

Golden Summer; Gold in the River

I hired workers that summer to help me with blister-rust control work in the mountain forests of northern California. We were five men, three wives, four children, three cars, one pickup, one motorcycle, rabbit-eared picks, pulaskis, axes, shovels, and various other tools, camping equipment, groceries, and all the other supplies it took to camp near our work and near clean water to meet our needs.

We uprooted ribes, gooseberry bushes and currant bushes, intermediate hosts for blister rust, that killed pine trees. Eliminating the ribes bushes, hosts for part of the life cycle of the disease, eliminated blister rust and protected the trees from infection.

We finished working an area in the El Dorado National Forest, folded our tents, and headed north, toward our next contract, in Lassen National Forest, a caravan of vehicles, people, and on some of the unpaved roads, dust boiling toward the summer sky.

Below the road we drove along, the Yuba River flowed from the mountains, clean and inviting. The people leading our caravan pulled off the highway, and everyone following pulled over to see what was on their minds.

What was on their minds was, "We've worked a bunch of hard, hot days in a row. It wouldn't hurt us any to take a break and swim in that river down there."

I heard the anxious, slightly defensive tone in that voice. I was getting a reputation for being a hard-driving crew boss, without much room for play. I definitely wanted to continue being the force that drove us toward making enough money so we could all go back to college in the fall, but I didn't want the reputation for relentlessly pushing the crew to take too deep root, and I'd been feeling the pull of the clear-running water myself, so I said, "Let's do that. Let's go swimming."

We found a road down to the river. Car and pickup doors didn't even get properly closed before people changed clothes and hit the water in force. Some didn't even change clothes, just took off their shoes and socks and

dove in, then swam back toward the river bank and acceptable swimming attire.

We unpacked food for lunch, and we stayed until supper time. We unpacked everything we needed to feed everyone supper. By the time we finished supper, it was too late to go anywhere, so we unpacked everything we needed, and we stayed the night in the forest growing beside the river.

The night and the early morning stayed warm. Everyone who got up at daylight swam in the river a few minutes after daylight. Late sleepers woke as they descended through the air toward the water, splash. Some took their abrupt wakening well. Others realized they should try to act like they didn't mind, because minding didn't buy them any mercy. Splash, nonetheless.

People looked at me as if they expected me to start pushing the crew again. I didn't feel like it, yet. Including looking at contracts, bidding and getting everything ready so the crew could work, I'd worked 43 days in a row. Now that I lived in my swimming suit, nobody was going to aim me toward work for a while.

We lifted rocks from the bottom of the river and built a dam that reached a fourth of the way across. It deepened our swimming area by lowering the bottom of the water and raising the top. People worked a floating dredge upstream and across the river from us, stacking rocks out of the way, sucking up the river bottom and running it through a sluice box to separate gold from dirt and sand and gravel.

That made me curious. I took a shovel into the river, dug sand and gravel from the bottom and panned it in the shovel, crude for a gold pan, but effective enough that I found black sand and several "colors," small pieces of gold, when I washed the gravel and sand off the top. "Gold. Hey everybody, there's so much gold out here, you can pan it out with a shovel." Nobody cared. They swam or relaxed in the sunshine or raided food boxes for something to feed appetites worked up by swimming.

If I worked for gold from the river, I would have to buy a whole new set of tools and equipment. That would take more cash than I had for what was probably a thin possibility of making some money. What I had already started on, blister rust control, had been paying a good wage and would continue to pay a good wage through the

summer. Our work allowed us some time to play, to swim in the river, and to stay up late on the bank of the river playing guitars and singing. It allowed everyone who got up early to jump in the river at daylight and then to round up everyone who hoped to sleep in and throw them in the river.

I let the gold in the shovel settle back to the bottom of the river. Then I swam, just for the fun of swimming. I planned to camp by the river until we ran low on groceries, four or five more days, before I remembered how to be a crew boss again and pushed everyone through a summer of hard work toward autumn with enough money in our pockets to see us through a winter of college or whatever other dreams we hoped to pursue and enough golden memories floating in our heads to carry us through whatever came our way.