

Three Miles from Gold Hill

Highway 234—Sam's Valley, Oregon



Jack Lapine's mobile home was on Highway 234 about three miles from Gold Hill, Oregon. Every evening Jack walked across to Sam's Creek Road, then about a half mile up the road, then back to check game trails and look for deer sign in the cool of the evening. It was 1987.

It began to be noticeable two years after Medco sold out to Amalgamated Sugar. Between I-5 and Highway 62 on Highway 234, where before the industrial clearcut on Medco land north and east Mt. McLoughlin, you usually couldn't catch a ride on a windshield if you were a hitchhiking bug. Fully loaded log trucks rumbled at top speed every two minutes from an ever-widening 250,000-acre moonscape-like clearcut being created near Butte Falls. This was probably less than half of the trucks streaming out of the clearcut effort; the rest were heading on down Highway 62 past Eagle Point and White City to the Medford Corporation's log pond, where logs were processed for the Medford mill that sat beside Highway 99 and encompassed a massive amount of south Medford, Oregon.

The log pond had been feeding the mill for decades, starting out from a narrow-gauge railroad that snaked back up into the Butte Falls area from Medford. By this time the railroad was just a memory, but up through the 1960s, once a day the little train used to pull the harvested logs down the track and through Eagle Point to Medco's log pond.

Jack was about five feet from stepping on the other side of Highway 234 when a log truck rounding a corner and 200 feet away crossed the Sam's Creek Bridge doing at least 80,

its driver blew the horn, applied the jake brake and made an easy and slight swerve to the right toward Jack. Whether this was intentional, or a slight lapse at the steering wheel by the driver, is unknown.

A walnut grove shared the five acres on the other side of Highway 234 from Jack's trailer with huge Queen Anne Cherry trees as tall as Tarzan's house, and Jack was not thinking of picking the ripe sweet morsels that would come on in three weeks like he had been before he saw the log truck seemingly trying to kill him. Jack dove for the weeds lining the ditch. He got up to see the truck as it started to close on the right turn just before the BLM park below the falls, and Jack was damn mad.

Medco had been the Timber King of Jackson County for 40 years. Eventually the entire railroad gave way to log trucks with cheap diesel and better highways, and the Medford Corporation, a public corporation that was mostly locally owned and unionized, provided family wage jobs for many families in Southern Oregon. If you worked for Medco, you would have a job for life unless you screwed up.

Jack pulled himself out of the ditch, as dust from the tires of the log truck that had swerved over the shoulder was still pluming up in the air; he'd already started back across the road to his Datsun pickup, a beat-up monkey-shit brown 1968 job that sat in front of Jack's mobile home twenty yards from the Rogue River. The Datsun started on first crank after Jack had thrown a baseball bat in the old rice grinder's bed, and only one car came down 234 behind the log truck before the Datsun raised its own dust cloud as its tires screeched out onto Highway 234.

In the middle 1980s along with Disco, Amalgamated Sugar had, like robber barons from a Japanese Samurai movie,

come into the Rogue Valley counting assets. Medco's shares were at \$28 per share and the Texas firm lined up a loan from East Coast banks and offered the moms and pops in sleepy Southern Oregon \$45 per share, and everyone sold out with assets worth many times the selling price. All the large trees were now leveraged to the banks, so it was no surprise to anyone who knew what was going on that the trees began to fall.

Medco didn't do clearcuts prior to the takeover, but rather employed a system of roads, and many of the roads, which were onetime railroad beds, snaked through their privately-owned forest where great stands of Douglas fir, white fir, ponderosa pine and sugar pine caught the prodigious winter rains just east of the Rogue-Umpqua divide with good volcanic soil from the Cascades. Enormous trees grew here, some of them taking the whole bed of a log truck and, while not quite redwood size, they were in the same ballpark. When you came up on one of the massive conifers in the forest it was an encounter with nature that made anyone, timber beast and environmentalist alike, approach this presence with awe. All the scientific definitions of old growth were met on the vast majority of Medco land, while in the rest of the Pacific Northwest, forests were being mowed down by the clearcut paradigm of logging that had been adopted by the notion of Silviculture, or tree science that operated very much like cabbage farming.

Very much unlike cabbage farmers, Medco's general forest practice was to base their logging operations off the little roads, entering into a harvest area by a road to take a red-topped fir here that had some form of disease in it, a butt-swelled one over there that certainly had a fungus eating up the first log, a half-dozen leaners on the other side of the road, and maybe thin out a clump or two of fir at the edge of a sugar pine

stand. The sugar pine would be noted and left until the price rose periodically, so they'd stay and then be thinned a little as a sought-after commodity. Three to five to ten years on, the foresters would be back sizing it all up, to do this all again. You could log a forest that way—well, you could log a forest that way forever. So, Medco's timber plan in the middle '80s went out to 2020, and that was not the end of their harvest—it was just as far as Medco wanted to plan.

Jack's Datsun had picked up speed and wound down Highway 234 that hugged all the bends in the river. Towards Gold Hill, past Lyman's Riffle, past Gold Nugget Park, past Ray Ridge's garage, downriver it hurtled like an imaginary little Sherman battle tank, Jack gritting his teeth and gripping the steering wheel as the little tires squalled on every turn he made, and from the rear of the little truck it looked like the Datsun was going to tip over and roll. Then on past the water treatment plant, past the softball fields, past Powerhouse Falls, then a right turn into Gold Hill and at the Gold Hill Hotel Jack could see the log truck, a red Kenworth, making it through the town. Just as he rattled across Southern Pacific's track, he saw the full load of logs going north on Highway 99 out of town to Medco's Rogue River sawmill.

Medco owned three sawmills, and its corporation had everyone working well into the next century with little change, as has been said already. It was hard to get a job with Medco: nobody gave up their jobs as Medco paid the highest wages in the valley and the loggers, millworkers and foresters had a well-oiled machine that was working toward four generations of legacy. They could continue to log this way—well, always, or dang near, with a little supplemental timber from federal bids, market ups and downs. There were rarely any lay-offs, and everybody always came back when there was one. When the takeover happened, abandoning this timber plan meant a

calculated end to all of it—Amalgamated Sugar made that happen in about five years.

Now Jack was hardly a Sierra Club member, and he fell timber for a living for about fifteen years until a deck of logs rolled on him as he was making his way to a landing with his saw, hard hat and faller's axe—he was pinned under a log for a long while and spent a long time in surgery, and now had Teflon tubes for arteries in his shoulders. While Jack had left the woods, several friends still worked for Medco, and he knew the whole story and he, like his friends, knew it was the end of an era. Jack, however, could still swing a bat.

The Rogue Valley kind of funnels in between some small mountains around Gold Hill where the Rogue River, I-5, Highway 99, and the Southern Pacific railroad run narrowly parallel all the way to Grants Pass. Highway 99 follows the river pretty close, winding a bit here and there, and passes St. Innocent's Russian Orthodox Church sporting a billboard-size picture of Jesus after the Orthodox fashion on the south end of the church, that at the time before they built the new church on the other side of Highway 99, could be seen from both I-5 but a drive-by closer view of the Christian Deity from 99—where northbound, Jesus appeared to the left of the road in 1987, as you rounded a corner.

Jack had caught up to the Kenworth just after Gold Hill and laid on the little truck's horn all the way to St. Innocent's as the Datsun pickup was tailgating the truck, and only stopped honking about a half mile from Medco's mill, located at the south end of the City of Rogue River.

The Kenworth had only four or five big old growth sticks on it to make a load; the truck took a left into the log yard and Jack passed it on the left as the log yard opened up wide so the truck driver could see him and gunned the little

brown pickup as it brodied to a stop in the gravel fifty feet from the log truck's path. Jack jumped out of the Datsun and reached into the bed for the bat in an athletic motion; the truck driver stopped, and Jack started to yell. Workers from all over the yard ran into the mill as Jack yelled and beat the ground with his bat. What he said was not recorded of course, and as mad as he was, Jack could not remember exactly what he said; he of course invited the truck driver outside the truck for a beating, but his rage, at the red truck that almost killed him, only cost the truck company a headlight. Jack and everyone else in the valley who knew anything about it thought of the greed that was going to make a way of life end for a lot of folks, and thought it was wrong and undeniably this was part of Jack's rage.

As Medco's timber holdings were turning into an almost 250,000-acre clearcut, life was continuing with a middle class dwindling and the service industry making available jobs for only half or less of the prevailing wage of the timber industry. Farms were sold, houses were sold, people moved on. The contiguous notion of community changed to something else a decade after the dust settled at the Rogue River mill that day.

The truck driver's action of locking himself in the Kenworth probably kept Jack out of the state pen. Perhaps the smiling bearded brothers from St. Innocent's had been praying for the mill workers with their three-hour stand-up worship and liturgy that went all the way back to the Apostles themselves, or perhaps they'd been praying for Jack, but after his rage was spent in the sort yard of the mill, Jack got in his Datsun and drove home.

The corporate office that had its presence in the city of its own name closed after a good part of the twentieth century

was winding down. The bankers on the East Coast who had loaned Amalgamated Sugar the money to create this large clearcut, had all their money back with interest. Amalgamated Sugar had a windfall of profit avalanche into its coffers because the assets of the standing timber was logged and sold and was several times the \$45 a share they'd paid.

The Rogue River mill stayed open, buying logs from all over with its location right off Interstate 5. A journalist covering this for a small magazine at the time, kept asking corporate men question after question, and at some juncture each of them would become unnerved at the challenge of the magnitude of change and at the obvious hardship that was going to be visited on those folks who would lose their jobs when the timber was all gone.

“Well, you know this is all legal!” they would say.

The small owl was the central character in a rage over timber. The owl would be happy in a pear orchard eating mice despite its natural habitat of old-growth forest; the friendly little bird had only two enemies there, the goshawk and an occasional barred owl. The advent of a checkerboard of West Coast clearcut forests, however, brought the owls' evening mouse hunting near created edges, where not only barred owls, and goshawks could dine on the slow-flying bird, but also great horned owl, snowy owl, bald eagle, American kestrel, sharp-shinned hawk, northern goshawk, red-tailed hawk, Cooper's hawk, feral house cats and others who had opportunistically spent 40 years of West Coast clearcut forestry adding the old-growth denizen, the northern spotted owl, to their dinner menu, and the small bird's population catastrophically plummeted.

The scientific committee that under court order examined the bird's plight likened it to the canary in the coal

mine and warned that the Federal Government would have to choose between tree plantations and forests.

A plane ride from Seattle to San Francisco on a sunny day every winter with the snow showed the checkerboard square of clearcuts down the whole range of the West Coast. So, that was the truth: the federal managers of both the Forest Service and the BLM stopped listening to what the common sense of the relatively small private company had known—to keep logging as a viable industry, which was the Medco plan, of a regular sustained yield of timber, that never cut more timber than was growing back. Log it that way and it could have gone on forever.

When the spotted owl became a threatened species, logging on the West Coast slowed to a standstill on federal lands. Private timber that was being meted out on the West Coast was cut for the market demand because of the gap the reduced federal cut created, and then our little owl went further in the hole as private timberland began to disappear at a heightened level. The creature's best hope may now be interbreeding with the barred owl.

The Medco Timber plan that went to 2020 had all its timber holdings in an old-growth status. The locally owned corporation had mill workers, loggers, and foresters working and no clearcuts and plenty of habitat for all creatures.

This was an answer and was in perfect keeping with Adam Smith; Amalgamated Sugar, despite Adam Smith and the tragedy of the commons, was in keeping with Genghis Khan. The productive timber base of Medco, now gone, was irretrievable; of course, it would grow back but not as the base it once was that provided all the elements of a forest. The next owners would plan harvests from 40 to 80 to 100 years out. The characteristics of the old-growth forest would not return

for 150 to 500 years depending on climate—if and only if, it was left alone.

The truck driver had wisely locked himself in the big red Kenworth. One hour after he got home, Jack called the owner of the trucking company, told him what he had done and why. He promised him the next truck driving 80 miles an hour that came by his rural mobile home was going to have a pre-deer-season surprise from his .300 Winchester Magnum. All the trucks slowed to the speed limit well before Sam's Creek and Jack's mobile home after that.

The Medford newspaper, owned by the Wall Street Journal, covered Medco's closing announcement, and having underreported what had really been happening in the community for the previous seven years, they prominently quoted the corporate raider's spokesman, as he blamed the firm's and the industry's demise on the federal listing of the northern spotted owl.

In Southern Oregon where most of the jobs at Medco were career family wage jobs, the logging jobs in the woods were gone, most of the jobs in the mill were gone, the forestry jobs were gone, and the jobs in the office were gone, and then the labor union closed.

Jack went on that same walk every night up Sam's Creek then back and often down to the Rogue River just before dusk where great blue herons that he called "long-legged guitar pickers" floated by on pterodactyl-like wings, and the steelhead would rise above Lyman's Riffle in the late summer evenings as the deer would come down to the river's edge. All the families that Jack knew were making do; with the coming recession and half the mills shutting down, they would be helping each other, cutting wood in the winter, and sharing venison and fruit and the nuts from the walnut orchard. And

some of them, lifelong valley residents, would move. Move to Alaska, move to Eastern Oregon and Washington State, where the jobs were. When 2020 came around which would have been the end of the Medco planning cycle had the company not been subject to robber barons, would have had all its past old growth forest intact—and there was hardly anyone around to remember a forest around the head waters of Butte Creek.