

Allen Robertson, interviewed by Imbert Orchard, 1968

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How does it come in now? You remember it would have gone way before your time, sir. Well, my picture of it is that the logging first started with hand logging. Then came oxen, and then came horses, and on Cortes Island, to my knowledge, the first horse logging would start in the 90s. On this part in Whaletown, horse logging was being done on this section particularly, from about 97 up until 1902. And the logging at that time extended back a mile, two miles from the water. The logs were dragged out over cross skids. And those skids were notched in the centre, and a boy or a man went ahead of the horses and greased each skid to help the logs drag over.

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What did he use to do it?

Just used a heavy oil, heavy black oil.

Made out of what? Crude oil?

I think crude oil, yes.

You mean petroleum?

Yes, I would think so. It was just a slippery black grease. He carried a bucket or usually a brush, a semi-liquid, so he could swab it on the actual notch that was cut in the centre of these logs.

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Big logs were put along these notches in the middle. Yes, these cross skids would be ten feet in length and perhaps a foot to sixteen inches in diameter and spaced about ten feet apart, ten to fifteen feet apart.

If they came across a gully, they would raise them up then?

They put in trestle bridges then, timber bridges to bring the level up. They had no power tools of course, any grading had to be done with a pick and shovel, so they picked their ground very carefully. They didn't try to cross any steep valleys or they couldn't work very well on heavy grades either because the timber would run away. There were many cases of the timber coming down following the horses too closely and running over the horses. But the horses developed a fine sense of timing.

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As they came to the beginning of a down grade, they would go just as slow as they could and still stay ahead of the logs. And as the logs began to run of their own accord, the horses would trot and then gallop as hard as they could go. Eventually, if the turn kept on at that speed, the horses would take to the timber at the side. And horses were killed occasionally over that sort of thing. But it was up to the driver in those cases to know the condition of his road and not try to take a

turn down when it was frosty or too slippery, when the logs had run faster than the horses could go.

Did they restrain the logs in any way?

No, they had... Well, they had methods of doing it. They could drag chains behind them and they could put a cable around the stump, a tailhold.

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Put another horse on that?

No, preferably a man would just take a wrap or two around the stump and pay the line out by hand, but they tried not to get a road of that type, it was too dangerous. After the horse logging of course came steam donkey logging. Yes, oh yes, in other cases you threw dirt on the skids to try and deliberately slow them down, or you might bring the logs down a very steep place with a bark on, instead of barking them so that they would slide.

It's just very interesting, because in this day and age, people have always had terrific grades, sometimes very steep grades.

Well, of course, they chose the ground they only worked on, the ground where they thought that type of logging was suitable.

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Did you turn corners with this big load?

Yes, comparatively short corners because they cut their logs short in those days. They were using heavy, big, bringing out big timber and they've, many of their logs were cut 20 and 24, 26, 30 feet in length.

So what about the corners, could you tell me more or if you could sort of answer my question?

Well, I should say maybe a 150-foot circle would be the very shortest part of the turn that you could make on the diameter of perhaps a 150-foot circle. But these logs were sniped at the end, so they would ride up on the cuts, the crotches, in the skids.

By snipe, what do you mean?

0:05:18

A kerf was cut by a man whose job it was to do that. He was hired as a sniper, and that was his job, to cut the edge of the log at one end so that it was pointed to some extent and would lift up onto the skids instead of digging into them. Yes, and particularly on the side on which the log was going to ride. It was his job to size the log up and say it'll ride on this side, and that was the side that he barked and that was the side that he put his best snipe on.

How can he tell which is the best side?

Just from experience, just from judging, looking at the log, sizing it up, the shape of the log, whether it was a little bit out of cylindrical in diameter, whether it had any flat places. One side of the log is often heavier than another because more growth has taken place on one side than the other. And if there was any bend in it, of course, that has a great deal to do with the ride. The valley will ride down generally. So that was important the sniper had to be able to tell how the log would ride when he got it on the skid road.

0:06:35

The earliest, right from the start, would they be using the skid road method? Or would they sometimes fell it close to the water themselves or..?

Oh yes. In many cases, if the slope was right, they didn't require a skid road. They could haul the logs with one team. At times they might have to use a block and tackle to assist them. They'd use a cable and snatch blocks. Just yarded straight into the water. But when they were going back half a mile or more they had what they called a roading crew. There'd be two teams or even three or four teams that would pick up six, eight, ten logs at a time. And back in the woods would be yarding teams, just a single team bringing out one log at a time. And these logs would be fastened together with grabs, sets of irons, fastening one log behind the other so that they could trail half a dozen logs at a time and use maybe two or three teams in front of it.

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When they got down close to the water, how did they get the logs into the water?

Yes. Well, they brought it out on what we call landing, a fairly level place where the horses could maneuver, and the logs would be unhooked there, and then rolled sideways into the water, on a roll way.

What did you call them back then? How would you describe hand-logging in general? When you speak of hand-logging, you mean of what? And what kind of a tool?

Hand-logging is a manpowered operation entirely. Axes, saws, and Gilchrist's jack was the great power machine, but it was operated by manpower. When you speak of hand-logging, there is no power concerned in it, just manpower. You've got to do all the lifting and pushing and such like by means of jacks or levers, operated by manpower only.

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What is a Gilchrist for?

Oh, it's a steel apparatus. It's got about a four-foot handle on it, and you can lift, what, a neighbourhood of 80 tons with it.

Now, aren't Gilchrist's limited by 15 to 20?

Oh, 15 to 20 tons, perhaps, but quite sufficient power to roll a big log if you had done anything like level ground.

I suppose from a really early stage, that's what really happened around this place, and it was before they even got the group going that had any, any...

Well, in the early days of hand logging, a hand logger had to be very selective in his grade of timber, because timber at that time, unless it was of high grade, you couldn't sell it.

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There was no market for it. It was very important that he chose only timber which would justify taking to Vancouver or to the nearest sawmill. That's why, for one reason, or at least that's one reason why logging has continued so long in many of the districts. The timber that was entirely suitable for the market 50 years ago later became marketable. That's right, as distances became greater, as the class of timber that the mills would accept became lower, they worked in many cases several times over the same ground.

Do you think that oxen were the first method, or was it a repurposed method?

I think oxen were in some operations used entirely, in others it was a mixture, although I understand that oxen and horses didn't work well together, so a camp usually had one or the other.

0:11:00

But I think horses were used just as much as oxen in the early days. There were some oxen used, but they were around. **Yes, there were some oxen..**

Yes. Yes, oxen were used. I know, I've talked to men that worked with oxen in Menzies Bay on Vancouver Island, which is only 25 miles from here.

What was the next big change after the oxen and the horses?

The next big change came starting around 1905, 1910 when steam donkeys first came in using steel cables. But that was all ground lead. The logs were felled.

Yes, so this, the donkey came in and did they use those on, did they have skid roads in the same way?

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Yes, some of the operations, even here in Whaletown, some of the first steam donkeys hauled their logs out on cross skids, similar to what the horses had used. But in the later phase, they found it cheaper in many cases to build fore and aft roads, and that meant that logs long, logs, oh, up to a hundred feet in length would be laid end-to-end, forming a "road" three or four logs wide with the lower, with the centre log, or maybe there might be a number of logs laid side by side and the centre ones would be lower than the outside ones. Now on those fore and aft roads originally the logs were dogged one behind the other in a long string. The yarder would bring out one log at a time, place it in the end of the fore and aft road, the dogs would be fastened into it,

and then another donkey engine might reach back as much as a mile, 5, 7,000 feet, and pull a turn, as we called it at the time, which meant anything up to perhaps a dozen logs at one time.

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Later, as road builders became more proficient, they built these roads so straight and so well graded that they could put half a dozen logs or more into the road and then just fasten on to one big log behind it and push the turn in front of the log that the choker was on, that the engine was fastened to. Those were push roads, but they were still fore and aft roads. Well, that type of logging went on until the 20s. And in many operations then, of course, it changed into a different type of logging. Starting around 1918, when the first high-lead work came into British Columbia, skid roads began to disappear, and railroads started to go in, steam railroad, standard gauge railroad. Yes.

0:14:11

And you talk about roads that were made very well, you mean roads of logs?

Yes.

When they were brought down by the donkey, they were brought side-by-side, is that right?

That formed the road, but when the logs themselves were coming out they came out single file one behind the other.

Oh, I see. The road was a long series of logs?

That's right they were laid, something in that manner end to end a little bit hollow in the middle and then the logs were hauled right down the centre. Where there was a grade of course that for and aft road turned into a chute, where the logs traveled of their own gravity. And many of the operations were on sort of bench land. They would be hauled over the fairly level land by donkey engines and then pushed into the head of the chute, and their gravity would take them down to the water. Some of those chutes might have been half a mile or a mile in length when the logs moved entirely by gravity.

0:15:21

Yes, I see that now. And then it takes the donkey engine to the strategic point.

That's right.

So that they could haul. On the donkey engine, how was the line that the line was set to? Well, in the ground lead days, when the road was not straight, rollers, big steel rollers, were fastened into stumps at the strategic points where the roads changed their angle, and the cable was led over these steel rollers, vertical rollers.

So when the log came to it, it stayed in the roads, the cable?

The cable would have been going around a steel roller on the bend. When the log came down the road and came around that bend, then the line would lead on to another roller vertical and another stump somewhere, or perhaps straight to the machine if the road was straight from there on.

0:16:26

Is the log to be choked to this thing?

Yes. The choker is simply the strap that goes around the forward end of the log that you're moving.

And that's attached to the line?

And that's attached to the line by means of a hook to the main line, which is wrapped around the drum of the donkey.

I see, and this comes around the roller, it's like a reversible road. And the protest line (quite indecipherable).

0:17:08

And, oh, yes, and then there's what's called the return line, I suppose?

Well, the main line after steam logging started was returned to the woods to the point where it was required by means of the haulback, which was a smaller cable. Originally, when I started working in the woods in 1913, we carried only the two lines on a donkey engine, a main line and a haulback. Later, a third drum was put on, in which we had a smaller cable yet that was used to haul the haulback out on the first setting. And the straw line was lightened up so a man could move four or five hundred feet by himself on level ground. The haulback, originally, half or three-quarters an inch in diameter, it took a good man to move two or three hundred feet of that along the ground. That meant when you were laying out a thousand or two thousand feet of haulback, it might even take you a day or two days just to get the haulback around the setting. But the purpose of the haulback was to bring the mainline back to where the logs were.

0:18:23

You couldn't just use the mainline instead of the haul back?

Not unless you had a very powerful machine. Machine donkey engines were developed that I ran later, in which the haulback was almost as strong as the mainline. We could haul a log backwards if it hung up.

When the logs were in the water, I suppose the booming of all this was, and not that you see it today, it's not a possibility that we have sidewinders that have been brought to do it.(indecipherable)

0:18:53

Yes, the flat boom as we know it, in which 60 or 70 foot logs were chained together, and then smaller logs of the same length were hauled across, merely to hold its shape and to stop the logs from riding one another when they got into rough water, has been in use from the days when they horse-logged. Of course, that type of boom is only suitable where you have comparatively quiet water to haul through, to tow through. In the northern part of this country, many of the timber sites were not suitable for that type of boom and they never used the flat boom. If they did try to use them, they had in many cases severe losses of booms breaking up. And today that type of boom has disappeared on the northern coast. It's come into the day when it's all carried on barges.

0:20:02

In the very early days, the hand loggers and so on, you said to us that what kind of boom they used was there something different maybe?

No, they would use a similar boom, except that they would handle it in small quantities. The original towboats in those days were little steamboats. They burned bark or driftwood, or occasionally on longer hauls, they burned coal. And of course, later on, most of the larger tugs were coal burners until the internal combustion engines came in. But many of the hand loggers would only have, oh, a few dozen logs, perhaps, in a boom. So they'd move it with these small, well, even with a rowboat or a sailboat in the first days, half a dozen or a couple of dozen logs at a time.

0:20:58

Than must have been tricky at times?

Yes, it meant a long, tough time. You'd have to tie up for bad weather, the tides and things of that kind.

You couldn't pack very much!

It was a tough time, actually, like the worst time of your life. Well, I worked when I was about nine years old, eight years old. I lived at Johnny Manson's, and he and his son and I used to tow logs off the beach with rowboats and take them out to what is now the Ulloa Islands, the Twin Islands. And there they'd form a bag boom until they got one big enough to justify a tug coming in to take it away. And we towed those logs with rowboats.

0:21:44

When the tide was against us, we just anchored and tied up until the tide turned.

Where were the logs mostly going in those first early days?

Most of those logs went to Vancouver, Vancouver, Victoria. Along the mainland side, of course, on the Vancouver Island side, there were mills in Victoria, Chemainus, Nanaimo.

And they went into Burrard Inlet, right?

Yes, most of the logs originally went into Burrard Inlet.

That's the, uh, the brown mill?

Well, that was the great Hastings Mill there for many years. I've seen the big four-masted sailing ships floating there.

0:22:28

And the Port Moody Mill on the other side. Not the Port Moody Mill, the Moodyville Mill.

Yes, on the North Shore there was a mill also, and some up in Port Moody.

Tell me about these people now, these early loggers. I gather from other people that they were quite unique (paraphrase; interviewer's voice indistinct)

0:22:58

There was a sort of a change. Do you hear about this at all) Interviewers voice indecipherable)

Well, a logger in many cases in the period perhaps up to 1905, 1910, even later, a proportion of them, were single men or men who had families that were permanent residents in some district, perhaps in the city. And the men went out when the snow and such like was suitable for the camp to open up in the spring, and they worked there until weather conditions shut them down in the fall. Well in many of those camps there were no women, so it was a rather rough...

0:23:46

When I started in the camps in 13, we carried our own blankets. If we wanted a bath, we had to heat our own water on coal oil tins on an open fire outside of the bunkhouse. You did your own washing. If you had a pillowcase, you did your own washing, you provided it yourself. When you came into camp, I was given a pally-ass (pailasse, French for straw mattress), as they called it, which is a big gunny sack, and there was hay or straw available in a shed, and I packed it myself.

0:24:19

You could put in more or less straw to suit your own liking, and laid that on the bunk and spread your blankets, your own blankets on, and that was it. When you went aboard the Union steam ship to go from one camp to another, or go to Vancouver or home, wherever you were going, you went aboard with your cork boots on. The boats had steel decks. Originally, they had wooden decks on which your corks would hold. But at the period I started, some of the ships were getting steel decks on, and you couldn't stand on a sloping steel deck with cork boots. So they had signs up, no cork boots allowed.

0:25:00

But there were only two or three or half a dozen staterooms on the ships, and they were usually reserved for women. So we just spread our blankets all the way down the gangways, down the

hallways in the ship at nighttime, and that was it. That lasted until during the First War. How would you describe a cork boot? A cork boot is simply a heavy leather boot. Might be eight inches, ten inches, twelve inches high, but in the soles are screwed or driven in steel pegs that project about half an inch and are sharp on the end.

Are they kept sharp?

No, we didn't sharpen them.

0:25:50

If they wore down badly over rocks and things of that kind, you simply put in more caulks. We call them cork boots, but the spelling of the word is C-A-U-L-K.

Those caulks would really chew up a wood floor, right?

Those steel pegs, yes, you'd see that on the falling boards that we used for the fallers in the woods. You had to have cork boots in order to hold your stand safely when you're swinging an axe and sledge and sawing and that sort of thing. We usually made those falling "spring" boards out of maple. It'd be about six inches wide and four feet long.

Were those the kind of things that the boom men would wear too?

Yes. Everybody in camp wore them except the cooks perhaps, but everybody that worked in the woods wore cork boots.

Did they usually have no other boots?

0:27:04

And, oh no, we carried one suit of clothes suitable for walking up the city street, and a pair of smooth-soled shoes to go with them. And some of us had white shirts in our packs. But, uh...

What was the costume you wore at the time?

Well, I was what, 13 years old when I started, and I didn't really feel I was a real logger, although I was drawing a man's wages and working men's hours, until I wore a pair of cork boots, heavy wool socks, heavy underwear the year round, drawers and shirts. Perhaps in the hot summer weather I'd discard the underwear and simply wear a pair of denim waist-high trousers with a blue woolen shirt above it and felt hat.

Broad brim?

Not very broad, three inches maybe, something of... But for fancy work, we cut the bottoms off the legs of the trousers, staggged them as we called them, so that they matched the top of our 8 or 10 inch boots.

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0:28:35

You wore braces on your pants, not a belt.

You cut them so that they come up above the boot?

Yes, just above the boot. And of course they frayed out and that was part of your fancy dress like the cowboys.

That's what you dressed up as a logger in your life.

Yes, that was my impression of the...

It was almost as dark as a blue denim and a blue shirt. Yes, when I started we very seldom touched anything in the way of rain clothes. We wore a Mackinaw shirt, a heavy wool Mackinaw shirt in the wintertime to go in the snow and rain if we needed them.

0:29:24

But starting about that time, around the first war, they began to wear what we called tin clothes. Oh, tin pants, tin hats, tin coats. Of course, they weren't tin, they were merely canvas, but impregnated so that when the weather was cool or cold, they would crackle. They were quite stiff, quite hard to work in at times. But later that developed into rubber clothing and synthetic plastic clothing.

He wasn't aware of the, of the, of the wear, or something for the hot weather in the woods?

0:30:00

No, all you did was take off your underwear and just work in your overalls and undershirt usually.

(Indecipherable interviewers words, end of tape)

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