

## Wanted: One Wheel Catskinner

Sometime in the early 1950's the following classified ad appeared in *The Herald and News*, the largest (and only) daily newspaper in Klamath County, Oregon.

**Wanted:** One wheel catskinner. Apply to the Employment Office, Weyerhaeuser Lumber Company, Bly, Oregon.

A naive reader might wonder why a logging company would be advertising its need for a cat-hating unicyclist. The advert would have been somewhat more understandable, at least locally, if it had appeared as “One wheel-catskinner ...”. In 1950s Eastern Oregon a “wheel-cat” was the prime piece of logging equipment. It consisted of a big D-8 Caterpillar tractor towing a logging arch, which is a massive upright “post” mounted on tracks – the “wheel” terminology being a historical artifact. The arch was used to lift the front end of the logs off the ground to make them easier to drag. The logs, sometimes four or more, were towed by massive cable “chokers” set by the “choker-setters” on the ground. That’s a “wheel-cat” and, of course, “catskinner” follows from earlier “drivers” common in the west – oxskinner and muleskinners who drove teams of oxen and mules. So, a “wheel-catskinner” is a person who can efficiently drive a big D-8 Cat and its arch to move Oregon’s big logs from where the “fallers” left them to the “landing” where they are loaded on trucks or railroad cars to be hauled to a sawmill.



A “wheel-cat” with a “medium-sized” Oregon log.

A memory tightly coupled to the “one wheel catskinner” advert is the summer and fall in which I was a “bob-tail catskinner” working for the Sam Edwards Logging Company. A “bob-tail catskinner” is several ranks

below a “wheel-catskinner”. First, there is no logging arch and, second, the tractor was only a smaller old model RD-7 Cat – though still a significant piece of machinery with a very large dozer blade on its front. As there was no arch, the chokers were hooked to a fan-shaped “bob-tail” that fastened

to the drawbar of the tractor and, consequently, the logs had to drag through the dirt and underbrush on their way to the landing.

We met Sam Edwards when he came to Keno Springs Ranch to harvest the merchantable trees for Harold Mallory, the owner. Sam was a bear of a man. He was tall and weighed well over 200 pounds. His bib-overalls were well-filled with a big belly – not a Santa Claus jelly-belly, but a hard, working man’s belly. Sam was a pragmatic man who faced life’s difficulties with a calm demeanor and a “let’s get it fixed” approach. This was fortunate because the Edwards Logging Company was a gyppo outfit. Now “gyppo” was not, at that time and place, a pejorative. Generally, it indicated people working “by the piece” where, in principle, they were paid for hard work and efficiency and, conversely, not paid for laziness or ineptitude. With that in mind, for a gyppo, whether hauling sacks of potatoes or hay bales from a field, splitting juniper trees into fence posts, or harvesting their neighbor’s grain or trees, pride dictated that the standard response to “So, how ya’ doin’?” was “Well -- it’s better’n wages.”

In this instance, Sam, as a gyppo logger, didn’t work for an established logging company and did not buy stands of timber for harvesting. Rather, he contracted to do the falling, yarding, and hauling of the logs to a sawmill for a share of the mill’s buying price. Sam had fallers, a couple of the newly developed light-weight chainsaws, and a small, but good, truck. He did not have, however, a tractor to do the yarding and the many other tasks that required a big tractor with a dozer blade. So, when he contracted to log a large stand of timber on a ranch some 15 miles from Keno Springs, he arranged to rent our RD-7 and to hire me as catskinner and my friend, Ronnie Wilson, as choker-setter.

Things began pretty well for the Sam Edwards Logging Company. But, to explain the vicissitudes that were to come its way, I need to explain how trees, or rather logs, made their way from the ground, where the fallers’ chainsaws put them, to the sawmill where they were to meet their destiny.

I start this tale in the woods where the logs lie helter-skelter amongst the brush and smaller trees. It is the choker-setter’s job to select a group of close-lying logs and put chokers on them. It is the catskinner’s job to get the tractor close enough to each, in turn, to attach their chokers to the bobtail on the Cat’s drawbar and to drag those logs to the landing and

stack them in a pile, called a “deck”, for loading on a truck. The deck is centered and at right angles to, and 20 or 25 feet from, the gin pole.



The gin pole is a long and strong log set at a steep angle with its top end held in place by at least two wire cables behind and at least one in front. The supporting cables, the guy wires, are wrapped around sturdy stumps and fastened. In addition to the connectors for the guy wires at the top of the pole is attached a strong block, or pulley, threaded with the wire rope used to lift the logs for

loading. The tricky part of this setup is transforming a log lying on the ground into an almost vertical, and stable, gin pole. That particular problem will be discussed below.

*Loading logs on railroad cars using a gin pole.*

Once the deck is formed, using the bull-dozer blade to form the pile, the loading starts when a logging truck arrives at the landing with its semi-trailer riding piggy-back. The four-wheel trailers used in the east for small 16- or 8-foot logs do not work for the western 32-footers. The truck pulls up beside the deck with the trailer’s wheels centered under the pully on the gin pole. One end of the cable through the pully is fastened to the trailer and the other end is attached to the Cat which starts and lifts the trailer off the truck.



The truck pulls forward and the trailer is lowered and fastened to its hitch on the back of the truck. The combination is aligned with the logs of the deck, and loading begins. The choker-setter and one other, often the truck driver, each have a hook they can set into opposite ends of a log. Then the catskiner

lifts the log, lets it swing over the truck, and sets it down in just the perfect place to make a good and stable load for the truck. One end of the logs of the first layer sit on a bunker on the truck and the other end sit on a similar bunker on the trailer. Once a truck is loaded, chains are wrapped around

the logs and tightened with chain-tighteners using 3-foot-long pipes over their handles as “come-alongs” to assist in the process. The truck then takes the logs to the sawmill where they are scaled to determine their value and then dumped in the sawmill’s pond or stacked in its log deck. The trailer is then loaded on the truck and together they return to the landing for the next load. That is exactly how the process is intended to work. Unfortunately, there are several places in the procedure where things might go wrong – in fact, in most places things can go awry.

The first two weeks went well. On the first day I learned how a gyppo logging outfit sets up a landing with its gyn pole securely – more or less – in place. One needs a somewhat level area in the midst of three stumps with the proper configuration to form the anchors for the guy wires -- two to the back and one to the front. The catskiner then pulls or pushes the potential gyn pole into its approximate position and the hardware connecting the three guy wires and the lifting pulley to the pole is attached. The catskiner then pushes the pole to tighten the two back guy wires equally and line the pole up to split the angle between them. At this point gyppo creativity comes to the fore. Two stout limbs, 6 to 8 feet long each having a fork on one end, are placed upright close to the potential upper end of the pole with the backward guy wires setting in their forked upper ends. Then, as the catskiner uses the dozer blade to push on the other end of the pole, the tightening of the guys lifts the top of the pole so that, with great care, the catskiner can keep pushing on the butt end of the gyn pole to raise the upper end sufficiently high in the air. The man on the forward guy needs to ensure that the pole does not come over backwards on the Cat. Only once in the season did this complex maneuver go wrong. At that time the butt end slipped on the dozer blade and the pole came back over toward the Cat – and me. I stopped the Cat and jumped off. The pole fell back but hit only the dozer blade. It broke a casting that had to be repaired, but it was a very minor ending to what could have been a serious event.

The sawmill in Bly was about 20 miles from our landing over a forest road that was mostly dirt. The road had some very steep and crooked parts that required slow low gear travel on the way up with a load and good brakes to keep a safe speed down on the way back to the landing. Under these conditions, we seldom made more than two loads of logs per day. That gave Ron and I plenty of time to yard the logs at the landing and “bump the

knots” with axes and a chainsaw to remove the broken branches and stubs left on the logs by the fallers.

The first sign of trouble occurred when, one afternoon, the truck did not return at the expected time. After about an hour’s wait, a pickup arrived with our driver on the passenger side. He was wild-eyed, wild-haired, missing his hard hat, and with a scratched and bloody face and torn shirt. It soon came out – he lost his air brakes on the steep hill. He’d forgotten rule number 1 for a truck driver – test your brakes before starting a long down grade. This mistake generated mistake number 2. By the time he realized his brakes were gone the truck had gained a good speed. At that point he, naturally, grabbed the hand brake and pulled back as hard as possible. Unfortunately, the hand brake acted on a drum fastened to the driveshaft. The drum gave the brake a lot of leverage. When the brake was sharply applied at that speed, the drum stopped, but the driveshaft didn’t. It snapped leaving the truck totally at the mercy of gravity. There was only one possible outcome for the truck, but, luckily, many for the driver – not all of them bad.

We all jumped in our pickups and went to check the truck. We found it below a high bank, upside down, facing uphill, and lying on a cab smashed flat on the driver’s side. The trailer lay beyond the truck. It, too, was upside down with its tongue pointing back up the hill. Clearly, the truck had somersaulted as it left the bank, threw its trailer on down the hill, and, unbelievably, threw the driver from behind the wheel, where he would have died, and across the seat so he could climb out the open passenger-side window when all came to rest. It was no wonder that the driver was rattled and wild-eyed. He had faced death much too closely.

With the truck completely unrepairable, Sam “gyppoed” the log hauling to Gordon, a logging truck owner/driver. Gordon’s truck was larger than Sam’s with tandem axels on both the truck and trailer. It was quite new, and extremely well cared-for. It looked to us that Gordon must rinse the truck off every night as it was very bright and shiny when it first appeared at the landing each morning.

For two or three weeks, with a larger truck, a lot of logs were hauled to the mill. It kept Ronnie and I much busier as, not only was the truck larger, Gordon made the round-trip faster. During the time Gordon was doing the

hauling, Sam took the unharmed engine and transmission from the wrecked truck and installed them in an old army surplus truck. However, with this move Sam showed that his “fix it” need was much in excess of his “fix it” ability.

When the engine, or transmission, of one truck is moved to the frame of another of a different model or make, the bolts through its mounting brackets are not going to match the holes in the new frame. New bolt holes need to be made in the frame. A bolt holding an engine in place needs a bolt hole that just fits it. Unfortunately, Sam did not take the time to make that type of bolt hole. Rather, he decided to make his bolt holes with an acetylene cutting torch. As someone who has done that, I can confirm the difficulty involved. One makes a hole that looks just right, but, when tested with a bolt, there is invariably a little “bump” which stops the bolt – so a little more cutting is done to remove that. But then another “bump” shows up, and when that is removed the hole is now too large and the bolt, even when tightened, has the possibility of moving within the hole.

Consider now the situation of a truck with its engine and transmission held to its frame with dozens of bolts each able to move in their bolt holes as the truck drives over a rough woods road. Add to this the fact that those bolt holes are not really smooth and, as the bolts “jiggle” around within those rough holes, the bolts wear out. In the case of Sam’s truck, it was little over a week before the front engine-mount bolts wore out and allowed the front of the engine to fall down on the frame’s front cross-member. We learned, over time, to anticipate this problem and replace those bolts before they failed. Those, however, were not the only bolts under attack by wear and tear in Sam’s “Flexible Flyer”.

The “Frankenstein” truck had other embarrassments. The tongue of the trailer had been badly cracked in the wreck so, despite Sam’s effort in splinting the tongue with strap iron and wire, when hooked to the truck it had a definite sag in the middle, kind of a faint Cheshire Cat grin when viewed from the side. Another indignity suffered by the poor truck was due to a combination of ignorance and carelessness on my part.

One day I failed to align one log with the log deck. Instead of being centered on the truck and trailer, it extended about 8 feet out toward the truck’s front end. Consequently, when we went to lift the log that end came

up first and the log pivoted on its other end. Unfortunately, it pivoted toward the truck which was sitting there peacefully with its driver-side door open. That big log swung over and hit that open-door edge-on. The door just crumpled up like a broken wing leaving the truck in an obviously unnatural state. When we were talking about this later, Ronnie said, "It's lucky we didn't do that to Gordon's truck, or he'd have killed us both with the knot-bumper axe." Which was probably true.

A replacement for a crumpled door of an old Army surplus truck might be had in some wrecking yard in Oregon or California, but where? This being a definite problem for Sam he took the gyppo solution. The door was removed, and the truck was driven, by Sam, without a driver's side door. Now this was a time before seatbelts, but it was not considered a real good idea to drive a truck without a door. Luckily, the trip to the sawmill did not involve much highway driving and Sam did not arouse any unpleasant attention. So, at that point we had a truck with the habit of dropping its engine down on its frame, a sagging tongue for its trailer, and a missing door on its driver's side.

All progressed normally, in the gyppo sense, for a while. With Sam driving we managed at least two loads a day for quite some time. One day, however, Sam pulled into the landing, I lifted the trailer off the truck, Sam pulled ahead so that I could lower the trailer behind the truck, and Ronnie fastened the trailer to its hitch on the rear-end of the truck. However, when Sam tried to pull the trailer into alignment with the log deck for loading, the bolts holding the trailer hitch to the truck finally gave up to the miles of jiggling around in those misshapen bolt holes in the frame, and the hitch, with the tongue attached, fell to the ground. That was an easy problem to solve with replacement bolts, but, just as we were standing discussing the situation, a green Forest Service pickup pulled up and stopped beside us and the sagging trailer tongue with its strap-iron splint.

Out of this green Forest Service pickup stepped the Forest Service Safety Inspector. He glanced at my Cat and noticed that we still did not have a metal canopy over the driver. He, then, looked at the trailer tongue which, with its truck-end on the ground, had a definite lop-sided and sheepish grin. Walking past the end of the truck, still showing the worn-out bolts in their misshapen holes, he stepped up to the door-less driver's side of the truck

and reached in to test the brake pedal. It is very difficult to “pump” brakes by hand, so the pedal went almost to the floorboards due to a perpetual lack of brake fluid. That did not impress the Safety Inspector. He then walked back, still without a word, to check our guy wires holding up the gin pole. Unfortunately, at that landing the necessary stumps were a little farther apart than was desirable so our regular guy wires were too short and had to be spliced. The splices were done with a collection of “cable clamps”, which is not considered the safest way to splice cables – in fact, it was prohibited. In addition, both the ends of our regular wires and those of the extending cables were all frayed and spikey as they stuck out on both ends of the series of clamps. Medusa’s pigtails must have looked somewhat similar. That, to the un-gyppo eye, did not increase confidence in the future of our outfit.

At this point we all thought we were finished logging. But, instead of closing us down for the multitude of safety violations, the inspector just went to his green Forest Service pickup, got in and drove away! At that time, I didn’t know as much about genetics as I do now, but I’ve since realized that he decided he would be doing the human gene-pool a great dis-service by stopping us from killing ourselves.

Our logging went on for a few weeks more before we were finished. At the end I drove the Cat back to Keno Springs and went to plowing, Ronnie went back to his family in Sprague River, and Sam went somewhere else. I’m not sure what happened to the truck, but I doubt if it hauled many logs after that.