting nine weeks,
never slept in a crummy
for ten, fifteen days
lemme tell ya...

spirit of adventure
lightly salted with the spirit
of revolution and a pinch
of Spirit -- who's your sister?
who's your brother? well,
maybe nobody can stand you, maybe
you're too outrageous, but it's your
crew and they love you
you're in the hoedads now.

tale tellers dispensing tradition
to the yearlings around the stove
are doing a job, it's part of the work
lets the yearlings know
a wet bad bloody-fingered day
is out there waiting in the slash
and it helps to have brothers and sisters.

do it for the love
more than for the money
no matter what you hear.

do it for the love
more than the money
or all these yurt tales
will be bones
bones, gathering in the shelter
bones, aching bones
talking, whispering
of the good old days.

The way Hoedads operates begins with the crews. It's here that most members meet, opinions are heard, and the issues discussed in finer detail.

Based on ongoing discussions, crews send a representative to a weekly council meeting made up of one voting representative from each crew. The council constitutes the Coop's board of directors. Decisions made by the crews and the council are explained in a weekly newsletter distributed to the members.

Technically less powerful, but the most active decision-making body, is the bidding committee. It also is made up of one rep from each crew. This committee carries on the weekly process of bidding on the stream of contracts which come into the office. At the height of the bidding season, this committee may meet in two or even three long sessions a week to decide ongoing strategy and allocate work. Since the primary purpose of Hoedads is to procure work, it's to the bidding committee that the most active involvement in administration seems to go. The council has the right to overrule the committee, yet rarely does.

The survival of the Coop depends on how successful we are in bidding and winning work. Since we work under a variety of conditions, and in almost every state in the West, this takes a lot of experience. You can't depend on luck.

There's not much which can beat traveling over the Rockies in the spring, hitting a contract, working hard and moving on. During a three month season, my crew may work as many as four contracts from the Bitterroot Mountains in Idaho to the Bighorn Range in Wyoming. You can see a lot of country, and after a few years, you get a sense of the land. Sometimes I almost can visualize all the different mountain ranges in those vast stretches.

If there is one common denominator between crews, it's that they all ride around in crummies. A crummy is a crew rig used for transport to the worksite. There are certain other crude habits which crews also hold in common, but this one is basic. In the crummy, all things are equal, and it is here that you find yourself sandwiched against someone you tried strenuously to avoid all day on the hill.

Red Star used to cruise around in a battered blue relic sporting a radio antenna and a pair of big, red stars painted on the doors. Those red stars must have confused some of the locals. One night, while my crew was living it up in a bar in Montana, someone took the trouble to loosen the lug nuts on the rear wheel. That courtesy almost wiped the whole crew off a mountain road several hours later when the wheel flew off. Oh, those memories! The crummy finally died a righteous death on the way across the desert last spring, and now rests in a trash-strewn lot, behind a shabby building in downtown Eugene.

The most important decision-making body is the quarterly general meeting. All member are invited, with from one to two hundred attending. Here, general policy is developed and decisions of unusual importance are made. A week prior to the meeting, a newspaper is printed ("Together") which discusses current issues. Generally about 30 people contribute, and reading it is one of the best ways to sense the pulse of the coop.

General meetings are the place to see the real dialog. We go on for two long days, plodding through an endless agenda. But we always manage to grind to a finish by the night of the second day.

On the night of the first day, we throw a party with a hired band and at least ten kegs of beer. Hundreds of people turn out for these quarterly parties. Perhaps they're the lure.

At the general membership meetings, eight people are elected to serve a year-long term as officers of the coop. Usually they work in the office full-time - carrying on day-to-day contract and crew coordination, keeping the books, working on political projects. There is also a fluctuating number of field workers who staff the office on a part-time basis.

Office work is paid at $7.00 an hour, a wage comparable to what an experienced planter makes over the period of a year. Some projects, such as political lobbying and some research, are also funded by council if deemed relevant to the coop's interests. All of these administrative functions are supported through a deduction from the members' checks. This deduction has averaged about 8% the last few years.

On any projects needing really large amounts of capital, we probably couldn't get enough people to agree. Some people view this inability to branch out as an indication we are too large and organizationally inflexible. Nevertheless, some people, mostly Hoedads, have been able to secure small seed loans for new coops. Over the years, this has added up to a sizable chunk of money, and helped several useful and ongoing projects. The general consensus, however, seems not to lend money outside the coop.

Part of what we do with that money is to provide the bonding we post on each job we bid. Above and beyond the bonding is a cash fund. In a meeting, three years ago, there was a proposal to use the fund as capital to start other cooperative businesses. Some of that has happened, though there are Hoedads who would rather have taxation reduced and the money available for personal use.

Camp scenes vary from crew to crew. Some, like mine, maintain collective eating and shelter scenes, while others depend upon the individual to provide their own food and shelter. A typical Hoedad camp usually has too many dogs and a motley collection of trailers and buses. Some people live only in tents, a grim choice during the wet winter months. Teepees were the rage a few years ago, but now the ultimate in tree planter comfort is the yurt, a portable structure which originated in Mongolia.

My crew has a large, remodeled school bus with a kitchen and eight bunks. We got the bus one fall three years ago after living through a monsoon in Idaho in the sodden comfort of individual pup tents. The story of that contract is an epic in itself, but suffice it to say, the bear didn't eat all the food. Had we not been so joined in our collective misery, we would never have bought the bus. Sometimes with twelve people in there, collectively groping our way through the long winter months toward the spring, one ceases to deeply love the elbows digging into one's sides. Now we have a 22 ft. diameter yurt to supplement the bus. Life gets easier year to year.

Working on a crew can build tensions as well as friendships over time. Even when everyone's intentions are the best, the grind of treeplanting, the constant rain and cold wear you down. By the end of the season, some people can do without each other for a good, long time.

With all the individuals and crews which make up Hoedads, it shouldn't be any surprise how many different ideas there are about what we are. John Ogden, our principal treasurer, offers this opinion:

"Hoedads wasn't created in our own self-interest, but...with a vision of worker-controlled cooperatives dominating an industry that traditionally has been subject to the sleazy greed of labor contractors. What is the role of Hoedads in the treeplanting industry? Do we see ourselves as basically a small business? Or do we see ourselves as the vanguard of the cooperative movement in the Northwest?"

Although Hoedads is the largest of the Northwestern forestry coops, there have been a number of others successfully started over the years, responding to the ever-increasing volume of reforestation work in all Western states, particularly west of the Cascades. Vast stands of prime, lower elevation forests supply year-round work critical to our success.

There are presently eleven planting coops in the Northwest, grossing close to four million dollars a year. We pose a significant threat to the capitalist contractors which still perform the bulk of the work.

In order to protect our interests and further worker-owned businesses, the forestry coops have formed an organization, the Northwest Forest Workers Association. The NWFWA represents fifteen member groups, and over one thousand cooperative forest workers in Oregon, Washington, and northern California.

The project which has occupied the most time for NWFWA is our struggle against the use of foresty chemicals. Several of them contain dioxin, used to defoliate large areas of Vietnam, and now used here to kill back brush and hardwoods to increase the growth of conifer trees. A cooperative research team, funded by Hoedads and NWFWA, is carrying out an extensive study designed to both test the effectiveness of herbicides and identify alternatives to their use.

Another issue we have been dealing with is the legal status of cooperatives. Although it's possible in Oregon to legally incorporate as a profit-making cooperative, our legal standing remains vague. We have been involved in a series of battles in the legislature and the courts. The key issue at this point is whether we are subject to a ridiculously expensive, state run insurance company which provides mandatory coverage for on-the-job accidents. The Oregon chapter of NWFWA has created a fund to lobby the state legislature in an attempt to change the laws. This is an extremely tedious issue, and has been following us around like a disease. Yet it seems likely that any coops which reach our scale or larger will find themselves dealing with legal problems. We hope that Hoedads having to retain a lawyer is not our only indication that we are coming of age.

Herbicides are issues which affect coops and workers directly. But for many Hoedads, the mundane issues of politics and the legislature seem obscure. For most people, the heart of being a member is the way we live and work together.

Greg Nagle, like the rest of us, would rather be in the gravy than the slash. Over the years, he's taken his turn at both.