

First Cone Collection

By Don Pigott

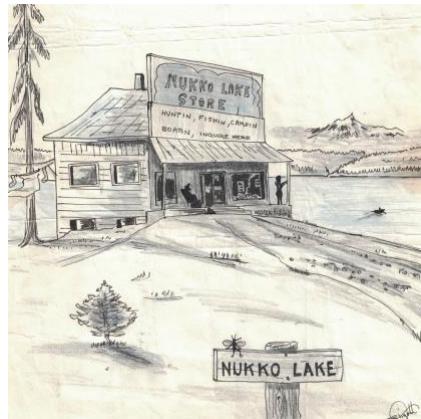
In the Spring of 1968, I was between my first and second year of forestry at Selkirk College in Castlegar. Due to an Interior wide forest industry strike that year, jobs were hard to get, but I had the good fortune to land a job with a Forest Service marking crew in Quesnel . For a few weeks, I worked with the somewhat legendary Jay Leak and Floyd Tugman, who taught me things that my mother probably wished they hadn't. The ranger who had hired me, Ed Hewitt, had taken me aside prior to actually working with Jay and "Tuggie," to warn me that no assistant had survived their tutelage for very long before, as they could be somewhat "abrasive." As it turned out however, we hit it off very well, and after a few introductory social evenings in the Jack of Clubs bar in Wells, we became good friends. In fact I was very disappointed when Bill Young, the District Forester decided I was needed to work out of the Prince George office. Ed Hewitt protested to no avail, because I was the only person up to that point, who had been able to survive with the dynamic duo.

So I loaded my rusty 1956 Dodge Station wagon (which was also my place of residence) and moved to Prince George. For the first few days I worked out of the Ranger District Office on Third St., and parked my "mobile home" overnight in the RCMP parking lot. On weekends in particular, this was the safest place to overnight, and you could get free coffee in the morning. After the first week, I was shipped out to help Tom Bayer the Assistant Ranger and sole Forest Service employee at the tiny office at Chief- Nukko Lake, about 40 miles north of Prince George, and off the Hart highway some distance. I spent the rest of the summer working with Tom, and Cliff Laboucan, the other Assistant Ranger for Ranger District #4. The Chief Lake area was a quilt-work of forests and farms and widely-scattered homes. I'm sure that in every farm households at least one of the partners worked at another job as well, usually logging related. There were still numerous small two-man sawmills scattered in the bush, in addition to the mid-sized ones such as the Lapointe Bros mill. Most of the smaller mills were powered by old T-120 Chrysler flat-head motors, and part of my job was to visit them to make sure they had adequate fire fighting equipment, or issue burning permits.

The hub of the community was the Chief Lake store and the nearby Community Centre. The store sold most of the essentials for a bachelor. (Kraft Dinner, wieners, beans, and instant rice.)



Nukko Lake Ranger Station, 1968



At Nukko Lake my living accommodations improved immensely. The main part of the office was about 24 feet square. A doorway led to a small storage room where the previous assistant had installed a cot, complete with a mosquito net frame. This proved entirely necessary as the office was nestled between Nukko Lake and Swamp Lake, with some of the finest mosquito breeding ground known to man. The building was extremely air-tight and you could feel the pressure in your ear drums when you closed the door after entering. You had to be quick though, as hordes of mosquitos would follow in behind you.

There was also a double burner hotplate, and a vintage 110 volt oven which resembled a small laboratory oven. I once tried to cook a small roasting chicken in the oven, but even after several hours on "Max", the chicken was more or less raw on the inside. There was an outhouse behind the office, and the lake was warm enough for bathing. Tom, his wife and kids lived closer to the lake, about 400 yards away, and they had me over several times for dinner during the first week. That was a treat! I had been batching for over a year, and his wife's cooking was of the same caliber as my mother's.

The work was quite varied and almost always enjoyable. Tom and Cliff were both easy going guys, and I would work with one of them one week, then the other the following week, or depending on where I was needed the most. In addition to checking bush mills and fire equipment, we laid out the odd Timber Sale boundary, and we had to monitor the land clearing for a new gas pipeline crossing diagonally through the district. We also had to assess thousands of acres that had been scarified. Planting after harvesting had not been practiced to the same degree in the Prince George Region as it had on the coast at that time. "Scarification" or preparation of the seed bed, either prior to harvesting, or more commonly after harvesting, was the norm. Large cats with rippers would attempt to expose mineral soil, and theoretically the following year a cone crop would occur, and seed would fall into the nicely prepared beds. Unfortunately however, crops had been infrequent, and we could often establish hundreds of plots without finding any regeneration. I was a reasonably good draftsman, so I was often delegated to do the mapping of scarification plots, traversed cut blocks, trespasses, and sometimes fires.

In my free time, I was eyed suspiciously by the locals. You can never be too careful around government employees..... For the first week or so it was a little lonely. Tom and his wife kept very busy with their kids, and it was somewhat cliquey community like most small communities are. On my nineteenth birthday, I splurged and had a nice fish & chip dinner after having worked in the Prince George office for the day. Upon returning to Nukko Lake, I was visited by one of the local lads about my age, who invited me to a party at the home of one of the nearby residents. I was thrilled! I quickly went to the lake and had a bath, shaved, put on my cleanest clothes, and proceeded to the party. I knocked on the door. The door opened, and I was invited in. The main room was almost devoid of any furniture except for the chairs that ringed the room. Hardly a word was spoken by the 40 or so people that sat in the chairs, but 40 pairs of eyes watched my

every move as I was taken around the room, and introduced one by one to the attendees. Most of them were around my age, or slightly younger. There were a number of older chaperones, or parents as well. Fortunately the music started shortly after, and gradually as I talked to several of the young ladies and lads, the guards came down, and most conceded that I might be OK.....

After this ice breaker, my social life, and my diet improved dramatically. Apparently some of the moms liked me. I was new blood, and I had a fairly good job. It was not uncommon to have a nice young lady deliver an apple pie, or be invited to over for dinner. At first, some of the males of my age considered me the competition. That evaporated after a few parties, when I was able to display my unique ability to inhale three beers in succession in 20 seconds. This gave me some celebrity status, and I was occasionally showcased, or used to impress outsiders. There was often a dance at the Chief Lake Hall on Saturday night. At that time the drinking regulations were very stringent, and technically, drinking at dances was not allowed. There were however, lots of bottles in brown paper bags under tables, or you could go outside to get some "fresh air." It was not uncommon for there to be a punch-up at these dances, and it usually involved the same cast of characters.

On the 8th of August in that year all of the Ranger staff went to the Prince George office for one of the first ever cone collection workshops. I can remember walking into the office that morning and hearing for the first time, the trademark laugh of Bruce Devitt who was to be our instructor. As a side note, when I was cross country skiing at Mt Washington with Mike Steeves in a blinding snowstorm twenty years later, I heard that same unmistakable laugh, and although we could not see him, we knew immediately who it was.

In the workshop we learned that this was one of the best spruce cone crops in many years, and because of our natural regeneration problems in the past, we had to make some large collections. We received instructions on cone sampling, seed evaluation, how to organize collections, and proper handling.

Cliff and I were given a 22 cal. rifle to sample cones in our district. It was the cheapest, and cheesiest, plastic stocked gun I have seen to this day. It had open sights, and on our first cone recce on August 16th, we had so little success with the weapon that we resorted to falling several trees with an axe. The two best crops in our area were located at Mossvale Lake and Loon Lake. The Mossvale Lake area was the most attractive as there was an old sawmill site close by with rudimentary bunkhouses, and a cookhouse that was still fully functional. It still had the traditional bee hive burner as well. A good dry place to store cones. There was an old trapper who lived in one of the buildings named Martin Schaeffer. He was not there for the first week of our collection, but arrived somewhat unfortunately for the last few days. (I'll explain later).

There was a great party at the Pruden household on the night of the 16th. It lasted until 5:00 in the morning. One of the Pruden's boys still inebriated, drove me all the way to Williams Lake. I had to go to Castlegar to write a supplemental Math exam at Selkirk College. From there, I hitch-hiked non-stop to Rossland, and spent Sunday night with the parents of my best-friend Ken MacAulay. The next morning (Monday) I hitched to Castlegar and wrote the exam, which I failed again, and got a ride with Bill Guthrie, a fellow student to Roger's Pass where he was working. I slept overnight in his car, and started hitching early Tuesday, arriving in Nukko Lake late in the evening.

Hitch-hiking was a lot easier in those days. People were more inclined to pick up young adults and rarely did you encounter any problems. During my two years at Selkirk College, and when I first started working, I was too broke to afford gas if I had a vehicle, so it was my primary method of travel.

On Wednesday morning, August 21st. Tom and I went to Prince George to pick up our "crew". The crew consisted of a faller and nine members of George Meent's juvenile boy's baseball team. These were boys 14-16 years old, not a lot younger than I was really. The other districts used

inmates from Prince George jail, and as it turned out they were the lucky ones. Some, but not all of the boys on my baseball team probably eventually ended up in the PG jail, with the exception of George Meent's kids who were as well-mannered as George. Tom picked up the cook "Bob" and the provisions for the week.



My cone picking crew.



The camp. Photo taken from the bee hive burner.

Cliff and I picked up the faller at Island Cache, and we then had to take him to a pawn shop to retrieve his power saw... hmm. Island Cache was a sketchy area of Prince George noted for illegal drinking establishments and some other unsavory activities.

We drove past Nukko and Chief Lake for some 40 miles to the Mossvale Lake camp. While the cook and the crew settled in, Cliff and I took the faller to the stand we were going to be collecting. This particular stand was in a pending cut block. Our plan was to fall several good looking trees in advance of starting the picking crew, and in an area that would be well away from where they were working. The faller put in an undercut on the first tree, then the back cut.... When the tree started to go, the faller fled past me at a high rate of speed, almost knocking me over.

Now, I had not been around falling activity very much, nor felled many trees, certainly not trees of this size, but this did seem somewhat non-professional. This performance was repeated several times, and he did manage to put several trees on the ground with good cone crops and a good start for the next day.

That evening for dinner we were treated to a feast. Despite being rough around the edges, Bob knew how to cook! He was a veteran cook of the armed forces, multiple bush camps, and fire camps. For me, as I was living much of the time on my own cooking, this was truly a treat! The next day the crew commenced to pick the cones from the felled trees, while the faller felled trees in an area at a safe distance away. All was going well, and the crew was very enthusiastic. The faller did well until the early afternoon when his saw broke down and he needed to make the long journey to Prince George to get another saw. He and Cliff left that afternoon and that was the last we saw of that faller... When Cliff went to pick him up in the morning he was nowhere to be found. Cliff returned with a Forest Service power saw the next day and felled enough trees to keep everyone busy. However, he was no faller, and not in particularly good shape for this type of work.

Tom Bayer came up the next day and felled for half a day. He was a better faller than Cliff, but he had a bad back and that was enough for him.

He left the saw with me when he returned to Nukko Lake that evening, and I felled a few trees. The spruce trees were very tall, straight, and averaged between 12" and 24" diameter. I had never fallen a tree over 6" diameter in my life, and certainly never had any training. I had observed the other fellows falling and tried to follow their example. I managed to get several trees on the ground without killing myself, or anyone else but it was certainly stressful.

The next day Tom brought "Dave" up. Dave was the father of a kid I hung out with in Nukko Lake, and he was a jack of all trades. He could run a skidder, cat, sawmill or drive the school bus, or snowplow. And best of all,... he could fall timber....

Watching Dave fall a tree was like watching an artist. His saw was almost a part of him, and while he was putting in the back cut, he casually slipped in the wedge in one motion, and gave it a few taps with his axe. He always backed away from the falling tree cautiously without panic. Every tree went where it was supposed to, and his production was fantastic. It was too good to be true! And it didn't last..... Late in the day Dave got a stick in the eye and that was it. He had to return to Prince George to have it removed. The following day, I started falling again. I hung up a few trees which I turned into firewood.

While I was falling, the crew was on their own for some periods of time, and the luster of cone picking was becoming less appealing. Also, there developed a bit of bad blood between two of the boys, and there were a few fights. In the evening, one of the boys found a very dead weasel in a trap and put it in the sleeping bag of his rival. One cold morning one of the terrorist decided to light a fire using a few cone sacks for starter. Fortunately they were able to put the fire out quickly before it got out of hand.

At this point, Martin Schaeffer the old trapper, returned from his summer holiday, (allegedly with his female accountant) with a winter's supply of food, supplies, and unfortunately, whiskey. Bob the cook quickly became his new best friend. Once this relationship was established meals went to hell, if indeed they were prepared at all.



Martin Schaefer.

On the upside, the ranger, George Meents came up with two seasoned fallers from La Pointe Bros Sawmill's. Production now exceeded the ability of the crew to pick the cones. After a couple of days we had achieved our quota, and we packed up and headed for Nukko Lake. Bob was drunk as a skunk, and fortunately was riding with Cliff. However, Cliff had accidentally left his Forest Service radio on and for 1½ hours everyone in the region heard Bob babbling on. Cliff did eventually realize this, just in time for us to get a call that informed us that a slash fire had escaped on a permit I had issued.

The permit was actually only a campfire permit that I had issued to a pretty young girl that had wanted an excuse to visit me at the office. Her mother interpreted that as permission to light up several slash piles in a cut block they had finished the year before.

Fortunately, it was controlled by several of the local farmers and loggers. However Tom did give me a bit of a lecture, then promptly invited me to dinner and a few beer.

My summer job was coming to a close, and I had mixed feeling about returning to school. It was a beautiful area, the people in the Forest Service and the people in the community were wonderful. I was given the opportunity to stay if I wanted, but ultimately decided to return to college.

One of the last things we had to do was tally up the cost of the cone collection. I remember Jenjii Konishi telling me that it was one of the most expensive collections in the history of the Forest Service! Fortunately, I think I have improved my record since then.

First Cone Collection
Seedlot 1502
Mossvale Lake August 21st to August 30th 1968
41.5 Hl