

Peeling Bark

Ken Kesey, in *Sometimes a Great Notion*, used the spelling *shittim* for the trees I know as *chittim* or *chittam*¹. Perhaps the /sh/ sound should be given to *chittim's* /ch/ as it is in *chaps* or *chaparral*. But the fellows I know all used the /ch/ pronunciation as in *chips* as we searched, each spring, coastal hillsides for stands of the small hardwood, better identified as *cascara sagrada*.

When I was a teenager in Oregon's Lincoln County, there weren't many ways to earn cash, especially not when too young to work in the woods. There weren't newspaper routes that could be run by bicycle, or delivery jobs for grocery or drug stores. There weren't berries or beans to pick although a bus came over from the Valley during those seasons' peaks so a few days of work was available. There weren't any of those things we saw on the innocent sitcoms of early television. There were only the rivers, brushed-over hills, still-timbered mountains beyond, and very little else.

I made a few dollars trapping, selling sand shrimp to a local bait shop, watching customers to deter shoplifting in a local gas station/tackle shop; plus, I made a little money splitting ricks of firewood. I even made a little money winning contests about world or American records for this or that: I won dinner at Pixie Kitchen for knowing that Ribbon Falls is the highest waterfall in North America. But I made the most when sap ran and chittim bark readily slipped.

Peeling bark wasn't hard work, wasn't limited by age or experience. Anyone could sell dried bark when there were buyers, and most of the local grocery stores bought for two or three months each spring.

I peeled bark while in high school, peeled once in a while after high school, but it was the spring following the 1973 Gas Shortage that I relied on the money I made from selling bark to feed a growing family.

When war in Israel stopped Arab imports of oil, I was renting a house, shop, and a hundred forty acres of scrub land for \$45/month. I built muzzleloading rifles, and I had orders for all the rifles I could build during the next two years, but the Gas Shortage changed the economic dynamics of the central Coast ... we went two and a half months without being able to buy gas locally. Neighbors were almost all loggers with jobs, but with no gas to get to those job sites. They were not eligible for unemployment—it wasn't long before they were broke. And I didn't pay unemployment on myself so I wouldn't have been eligible under any circumstances.

The Gas Shortage began to seriously affect me just after elk season 1973, when business was usually slow. I relied on customers picking up and paying for their completed rifles within a few weeks of when I finished their guns. While I had very low overhead, I had very little cash reserves. I had far less cash reserves than

¹ *Cascara*, *Rhamnus purshiana* DC [Fam. Rhamnaceae].

the classically under-capitalized small business. Not by choice. And building rifles wasn't a vocation valued enough by lending institutions for bankers to extend me either capital or credit; so after a second month of the Gas Shortage preventing customers from claiming their completed rifles, I couldn't pay even the low rent I had.

Although I was living along the Siletz River, my neighbors were already heavily trapping the Siletz by the time I fell behind on my rent. One of them sold the pelt of a bobcat I shot (the bobcat was after my turkeys), and those few dollars paid the electric bill.

When Ronnie Oleman paid me for the bobcat's pelt, he said that I, too, should be trapping. I agreed, but the next nearest river system not being trapped was the Yaquina. Getting there required more gas than either they or I could buy from local stations.

The Gas Shortage Oregon experienced during the fall and winter of 1973 should have set a record for the most contrived commodity shortage this nation has ever experienced. Distributors had full storage tanks, but they were prohibited from selling that fuel to local stations, some out of fuel for months.

I was then living five miles upriver from the town of Siletz, living fifteen miles from Toledo. I felt that for me to continue building rifles, I would have to move closer to a city: I needed to set up shop where I was more accessible to a greater number of people. But moving seemed just as impossible as staying where we were. We were living on venison, eggs (I had a small flock of laying hens), and what we had put up from the previous summer's garden.

One of the local ranchers had filled his above-ground storage tanks with gasoline before the shortage became severe. I traded him work for gas, traded (in a roundabout way) deer antlers for traps, and I began hanging iron along the upper reaches of the Yaquina River ... the Sam's Creek Cutoff, only three miles long, allowed me to cross from where I lived along the Siletz to the Yaquina.

When I ran my trapline along the Yaquina, I passed the vacant house at Abby [Abbey] Creek. The house was owned by Publishers Paper Co. It was a nice house: three bedrooms, two baths, cork tile floors, flagstone fireplace. It was somewhere I wanted to live even though there was no outbuilding for a shop. It was considerably closer to Toledo than where I was living, and it was along my trapline: I could work the river without driving anywhere.

The covered bridge in the movie *Sometimes A Great Notion* was the end of the mud road that lead to that house at Abby Creek.

After inquiring about who owned the place and who I had to see to rent it and after passing the *I-am-not-a-hippy* test, I rented the house for \$350 a year; I immediately moved. I got Frankie Hunt, Don Lynch and Wayne Hodges to help me. We used George Connors' skiff, powered by my 7.5 horse McCullough outboard, for most everything. Wayne brought one load of furniture in overland (any vehicle less able to navigate through mud than was his four-by-four Cornbinder pickup couldn't have even reached the creek, let alone the house beyond). And when I was all moved in, I don't think between the four of us we had enough cash money to celebrate with even a bottle of beer.

The house was all it promised to be. The hundred year old magnolia bloomed early that spring. After some of Elk City's retired loggers watched me pack, one

on each shoulder, two eighty pound sacks of chicken feed down the railroad tracks to the house, I was accepted by the community. I was one of them, only younger. And they told me stories of what the woods were like when a fellow headed to work with a gunny sack of steel wedges and a gallon of turpentine slung over his shoulder. They told about brazing together three ten foot misery whips to reach across the larger stumps; they told about falling trees larger than today's world records.

But despite how nice the house was, there wasn't an outbuilding I could use for a shop on the nine hundred acres there at Abby Creek so when fur started to slip because of spring warmth I didn't return to building rifles; I needed another source of immediate income. Most of the gyppo loggers hadn't yet recovered from their forced winter layoff; they weren't hiring or picking up guns already built. All that was available to me was peeling bark.

Although I still had use of George's skiff and despite having a four-wheel-drive Bronco, when we went in or out we usually walked the railroad tracks rather than cut deeper ruts in the road or fool with a balky outboard. And while walking those tracks, I noticed that no one had peeled bark for years along a ten mile stretch of the Yaquina River's north side.

The hillsides on that north side of the Yaquina had been logged during the Depression. They weren't replanted with firs, but were allowed to naturally reseed themselves. In places, there were patches of large Douglas fir, but most of those hillsides were still in the deciduous phase of the two-phase growth cycle of the coast range. And among the alders and maples were the largest chittims I had ever found.

An acquaintance who paid attention to these things said the world's largest chittim at the time was fifty-three feet tall and twenty-six inches in diameter. I had, a few days previous to being told this, fallen ["felled" for readers not part of the coastal culture] a chittim that was twenty-six inches across its foot-high stump. Wondering if that tree would have been a new record, I hiked back to where it lay, and I measured its log and limbs. They were at least fifty-three feet long. The tree had probably been fifty-six or more feet tall. It would have been or been close to being the record.

The bark on that chittim's trunk was nearly three-quarters of an inch thick—I had fallen it so I could peel even its small limbs. I didn't want to leave any of its bark in the woods, didn't want to waste any of it.

Bark is stripped from growing chittims, dried and broken into pieces approximately an inch square, then sacked and sold by the pound; the going rate that spring was thirty-five cents a pound. Stems that are stripped obviously die. Their roots send up suckers which in four or five years will be large enough to peel. So chittims with trunks eight inches or more in diameter are rare even where no one has peeled for decades.

A week after peeling that probable record tree, I sat in a stand of chittims growing on the railroad right-of-way, eating my lunch and thinking about having fallen a record. I had already peeled nine sacks of green bark that morning, about ninety dollars worth, and as I admired that stack of sacks I wondered about the worth of records. Was nine sacks of bark a record for a morning of peeling? I didn't know of anyone peeling an amount even close to that. And was that tree a

record? What should I think of having fallen it?

Why do we keep track of the largest or the biggest or the fastest? A kid on the Skeena River broke the record for the largest sport caught Chinook when I was in high school. Roughly thirty years later that record would be broken by a fisherman on the Kenai River. Even I would hold a line-class world record for fly-caught Dolly Varden for a couple of years. But that record Dolly wasn't even the largest one I caught that day and certainly wasn't as large as the Dolly I caught in Kodiak's Salmonie Creek two years earlier.

Records are a way of remembering, a way of keeping score, a way of immortalizing ourselves that only proves our mortality. Ken Kesey's novel seems like his attempt to elbow his way into the literary canon. I suppose somebody will say something similar about my scribblings. But what I remember best about that morning I peeled those nine sacks of bark (I peeled thirteen sacks for the day) is what happened after I ate my lunch without washing my hands.

Coastal Natives brewed tea made from chittim leaves as a remedy for constipation. I don't know how much sap was on my hands as I sat among those white, shiny trunks and ate two sandwiches. What I know is that for four days I couldn't leave the bathroom. Whereas I had made so much money that one day, I made nothing for the following week.

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