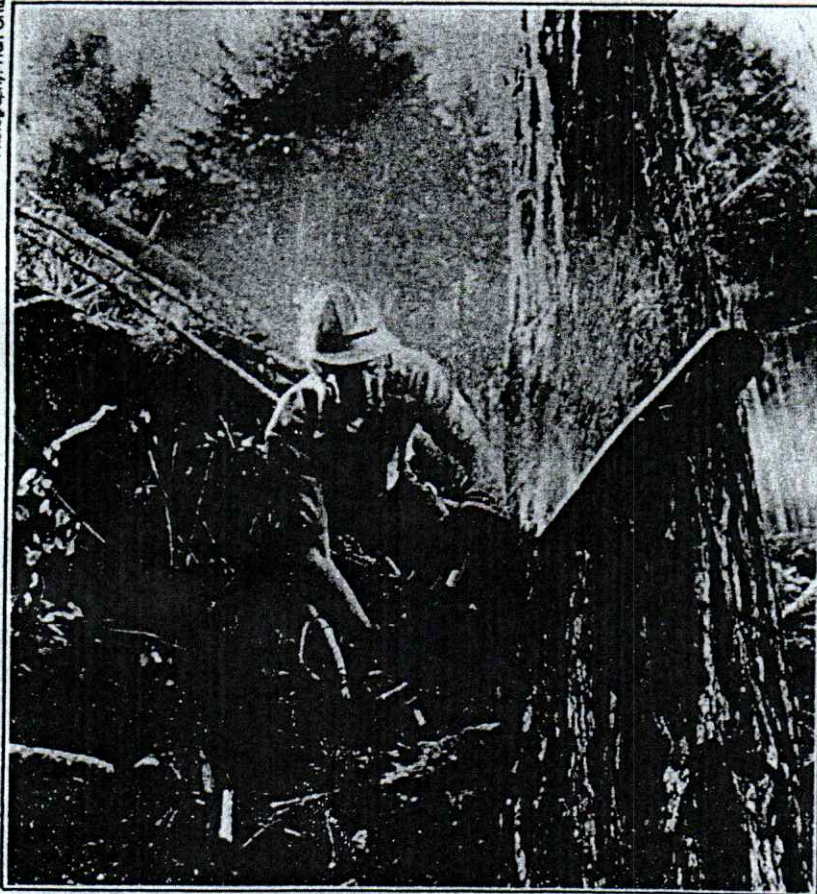


**Environment**

**Two Parables Of The Timber Trade**

By Paul McHugh

Photography: Fran Ortiz



*"The echo of chainsaws was an alarm clock, awakening residents to the fact the North Coast's heaviest industry had dropped in for a visit."*

■ The site was a small residential lot in Redway, a town near Garberville, just a few quiet miles off 101. What made the site special were its trees: stately old-growth redwoods that soared up to dwarf the homes scattered among their cool shadows. The man who answered the O'Kanes' ad seemed likeable and sincere. He introduced himself — Walt Wilkinson of Miranda — and said he'd been doing some carpentry and wanted to put in a house as an investment. The land had been in the O'Kane family for three generations. Val and Rhonda appreciated its beauty, but also had become aware that difficulty in obtaining a septic permit meant they'd have to sell the lot in order to finance their home building elsewhere. Walt said that would be no problem for him, he had the equipment to put in fill and would it be all right to take down a couple of trees to make room for a foundation? Val told him to contact the powers-that-be; apparently strict ordinances governed tree cutting in this residential area. The O'Kanes were happy they'd found a buyer with the means and desire to use the land carefully. Walt's down payment was accepted; escrow closed April 27, 1978.

On June first, a Thursday, the logging equipment of Carl Richardson clanked and rattled up to the lot. Skilled timber fallers climbed up the huge, shaggy trunks and began dropping limbs — first step in the process by which living trees are transformed into board feet. The echo of their chainsaws was also an alarm clock, awakening residents to the fact that the North Coast's heaviest industry had dropped into their supposedly secure neighborhood for a visit. By Friday, the general alarm and confusion were evolving into a reaction. While a crowd of people of various beliefs, appearances, and persuasions gathered at the site to engage in spirited shouting matches with the loggers and each other, a few local residents and realtors bounced back and forth between the Sheriff's office, California Division of Forestry, and County Planning, trying to find out what was going on and to get it stopped.

Richardson, hired by Wilkinson for the logging, maintained he was just clearing for a homesite. But there was no record of even a permit application to begin such construction. There was, however, dated and filed on May 16th, an Exemption from filing a Timber Harvest Plan. Granted because the lot was under three acres, the Exemption meant that Wilkinson could cut down as many trees in any manner that he liked.

That afternoon, as opposition mounted to having this occur, a hurried conference was held at the Sheriff's in Garberville. Participants included Stan Gold from Humboldt County Planning, Richardson, law officers, and Mike Selsen, an unlicensed forester with the California Division of Forestry. Despite the Exemption, there were prohibitive county ordinances about commercial cutting in a residential zone. After phone calls to various sources, it was decided that the logging could continue if a loophole in the ordinance was used, which permitted the cutting of "diseased or dangerous trees." Mike Selsen's document, signed that afternoon shortly before state and county



offices closed for the weekend, read, "In light of recent wind damage to personal property by wind blown trees in and about the town of Redway as well as throughout Humboldt County, it is my opinion that the trees on Ap 77-073-05 in the most part because of there (sic) height and size are potentially dangerous to the adjacent property and the main county road traversed by many people traveling this area."

Val O'Kane says, with almost more awe than bitterness in his voice, that no tree has ever fallen in the memory of his family on that lot, and in the high windstorms that hit the North Coast last Christmas, maybe one limb came down. The topper now cutting on the site was overheard to say that these were among the healthiest he had seen.

There was no strong wind on Saturday, June 3rd, but limbs were falling fast and furious. And the first tree was felled. Someone finally notified the O'Kanes about the happenings on this lot where they still had a two-thirds interest, and they drove out. The site reportedly looked like a joint logger's/ecologist's demonstration crossed with a northwoods primal encounter group. There were CDF men, loggers, residents, environmentalists, deputies, CHP's, realtors, and old-timers who just came to criticize or applaud the delicate expertise needed to fall huge trees that stood near to homes and powerlines.

The O'Kanes tried desperately to reach officials of the closed offices, tried arguing and reasoning with Richardson, tried even to buy back Wilkinson's interest in the land, all to no avail. As the tense scenario unfolded at the site, spreading eddies of sympathetic and antagonistic reaction out through the county, the immense and venerable trees continued to crash to the ground.

Finally, on Monday, the O'Kanes obtained three restraining orders on the grounds that Wilkinson and his logger were laying waste to the land in which they still had an interest. Rhonda O'Kane served one on Carl Richardson at the logging site, while her husband Val went off to hand another to Wilkinson, if he could find him, and another to the company buying the logs. Richardson dropped his in the dirt and walked away. The Sheriff's Department told Rhonda they couldn't enforce the restraining order unless they got another order ordering them to. The cutting continued.

It's hard to believe Rhonda did what she did next. She is a slight, dark, soft-spoken woman, but there is an intensity of feeling in her eyes that belies the gentle manner. She drove her car up under the next tree to be cut, threw her keys into the brush, and sat, refusing to budge, despite yells of "Get out of here, bitch!", and "Drop a limb on her!" She was dragged away by a Highway Patrolman, who told her he was protecting her, and who scolded her for breaking the law. When she demanded to know why he couldn't enforce the law against the loggers as well, telling him about the ignored restraining order, things began taking a different turn. The operation ground slowly to a halt.

The chainsaws were silent Tuesday. But Tuesday afternoon, an attorney for Wilkinson handed a check for the balance on the land to an attorney retained by the O'Kanes, and the last lever they had on the situation evaporated. Within a few days the clearcut was complete, and eighteen big stumps sat surrounded by bare and dusty ground.

It had been a good week for some. Walt Wilkinson had paid \$18,500 for the lot; rumored profits from the lumber were upwards of

\$50,000. After it was all over, a "For Sale" sign appeared on one of the stumps. When confronted by someone who wanted to know if the barren lot was really to be resold, Richardson laughed and said, "Oh no, it just must be that stump!"

Later, another sign appeared on the site. It read, "Quarantined: The Disease Is Greed."

A week later the County Supervisors locked the barn door by changing the ordinance which had provided a loophole big enough for Wilkinson & Co. to drive a logging truck through. CDF increased the requirements for the certification of diseased or dangerous trees. Meanwhile, the loggers, in a final flourish of indifference, dumped the slash and debris from the site on a steep bank of the Eel, where the first rain would wash it down, adding its bit to the problems of the second-fastest eroding watershed in the world. (They were cited for this by the Department of Fish and Game, but charges were later dropped. In late October, the Water Quality Control Board issued a clean-up and abatement order to be executed by November 30.)

Another story, another attitude.

On the Albion River, about seventy miles south of Redway as the crow flies, many more miles if one tries to follow the winding roads, a crew of local people is working to repair the river, to restore it to a semblance of free-flowing health. By any standard, the Albion has been ravaged by old logging practices. Up and down the river and its tributaries, huge jams of logs and debris left or dumped in the river block its flow, and behind them siltation from active slides, overcut banks, and poorly built roads chokes the spawning gravel of steelhead and salmon. In some places, the

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