

Trips to the Woodshed
by Stephen Russell Payne

Growing up in the Northeast Kingdom, I'd often fall asleep to the rhythmic ka-thunk of my father splitting wood in the shed below my bedroom window. I remember one particular night in second grade when I just couldn't fall asleep so I slid out of bed and tip-toed to the window where I watched the shadow of my father swinging his ax in the woodshed's yellow light. I'd never been out in the shed that late at night before but I had just turned seven and figured I was old enough.

I snuck down the back staircase to the mud room and pulled on one of my father's hunting jackets, the heavy wool enveloping me with his familiar scent, a seasoned mixture of sweat, pipe tobacco, and chain saw oil. I climbed into a pair of his barn boots and clomped out the back door into the cold October night.

I hesitated at the shed doorway while Dad finished driving a steel wedge through a stubborn piece of elm then I stepped into the light. Seeing me, he leaned his sledge against the chopping block, pushed his cap back on his head. "Hi, Bud," he said, motioning me inside. "It's late, pretty near midnight. Mother know you're out here?"

"No," I replied, not sure if this was such a good idea.

"Good," he said, breaking into a smile. He sat down on a stack of wood beside his work bench. I grabbed hold of his pant leg and, with a boost, pulled myself up. "Do you know what you're sitting on here?" he asked.

"Fire wood," I replied, confidently.

“Not just *any* fire wood. This is our ‘family stack’.” He pulled an ancient looking log from the pile, into which a date had been carved.

I looked at the numbers. “What do they stand for?” I asked.

“August 29th, 1864.”

My father ran his fingertips along the carved numbers. “Your great-grand father cut this log during the Civil War when Abe Lincoln was President. Oldest piece in the stack. My father told me it came from a grand old sugar maple split in two by a thunderous lightning strike that deafened deer for a half a mile. When they cut it up they counted a hundred and fifty-two rings in the trunk.”

Dad slid the log over onto my lap. I held it with both hands. I had no idea what the Civil War was or who this Lincoln guy was, but it all sounded very important.

“You’re holding a piece of wood that sprouted from a seed about 1712, long before the United States was even a country.”

“Wow,” I said, admiringly then carefully gave it back to him. Dad went on to show me other pieces inscribed by family members over the years: a cracked piece of oak from the day of my parents’ hasty wedding before Dad shipped out to England in ‘41; a piece of birch from the day President Kennedy died in Dallas into which someone had carved a set of tears beside his name. Another was a slab of maple with a likeness of my grandfather’s beloved St. Bernard, accidentally killed by a neighbor during hunting season.

Over the years I had occasionally caught Dad on a summer evening just looking over the woodpile, admiring the fruits of his labors. He took such pleasure in how the

pieces of beech, ash, maple and birch fit so perfectly together, side by side, completely comfortable with each other. He'd point to a specific piece and tell you exactly which tree it came from, the weather and wind the day he cut it and how well his chainsaw was running. He'd speak of watching a tall silver maple fall, its leafy branches arcing across the sky like a painter's brush on a blue pallet, crashing to the ground with a whooshing thud. He'd relate the way a stubborn oak twisted hard on its stump, falling—off kilter—from its planned landing, catching in a thicket of young maples, leaving it at a perilous angle. If a tree became too hung up, Dad would walk around, stare at it from different angles then finally stand back and declare: "We're going to do what George Aiken did for Viet Nam: declare victory and go home." With that he'd load his chainsaw and tools into the bed of his pickup and head for the house.

Dad taught me you have to cut wood on nature's schedule not your own. If you try to get into the woods too early in the spring the soft ground will swallow your boots like quicksand. However, there is a short but sweet cutting season just after the ground firms up, before the black flies rise up in hungry hordes. During those couple of cool weeks we'd trudge into the woods everyday and cut up the trees blown down by winter's fierce winds. Often, Dad would earmark certain pieces for special occasions, selecting a piece of wood like most people select a fine wine for dinner. A scraggly, aromatic piece of apple to start the Thanksgiving fire or a perfectly round piece of birch, its bark speckled like a trout flashing in sunlight, to warm the family on Christmas morning.

Once in a while after we'd split and stacked a good load in the shed, Dad would offer me a Macintosh from his coat pocket then light a pipe he kept in a tin of tobacco

above his work bench. He'd lean against the family stack and we'd talk, father and son. I don't remember all the details but I remember the lessons he taught.

"This farm is your rock, Son," he said on more than one occasion. "Got everything you need right here: God and family. You'll find God in the woods, family's in the house."

In high school I got into an ongoing argument with my football coach over how much playing time I was getting. One Sunday night before the playoffs, Dad listened to me rant and rave out in the shed for quite some time. After I settled down, he knowingly nodded his head. "Yup," he said, "they's fights in your life it's best you back away from. You'll have to decide if this is one of them."

Another time, when I'd come home from college for Thanksgiving, we were out splitting kindling while Mom and my girlfriend were stuffing a turkey in the kitchen. He knew I was struggling with commitment so I asked him how he'd known Mom was the right woman for him. He leaned on his ax for a few moments then said: "the woman you'll marry will be the one you can't live without." Having been married to her now for over twenty years, his advice has served me well. Trips to Dad's woodshed were always a privilege, not a punishment.

Unlike the traditional native, Dad never liked to get too far ahead with our wood supply for fear a year might come when we didn't have to cut any. One summer, though, Dad stepped hard into a gopher hole and snapped a bone in his foot. He limped well into the fall, about as frustrated as I'd ever seen him. Due to his painful gimp it was hard for him to work in the woods or partridge hunt like he was used to. It was the only time I

ever heard my mother inquire—ever so gently—about whether he had enough wood for the winter. Dad scowled and limped out the back door to the woodshed where he brooded late into the night, splitting a huge pile of kindling from the mill.

By late February we all knew the wood supply was going to run out so one morning at breakfast Dad announced we were going out to bring in a large maple that had come down in a snowy gale a few nights before. Knowing there was a good two to three feet of snow on the ground, my brothers and I looked at each other questioning Dad's sanity. But, half an hour later, we headed up into the hills on three yellow Skidoos, toboggans, ropes and chainsaws in tow, a northwest wind whipping cold dervishes of snow all around us. I still remember my mother standing in the kitchen window when we came home later that night dragging large pieces of that frozen maple behind us. When we appeared at the kitchen door, we were greeted by the aroma of hot chocolate and by Mother who, with hands on aproned hips, shook her head and said simply, "crazy boys."

Dad loved the Vermont countryside he grew up in. He taught us about the different geologic formations beneath our feet and the diverse fern community waving along the forest floor. He showed us trees weakened by acid rain and mountainsides scarred by ATV's. Each year, we'd gather most of our firewood from our own forest then travel all over northern Vermont to cut our last few "special" pieces. We made many a weekend trip to different ponds, hillsides and mountain tops, ostensibly to find a special piece of wood for an upcoming holiday, but it was also to show us the remarkable splendor of these strong but vulnerable Green Mountains.

Dad got the idea of searching for unique pieces of wood from his father who drove Dad over the rutted dirt roads of the Northeast Kingdom in a Model A Ford pickup. In the spring Dad would take us trout fishing up to Lake Seymour or to the falls in Orleans for the salmon run. He spent as much time scanning the shoreline for an interesting tree as he did watching his bobber and line. One day up on Newark Pond he spied a slender, “Robert Frost” birch, arced gracefully over the water like a long white fishing pole. We rowed our way over to it and realized it was a good forty feet in length. Undeterred, Dad stood balancing on the seat of our boat and cut off several four foot sections which he carefully set next to the tackle boxes. “Ain’t them beauties?” he said, referring not to the beautifully speckled trout we’d caught but to the perfectly round pieces of white birch. “They’ll make a dandy Christmas fire.” Later that year, we awoke to those same pieces of birch warming the house early on Christmas morning.

One April my Dad got me up earlier than usual, poured me into his pickup and we headed to Lake Willoughby. We climbed part way up Mt. Pisgah and watched the sun rise from Pulpit Rock, where we sat high over the lake and shared fresh-cut orange halves. Over the blue-black water hung an ethereal mist which rose silently in the warm morning sun. When we were finished, Dad led us further up the mountain where we found a good sized limb from a butternut tree that we cut up and took home. As we trudged through the woods he’d often stop and reverently run his fingers into the claw marks of a black bear or the rubbing of a horny buck’s rack on the trunks of trees.

The year after Mom died, Dad turned ninety-four and the State took his driver’s license away because, they said, his eyes had gotten so bad. Dad took his final road trip

that fall. With his time short, he wanted to go up to Irasburg where his boyhood deer camp sat on the east slope of Black Hill. We left his house at 5 am with a Thermos of hot coffee and drove north through the disappearing November darkness, up over Sheffield heights where a trio of deer watched us pass from the side of the road. “Watch they don’t jump ‘front of you,” Dad said, as I slowed and veered away from them. I guessed his eyes weren’t so bad after all.

Just about day break we made it to Coventry, crossed the Lord’s Crossing covered bridge spanning the Black River and headed up the old Poutrie Road to where his grandfather’s camp had been hidden deep in the forest. “There’s an ancient black cherry up on the north slope that ought to be outta’ gas by now,” Dad said expectantly. “I’ve had my eye on that old beast since I was a kid. Cherry burns like a banshee, gives a wonderful heat. Was one of your mother’s favorites, especially around the holidays.”

I put my truck in four-wheel-drive and we climbed up a primitive logging road, washed out from the summer’s rains. “Stay out ‘ta deep ruts,” Dad said, his hands clutched in front of him as if he had the wheel. “Just a little further and we’ll break out into an old apple pasture. The big cherry’s on the far end. Beautiful view of Jay Peak up here.”

We both felt the excitement, as if we were hot on the trail of a trophy buck. As our pickup dug its way up over the crest of a hill, we suddenly came off the dirt road onto a freshly paved driveway coming in from the other side of the mountain that led to a black iron gate supported by granite posts on either side. Beneath a fancy brass lamp a carved sign read: “Black Mountain Estates.” I couldn’t believe my eyes. Dad’s mouth dropped

open as he fell forward, almost into the dash. Beyond the gate was the site of the old pasture, stripped bare of any remnant of how the glacier had left it. A perfectly shaped cul-de-sac curved in front of a half dozen, Swiss-style homes, each with a two car garage and a post lamp. My father lifted his hand to his chin and sat trembling in silence. In the distance, Jay Peak, draped with its white ski trails, stood majestically against the peach colored horizon.

Dad's face tightened into a knot. He motioned for us to go. Not wanting to enter the granite gates, I turned around and headed back down the logging road. On the way down the hill, Dad shook his head and stared out the side window. "The only way you can save land is to own it," he said, angrily. "Otherwise the bastards'll raze and pave it all."

I think what hurt Dad the most was that an old friend's family had owned that property for over a hundred years and he held them responsible for its demise. On the other hand, Dad was a realist and, though it frustrated him to no end, he knew that a farmer's land was usually his only source of retirement money. He also knew that often it was flatlanders with silver spoons in their mouths that could afford to buy such precious farm land and keep it open. Even when new owners posted—a practice he detested—Dad would grumble that at least they'd kept it out of the hands of greedy developers.

The ever-present light in Dad's eyes dimmed that day. When we got home, he asked if I'd drag his favorite recliner out of the farmhouse and set it up in the woodshed. He spent his last days surrounded by the things he loved most, gazing out at the unspoiled hillsides of our farm. On his last afternoon, we sat together next to the family stack and

watched a parade of Canada Geese v-ing their way south for the winter. There was a hard frost predicted that night and I tried to get Dad to go back into the house, but he wouldn't budge. The most he'd let me do is bring him a bowl of hot soup and a heavy patchwork quilt which I wrapped around him.

Early the next morning I walked down from our place to check on him. I peered inside the shed and there he was, unmoving in his recliner, peaceful as I'd ever seen him. In his lap was a smooth piece of rock maple into which he had inscribed in broken numbers the date he died. On the floor next to him were the empty soup bowl and his jackknife, which I carry in my pocket to this day.

Now, with my own family, if I want to get them together, all I have to do is light a fire in the woodstove and as soon as the hearthstone is warm they will gather. Our kids usually stretch out on an old braided rug in front of the hearth and my wife curls up next to me on our couch which faces the fire.

Never as enthusiastic about heating with wood as I am, my kids don't exactly run to the woodlot to help out. But I still migrate out to the woodshed after they go to bed to stack 'just a few more pieces.' I usually leave my leather gloves on the work bench for there is a softness to hardwood that I enjoy on my bare hands. Sometimes, in the moonlight, I see my young son or daughter watching me from their bedroom windows, happy that there will be less of a pile for them to stack come Saturday morning. I hope they'll eventually learn that in fact I am the lucky one for having spent the most time laying logs in for winter. And perhaps late some wintry night, they too will appear in the

light of the woodshed and I will show them the Civil War log their great-great
grandfather cut and carved so long ago.

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