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Winter Woodcutting

I take my mitten off so I can adjust my chainsaw's carburetor. I get it done quickly and get my mitten back on, because it's twenty-below zero. Christy keeps a fire roaring under coffee and hot chocolate. I put the saw down in snow and move close to the fire to get my fingers flexing and my mittens warmed up. Then I start my saw again and fall and cut limbs off dead trees up the edge of the meadow from the cable machine in two feet of snow.

Jim's in the timber a ways, falling dead trees toward the machine and cutting the limbs off them. Ed wades through snow and sets chokers on logs and clears to the side. Gary revs the engine and engages the clutch, and the drum turns and winds in cable and drags logs toward the cable machine.

Some logs dig in and push snow ahead of them until the engine on the machine runs out of power, and the logs can't move anymore. Whoever's closest picks up a shovel and digs the logs out and gets them up onto the surface of the snow so we can yard them farther.

When there are enough logs in the landing, I leave the falling to Jim and start cutting them into 18 inch lengths. We're hoping to load a trailer with four cords of wood so Ed and Christy and Gary can take it with them when we're through for the day and sell the wood down the mountain in Baker.

Ed built his double-drum machine during the summer and fall. It

will drag logs in from as far as two hundred yards away. When I saw Ed during the summer, I told him, “I have more orders for firewood than I can fill. Come up and cut wood and sell it where you cut it, and you won’t need a cable rig or even a trailer. No need to mess with all the extra machinery.”

Our culture relies too heavily on a highly-mechanized approach to work. We’re so accustomed to thinking in terms of machinery, we often don’t see simpler ways to work.

Unasked-for advice never did change anybody’s mind. Ed wanted to build his machine, so he kept at it. I went back up the mountain and cut and sold firewood. Winter hit by the time he had his machine ready to run.

I had plenty of wood in the barn and the front yard to get us through the winter. My family could get through winter without money from woodcutting. So when Ed talked about bringing the machine up, I said, “It’s crazy to cut firewood in the winter. Machines are harder to keep running. They break easier. Yarding logs to a landing when we can cut them up where they fall and sell the wood on the ground in the summer doesn’t make sense.”

“Wood’s selling for 75 dollars a cord in the valley now. That’s more than twice what you were getting in the summer. It makes the extra work worth it.”

It wasn’t so much that he convinced me as I couldn’t pass up a possible adventure. I had to go out there to see what happened, and if I was out there, the only way to keep warm was to work. If it did work out, it wouldn’t do my family any actual harm to have

some income.

“Okay. I’ll see if Jim can come back up, and we’ll give it a try.”

I broke up the ice at the ford in the river with the tractor and shoveled and pitchforked the floating chunks up onto the bank so they wouldn’t jam under the ice downstream and block the flow of water and make the crossing too deep. Then I plowed the snow aside for a road across the meadow. When the road was ready, I called Ed, and he brought the machine up the next day.

By the time he got up the mountain and we got across the meadow and into position at the edge of the timber, most of the day was gone. The only thing to do was to wait until the next day to start work. Jim came up late that night and stayed over.

The thermometer registered 25 below zero that night. When Ed and Christy and Gary showed up the next morning, the sun had been shining for an hour, and it had warmed up to a toasty 22 below zero. Ed led the way down to the river in his pickup. The crossing had frozen over again, but the new ice was thin, and it broke up as he drove across. A ways out of the river, Ed stopped, and I had to stop behind him.

He got out and walked back. He said, “My rear brakes froze up. I’m dragging my rear wheels. If you touched your brake pedal, yours probably froze up too.” I pulled forward, and he watched my rear wheels. In four-wheel drive, the rear wheels skidded along the surface of packed snow. Water had entered the rear drums while fording, and when we stopped, the brake shoes froze to the drums.

I had loaded my propane torch. We jacked up the pickups, took

off the rear wheels, and heated the drums until the shoes let go, put the wheels back on, and let the trucks down. “Don’t touch the brake pedal, just in case.”

The cable machine had two engines, one to move it, and one to operate the drums. Neither would start. We heated them with the torch, a slow process, because the torch had to be shielded so heat reached the engine, but not enough to set it on fire.

Jim started his saw and started falling and limbing trees. He tried to peevy over the logs, to get at the limbs buried in snow, but the heavy snow kept them from coming over. He said, “We’ll have to wait till we get the machine running and roll them with that.”

Christy gathered small wood and started a fire to warm people, coffee and hot chocolate, tea, and tools.

We got the engines on the cable machine started a little after twelve o’clock. We gathered around the fire and ate lunch, each with our own style of food.

We yarded logs after lunch. Ed said, “If the snow had a crust on it, the logs would come up on top. They wouldn’t dig in like that.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say, except, “The snow doesn’t have a crust on it, though.”

We had two different priorities out there. Jim and I had worked together cutting hay, fixing fence, and cutting firewood, and we never had let go of the principle, nothing’s worth doing unless you can have some fun doing it. Ed and Christy and Gary probably weren’t opposed to having fun, but they had come up the mountain to make money. The early darkness that comes to 45 degrees

north descended on us when we had a scant cord and a half of wood cut and loaded on the trailer. Ed and Christy and Gary caught deep gloom. They hadn't made much money. Ed's parting comment was, "We'll do better tomorrow."

On the way back across the meadow, Jim and I agreed we had had some fun out there, and the experience would be one to remember. We'd give it another day or two and see how it went.

At daylight the next morning, the thermometer on the front porch indicated 34 below zero. Ed and Christy showed up about noon, because they couldn't get their pickup started until late.

Ed was more cheerful than he had been the previous day. He had a job lined up driving a potato chip delivery truck south far enough that sub-zero days were unknown. "Winter always wins up here," he said.

Winter doesn't fight anybody, I thought. It just exists. Nothing personal. No contest. But I didn't speak my thoughts. Jim and I crossed the river and the meadow with Ed and Christy and helped them warm up the cable machine with my torch, get the engine started, and get the machine out to the road.

Dark settled into the high mountain meadows by the time they headed down the mountain, soon to be on their way to warmer country and a reliable job. Jim and I played chess that evening, up close to the heater, with my daughters close to us, watching, starting to learn this fascinating game of kings and queens and, most exciting to them, knights on horses.

The next day, Jim headed home. I settled into my winter routine

of writing, playing my guitar, keeping the house warm, skiing sometimes, and helping teach in our school at home. Winter went on with its job of being winter.