

The First Contract

(For Yellow Point Propagation)

In the Spring of 1982 I had been working in MacMillan Bloedel's Forest Research Division for almost 13 years. The company had been very good to me. I had excellent co-workers, bosses and managers. In 1977 the manager, Dave Handley, arranged for me to go to Norway on a one-year exchange to work on and study tree improvement abroad. When I returned, I became the company's Tree Improvement supervisor, which came with a lot of responsibility. It was really challenging and I loved it. Unfortunately, my former direct supervisor had quit and returned to the US. He had been a great mentor and friend. His replacement, however, was another story. He was from Texas and used to a strict hierarchy, and had no concept of team work. Fortunately, the Division manager managed to keep me somewhat remote from him and gave me lots of special projects like establishing the first forest company tree seedling nursery. In 1981 there was a reorganization in Forestry Division and my staff and I were absorbed into LUPAT (Land Use Planning and Advisory Team).

It was an odd move in my opinion, and it soon became apparent that the word 'team' was not really appropriate. There were strict rules about the reporting structure, countless meetings, and little or no opportunity for innovation. I became more and more dissatisfied with my position and in early 1982, Sheila and I decided I would leave the company and start a seed collection and tree improvement consulting company. The year we lived in Norway everyone had told me that the need for BC conifer seeds from BC was endless. I decided to wait until the fall to see what the cone crops looked like before making any rash decisions. Then came Black Friday.....April 23rd. The company was going through some tough economic times and it became apparent there were going to be some significant reductions in staff.

On that Friday afternoon, Bill, the manager of LUPAT came out to our seed orchard office, and I was terminated, along with two others of my staff. Bill said they might have to hire me to temporarily fill in some of the gaps that would be created by the terminations. At that moment, I gave him my business card. He was shocked!

The terms of my severance were excellent. As well as a generous cash settlement, I was given an office downtown with a secretary and word processor at my disposal. Free phone and mail! It was a great way to put out feelers for contracts and let companies know that I was willing to provide services related to cone and seed collection, and tree improvement.

Unfortunately, the downturn was not limited to MacMillan Bloedel. Most of the companies were in the same boat. In the short term the prospects were poor, but there was interest in potential cone collections in the fall. I did get one job offer from Forestry Canada to be a coordinator for a program to top up wages of forest workers who had been laid off (Employment Bridging Assistance Program). It was tempting, but I did not want to be a desk jockey.

Unfortunately for one of my former assistants, Gerhard Gerke, this downturn came just as he graduated from Washington State University with a degree in forestry. Bad timing! We talked about it and he was able to work for a time at his Dad's nursery until the fall when hopefully we would be able to find some forestry work.

In late July I got a call from Martin Albrecht who was the Forest Service Seed Production Officer for the BC Interior. He wanted to know if we were interested in collecting cones from 150 Douglas fir parent trees selected by six forest companies in the Southern Interior for the provincial tree improvement program. On the coast we had selected hundreds of parent trees of all the commercial tree species, and spent weeks shooting both scion and cones from these parents. I readily agreed and sent Martin a quote which he accepted almost immediately.

The parent trees were located in the following general areas;

General Area	Company	# trees
Heffley Creek- Louis Creek	Balco	30
Clearwater Timber	Clearwater Timber	25
Vavenby	Weyerhaeuser	20
Lumby	Weyerhaeuser	15
Lumby	Crown Zellerbach	30
Shuswap	Riverside	15
Shuswap	Tolko	15

Martin estimated that we would be able to start shooting and collecting by Aug 16th.

Gerhard and I made preparations in advance, getting some cone sacks, tags, etc., and we bought two new Savage 22 rifles from Johnson's Hardware in Nanaimo. They held clips of 10, and we bought additional clips, as well as 5000 rounds of ammunition. We both already had 30-30 rifles if we needed to get serious, and an older 22 that I had. We also borrowed a small 90 cc dirt bike from MacMillan Bloedel in case we had issues getting to any of the trees in my 2-wheel drive pick-up. We convinced one of our former co-workers, JP Apperson, to come along to assist us.

On August 16 we drove to the Kalamalka Research Station and met with Martin and Paul Birzens. They gave us the maps that had been submitted by the licensees for the parent tree selections, and the best contact information for each of the licensee in case there was any confusion about the parent tree locations. The companies had received compensation for their efforts.

After leaving Martin and Paul, there was some daylight left so we decided to take a look at one of the parent trees, just outside Canoe. Almost all of the selections were road-side. I think the only criterion was a nice-looking tree with cones. Rarely, if ever did we have to go more than 100 metres off the road. The first tree was an eye-opener. The Interior Douglas firs were far bushier, but fortunately usually shorter, than the Coastal Douglas fir we were used to. The problem with the bushiness was that it was difficult to get the top branches, which were concentrated with cones, to the ground without getting hung up. After a lot of frustration, we managed to get enough cones off the tree, and then headed to

Norm and Val Blazina's place in Tappen for dinner and to stay overnight. Norm was an old forestry classmate of mine, and we had an open invitation to drop in and stay overnight anytime, which we did when convenient.

The following day we went to Lumby and met with a couple of Crown Zellerbach foresters who went with us to shoot a couple of trees. Things went better, but we still struggled getting branches to the ground and usually left a couple of hundred pounds of branches hanging up in the tree.

After we had done a dozen or so trees, however, we worked out a system. We would start shooting and removing the lower branches first to create a path for the upper cone-bearing branches to free fall to the ground. Fortunately, the Interior Douglas fir branches are quite brittle and even if they did not break off clean, they would bend over enough to create a path. Occasionally, if the crop was very light, we would shoot the top 3-5 feet off with a 30-30. This usually took 3 or 4 shots.



Branches are first shot off starting at the bottom to create a path for the branches with cones near the top to be able to reach the ground.

I remember well one tree in particular near Cherryville. It was in a road junction and less than 30 metres off the road. There was sparse vegetation on the ground, but there were literally hundreds of empty shell casing scattered around the parent tree. We heard a rumor later that there had been a "shooting" workshop for licensees to show them how to collect scion from parent trees. (Maybe that is why it was contracted out to us!).

We worked for several days in the Vernon-Mabel Lake-Enderby area and collected cones from half of the trees. It was convenient to stay in Vernon and be able to drop the cones off at the Research Station regularly. Also, there were a couple of really nice bars for evening entertainment. We were also getting a bit low on ammunition and able to stock up at a local wholesaler.

After completing the cone collections in that region, we headed up Highway 5 to Louis Creek where we met Steve Pelton, one of the foresters for Balco. We had not received the maps previously for the Balco selections from Martín. When we saw the maps we were horrified! They were hand-drawn sketches that only a local would be able to decipher. When Steve saw them, he was also shocked and embarrassed. He immediately called in one of the technicians who had made the selections, and said that he would be working with us as a guide for the next few days.

Rocky was a very nice First Nations fellow who turned out to be invaluable. We would meet him at the office each morning and he would lead us to each tree in his pick-up. A few trees were on the other side of the North Thompson River and we took the ferry across. A couple of the trees were close to homes and we climbed these with belt and spurs.

One day we got notified at the Balco office that one of the local District Forest Service foresters wanted to meet us on-site when we were shooting a tree. Steve warned us that he was a stickler for detail, but we made arrangements to meet at the office and he followed us to our first tree.

It turned out it was less than 30' from the edge of a Forest Service road. The tree had a very light crop and getting enough cones was going to be challenging. I explained to him that in cases like this, albeit we didn't like to do it, we would shoot the top off the tree. He seemed to understand, and asked how many shots it would take. I said one. JP and Gerhard stifled chuckles. I rested my 30-30 on the hood of the truck and took a shot.... The top immediately detached and plummeted to the ground. JP and Gerhard had to turn away to hide their laughter. The Forest Service guy was most impressed, and seemed satisfied that we knew what we were doing, and returned to his office. We laughed for an hour after in the truck.

One day when we picked up Rocky at the office, Steve mentioned that if we were going up to a tree on Cedar Creek we would pass a tiny lake (puddle) he called Bitchy Lake, that had good fishing. So that day after dropping Rocky off at the office at 4:30 we headed up there to get one last tree for the day. It was an easy shoot and on our return we stopped at Bitchy Lake. Gerhard and JP got three nice rainbows. We were staying at a motel in Barriere and really weren't interested in cooking, so we gave the fish to the owner of the motel. She was thrilled. We then proceeded to the Station Restaurant where we consumed a huge Greek dinner. We returned to our room and were relaxing on our beds when there was a knock at the door. Here was our "landlady" with 3 enormous plates of potatoes, vegetables and trout! We had to be polite, so as she sat and chatted to us, we forced ourselves to eat another meal.



A bit of time to relax at Bitchy Lake.

Once we finished the parent-tree cone collection in the Louis Creek to Little Fort area, we moved up to Clearwater where we set up in a motel for our base. We had 45 trees left that had been selected by both Weyerhaeuser and Clearwater Timber. On average, all the trees we collected from were similar; some better than others, but generally much the same. However, the trees selected by Clearwater Timber were generally ugly, and very close to the road edge. One tree on Clearwater Main had branches so low we could pick cones from the ground.

While working in the Clearwater area, we kept seeing RCMP vehicles on the logging roads. We were curious, but we were never stopped or questioned, which was good considering that we had a truck full of guns and ammunition. It was not until we returned home much later that we heard about the murder of six members of a family in that area. We finally finished the last tree and drove to Kamloops for the night where we relaxed in bar. The next day we drove to Vernon with the last of the last of the cones which we dropped them off with Barry Jaquish, at his home on Kalamalka Lake. After a beer with Barry, we returned home to the Island for a well-deserved rest.

It was however short-lived. Although money was tight in the Forest companies and Ministry of Forest, there was an acute shortage of high elevation Douglas fir, and fortunately we found three excellent natural stands that were loaded. We had 8 or more climbers working in a Seed Production Area owned by Pacific Logging for a month.

But that's another story.....