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The Sunshining Day I Dropped Three Trees with One Cut

Along the west boundary and the south boundary of the hay and cattle ranch we took care of in northeastern Oregon, trees in dense stands of lodgepole pine died when pine beetles bored through the bark and circled the tree with tunnels through the cambium. Some of the dead trees blew down in wind storms.

The dead trees that hadn't fallen needed to come down so they wouldn't continue to blow down on fences and in ditches that brought water through the edge of the timber onto the grass-growing meadows. I set to work clearing out the dead trees. I cut firewood for our heating and cooking needs. I sold firewood to anyone who would come and get it each year after I finished the year's ranch work.

I had no one to show me how to fall standing trees. I read instructions, added falling wedges and a heavy single-bit axe, to drive the wedges, to my tools, and approached dead lodgepole pine trees. It was, at first, a time of trembling, because there is a great gap between instructions printed on the page and a tree tipping from its stump, falling with a rushing sound through the air, and slamming with great noise of impact and breaking branches to the ground.

On the other hand, no large gap separates fear and caution. Throughout my eight and a half years of falling trees in Whitney Valley, I felt no shame at staying a little afraid of the work I did. I thought most workers who cut themselves with chain saws or got hit by falling trees had been overconfident.

At first, I picked trees clear of thickets, with a slight lean to them.

I cut a notch about a third of the way through each tree, close to the ground, facing the way I wanted the tree to fall. Then I cut straight through toward the notch from the opposite side of the tree. Each tree started tipping before I cut all the way through, and the remaining hinge of uncut wood held the tree to the stump until its continued fall in the arc it had started was assured. In a correctly-cut tree, the hinge broke before the tree hit the ground.

A tree with no lean will still fall into the notch, because its support on the stump in that direction is gone. Falling wedges are for poor judgement, "I thought it would tip that direction, but it won't" or for trees that must fall in an unnatural direction. I drove the wedges into the cut behind the tree, behind the bar and chain, or after I removed the saw from the cut. The wedges opened the cut wider and wider as I drove them in, tilting the tree toward the face notch until the tree tipped far enough that its weight started the falling arc. I worked from the book, and everything worked exactly as it should, except...

Dead trees are unpredictable. The brittle wood breaks in unpredictable ways. Sometimes, the wood low on the tree rots, and the predictability provided by a strong hinge the tree pivots from disappears. The tree falls wild, without attention to my plans, hopes or fears. I tried to see everything that could happen, plan alternate escape routes in case my predictions weren't accurate, and watch everything until all motion ceased. Several times, brittle trees broke as they fell. Their tops crashed down behind the stump, where I had been standing, but watching, saw what was happening, and moved quickly out of the way.

I worked my way up the big ditch that ran down through the edge of the timber, falling dead trees, cutting them into firewood lengths, and piling the tops and limbs for later burning. On the high bank of the ditch, I aimed a big lodgepole straight across the ditch.

I walked away diagonally from the motion as it tipped, then stopped and watched. The brittle hinge broke too soon, and the tree turned a little from the path I had planned for it. It brushed another dead lodgepole on the opposite bank. That tree, slammed by the falling tree, broke at its base and fell directly away from the first tree, hit and slid down a third dead tree, which broke at the base. I watched the escalating action with a sense of wonder and walked rapidly down the ditch bank so I stood in the clear when the top of the third tree shattered violently on the ground where I had been standing.

Hoo, ha. I put my saw down, flexed my arms, did a little dance above the ditch, bowed this way and that, to the trees and whatever other wildlife might be interested. I was a man of power, falling three trees with one cut. I thought of sewing it into my suspenders, "Three at one blow," as the brave little tailor had sewn into his belt a record of his victory over multiple flies at one blow. Indeed, indeed. That brightened my day. It also reminded me how careful I needed to be to stay in good shape through this dead-timber clearing project.

I picked up my saw, walked up the ditch bank, and reduced my trophies of the day to mundane lengths of firewood as the sun tilted into its afternoon descent of the mountain-blue sky.