

My Days with Oscar Evans

by

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Late on a Sunday afternoon in November, 1938, a Greyhound bus paused briefly on the road between Adin and Canby in Modoc County to leave Dick Gaiser, me, and our gear by the side of the road. As we stood there feeling the chill of early winter set in, a green stakeside truck emerged from the emptiness to take us to Oscar Evan's timber survey camp.

On arrival at the camp, we were shown to our quarters -- a tired old wall tent, pitched on what had once been a sea of mud but which now resembled cast iron, thanks to the frosts of winter. After greeting old friends and enjoying an excellent dinner, we retired for the night. Awakened the next morning in the pitch blackness well before dawn's early light, we found our tin pants and tin coats standing rigidly where we had dropped them the previous evening. By the time we had a fire going in the little sheet iron air-tight stove, we were equally stiff, with the temperature seemingly approaching zero.

As we stumped across to the cook tent for breakfast, we saw two of the old hands underneath the trucks with blow torches, warming the engines so that they could be started. We could have used a little of that treatment ourselves. We quickly learned the art of survival under such conditions. Just before crawling into his sleeping bag in the evening, the individual whose turn it would be to start the morning fire would construct a nest of pine needles, twigs, and pitchy wood. At the fateful hour in the morning, he would stretch one arm out of his sleeping bag, drop the bundle into the stove followed by a match, replace the lid, and hastily disappear again into his sleeping bag. Within a couple of minutes a roaring fire made it possible to get up without freezing.

Thus Dick Gaiser and I became timber cruisers for Region 5 of the U.S. Forest Service. We were eager young forestry graduates from Berkeley in the class of 1938 -- a year that marked the beginning of a long drought in employment opportunities for inexperienced young foresters.

We both had spent the summer and fall in temporary jobs, I, as an under field assistant at Black's Mountain Experimental Forest, and Dick as a lookout on the Eldorado National Forest, and then had been laid off with the first snows of winter. Oscar Evans and his timber survey party were working unseasonably late on the Modoc National Forest, pushing hard to complete an inventory needed for a land before Christmas. Dick and I had jumped at the chance to join the crew in the final phase of this work.

We each started in running compass for more experienced cruisers. The terrain was easy and the forests open, but the weather made the going tough. With daytime temperatures hovering around freezing, many days were marked by a mixture of rain and snow squalls. A warming fire of pitchy wood at lunch time and the good food prepared by Mrs. Zink at camp kept us going.

Finally a day came when a pouring rain and a temperature of 34° F. made it obvious even to Mr. Evans that he would get no work from us by sending the crews into the field. Characteristically, he decided we had all applied for annual leave so we could sit in our tents through the long rainy day. Dick and I, however, were a problem, for we had accumulated no annual leave credit. The answer was simple. We were turned out into the freezing rain with saws and splitting mauls to work on the camp wood pile. Shortly before noon Mr. Evans came by, heavily bundled up against the weather. As we stood there, miserable and wordless, looking at him, he growled, "You hired out to be tough, did'nt you!" and went on his way.

A couple of boys didn't take to the idea of using their annual leave in this way and made their views known to Mr. Evans. He responded with one of his numerous pet phrases: "The road is 14 feet wide and plenty long. Start down it!" The rest of us were a bit upset about these firings on the day before Thanksgiving, but I'm afraid we quickly forgot our abandoned fellows the next day at a noble Thanksgiving feast.

Mr. Evan's beloved dog, Gus, would sometimes ride out to work with us in the early morning in the open stake-side truck. Gus had an unhappy tendency to car sickness, but the upchuck would no sooner hit the bed then it would freeze solid and thus could be easily kicked out. There are, of course, other and better memories, such as watching the sun disappear behind Mr. Shasta in the late afternoon and seeing the green pines turn

into black silhouettes.

Recognizing the isolated location of our camp, Mr. Evans did see to it that on occasion we had an opportunity for an evening in Alturas. There we were well received by all, including a group of young school teachers who somehow managed to ignore the fact that none of us had had a complete bath for weeks.

For all of the rugged conditions, the work came to an end all too soon, and by the middle of December we were back in Berkeley. A couple of the boys were kept on to work up the cruise results, but the rest of us rejoined the ranks of the unemployed. I soon began a program of graduate study, more as a means of keeping involved in forestry than as a result of strong scholarly leanings.

As spring came around, I was delighted to be offered a chance to rejoin the timber survey party for the 1939 season. Imagine being paid to spend each day walking through the woods! I signed on immediately. It was a goodly crowd which came together in the 1939 survey party. My close friend Dick Gaiser also signed on. Among others were Bill Beatty, later to become one of the best known private foresters in California; Gene Berkenkamp, Olympic oarsman who became an Air Force colonel; Phil Knorr, now professor of forest economics at the University of Arizona; my 1939 tentmate, Andy Schmitz, now retired after a successful Forest Service career; George Grogan, Michigander who was to become a Deputy State Forester in California; Neilo Haapala, Minnesota Finn who disappeared once again into the Minnesota iron range; Kermit Cuff, later chief forester for Southern Pacific; Gordon Robinson, who was to parlay many somewhat unhappy years as an industrial forester into national prominence as forester for the Sierra Club; and even, for a few weeks, Bob Burton, Cal grad of 1915, man of many parts and accomplishments, and an individual who just plain enjoyed cruising timber.

The 1939 project involved cruising the east side of the Plumas National Forest -- high plateau country, with timbered ridges separated by open valleys of sagebrush and grass. In any given 24-hour period, temperatures could soar to 100° F and then drop to below freezing at night, but it was a lovely country in which to work.

Mr. Evans picked an ideal camp site in a valley just inside the edge of the timber, with a cold, bubbling spring for drinking water and a nearby stream in which a temporary rock dam quickly gave us a shallow swimming hole.

The redoubtable Mrs. Zink was not available as camp cook that summer. During the first couple of weeks Oscar (as we always thought of Mr. Evans, but never presumed to call him to his face) had some problems in finding a cook who would both meet his standards and be willing to put up with him. As a result, there were two or three days when we were without a camp cook. On one of these days I came down with a good case of mountain sickness, which I convincingly demonstrated by being wholly unable to eat breakfast. Oscar immediately rose to the opportunity: "O.K. John, you stay in camp and cook. It's easy to cook. Just throw the stuff in pots and boil the hell out of it." The fact that the crew ate the dinner that night was a tribute to hunger. I did not join them.

Despite this somewhat cavalier attitude toward cooking, Mr. Evans firmly believed good meals led to good work. The meals were simple but good, with abundant food freshly cooked, and gallons of milk to go with it. Dinner was usually a lively meal, marked by conversation and other activities. Mr. Evans would frequently expound on Ireland, home of his ancestors, giving us his own very special interpretation of the Scotch-Irish, Catholicism, and other matters. Since his biases were fully matched by our ignorance, I'm afraid none of us will ever really understand Irish history.

At times Mr. Evans would think that the discussions among those of us who sat below the salt (by mutual choice) were getting too erudite. He would then peer down the long, oil-cloth covered table and announce in a loud voice: "Now, we're all just plain folks here!" Dick Gaiser, always the grammarian, would sometimes respond: "Do you mean folk, Mr. Evans?" As far as any of us could see, Oscar never knew that he had been gigged.

I quickly graduated from compassman to cruiser, a responsibility which I took most seriously. Nonetheless, I nearly failed my first check cruise by Mr. Evans. After we paced out from the first tree to be tallied, I took my first Abney sight for height determination at the top of the tree rather than at the base as the Timber Survey Manual directed (or was

it the other way around?). The trees shook with the vehemance of Oscar's denunciation of the folly of my ways. Unlike the Army, there were only two ways to do things in timber cruising in California -- the wrong way and Oscar's way. The right way had not even been heard of.

While generally free of insect pests, the eastside of the Plumas was well supplied with ticks. It was not unusual for one or the other member of a cruising party to stop, drop his pants, and begin to check for an invader. We were filled with theories of how to extract them -- turn counter clockwise, apply a lighted cigarette, etc. Thus it was not surprising one Saturday afternoon to see Mr. Evans with his dog, Gus, held across his lap and a knife in one hand, about to remove a tick from Gus's belly. However, one of the boys looked closer and realized that the "tick" was a permanent part of Gus's anatomy. When he pointed this out, Mr. Evans exploded in apparent amazement, "My god, a male dog has teats!"

On late Saturday afternoons, there would usually be supplies to be picked up in Susanville, giving us an excuse to drive in for an evening's recreation. This meant the Saturday night move, commonly a western starring Gene Autrey, the singing cowboy, who would break into song at the most unlikely moments. "Give us a song, Gene," quickly became our battlecry for moments of crisis. Unbelievably, on Sundays we sometimes went hiking.

In late July, a major forest fire broke the routine. We thought it a ball, finding fire fighting both more exciting and easier than cruising. While we were all out on the fire line, Oscar did some volunteer scouting. Finding some developments he thought important, he rushed back to the fire camp and began to tell the fire boss all about it. To Oscar's complete frustration, the man couldn't identify the particular area, no matter how often he repeated or how loudly he hollered "Rocky Creek." Oscar never could understand why the fire boss didn't realize instantly that he meant Stoney Creek.

Dick Gaiser and I had started the season's work with dreams of putting in the full season of cruising and then heading for Greece to begin a vagabond tour of Europe. The events which led to World War II put an end to that, so in late August I returned to Berkeley to continue my graduate studies. While a few others also returned to college, most of the crew continued with the work.

Well into the fall, Dick finally achieved his goal of getting one up on Oscar. In addition to the stake-side trucks, the timber survey party had a couple of special light trucks equipped with seats in the back, a metal roof, and curtains which could be dropped down on the sides. On this particular day, two of the crews, including Dick, drove out in one of these special trucks, while a larger group went to the same general area in a stake-side truck. Arriving at the starting point, Dick decided the day would be warm enough so that he could leave his cruiser's jacket in the truck.

When they returned to the truck at the end of the day, they found it totally destroyed by fire, apparently started by a short. The stake-side truck came along and took them back to camp. Now how to break the news to Oscar that one of his beloved trucks was no more?

Dick rose to the occasion. "Mr. Evans, I sure had some bad luck today. I burned up my new cruiser's jacket."

Oscar was convulsed by laughter. "How'd you ever do a damn fool thing like that?"

"I left it in the truck." Oscar obliged with a classic double take.

In the spring of 1940 with my freshly earned M.S. degree, I again responded to Oscar Evans' siren call to cruise timber at \$105 per month. The 1940 project was on the Klamath National Forest, in an area more remote than any that can now be found in California. The country was so consistently steep that even at the nearest gasoline pump in Weitchpec there was not a level spot to park while gassing up a truck. In early May and June the rhododendron and azalea were in full flower, but to us they were just an element in a continuous brush understory. I had been accustomed to cruise at least two miles of one-chain strip per day on the Plumas, but one my first day on the Klamath I came back exhausted with a half mile of line completed.

The assignment was to cruise the Port Orford cedar, which was then believed to be the only species with enough value to cover the costs of logging from such a remote area. Instead of making Oscar's traditional 10% cruise with two lines through each forty, we tallied all timber on a 5% cruise with a single line through the middle of each forty. At regular intervals we paced out for 10 chains at right angles to the line, searching for stands of Port Orford cedar.

When such a patch was found, we carefully plotted its location on the map and made a 100% tally of the Port Orford cedar. Generally these patches were small and scattered, but I can recall some splendid bottom land groves in which nearly a full day would be required to tally the stand.

To provide us with a starting point, Oscar found an old Hoopa Indian who remembered watching a surveyor set a section corner when he was a boy. He led us to a bearing tree, which gave us a starting corner. During the rest of the summer we found exactly one other section corner. We quickly came to the conclusion that, after giving it a good try, the contract surveyor for the General Land Office had had the good judgment to prepare most of his survey notes in a comfortable bar in Eureka.

In such a location, we might well have been out of touch with the world that summer. However, Clarence Van de Wetering, a student member of the survey party who later followed a career in the Los Angeles County Fire Department, had done the unthinkable and brought a portable radio to the camp. This just wasn't done; there was no need for a rule against it. At first we huddled around the radio closely, with the volume turned down low. However, with the Twilight War having ended and the British army reeling back to Dunkirk, Oscar soon joined us and we all sat there each evening listening appalled to the news of mounting disaster.

The world we had known was coming to an end, including that great tradition of California forestry, Oscar Evans' timber survey party. The youthful forestry graduates and forestry students, who had an unparalleled opportunity to see the forests while learning to do a day's work for day's pay for Oscar, would soon be off to war, and in his final years with the Forest Service Oscar would be faced with the problem of trying to teach a group of Conscientious Objectors to cruise timber. Of course, we did not realize all this at the time, so most of our days were spent in the usual routines of cruising timber, including trying to outguess Oscar.

As the work progressed, it became necessary to cruise a roadless area too distant to be worked from our main camp. Oscar scouted around and found a homesteading couple with a place ten miles up Brush Creek from the nearest road. They were happy to earn a little cash by preparing meals for us and having us stay at their place. Oscar somehow acquired a mule, Brenda, to pack in our supplies, and six of us went off to the side camp. We slept in the barn, which was filled with hay and fleas, and were happy to be out from under daily supervision.

The homesteaders were an interesting couple, of some education, who had opted for an alternate life style forty years before that phrase was invented. As we were to discover, they also had some surprising friends. One Sunday morning as we were relaxing in the creek, we suddenly became aware of a strange woman approaching. Hastily grabbing towels, we soon found ourselves being interviewed by the society editor of the San Francisco Chronicle -- an old friend of our hosts. Somehow she didn't find anything to print from that interview.

After finishing this phase of the work, we returned to the main camp. There in early August I received a letter which, if it didn't change the course of my life, certainly put a detour into it. Apparently as a chance result of having taken the civil service examination for Junior Forester, I was being offered an appointment as a Patrol Inspector in the U. S. Border Patrol. I knew nothing of the organization, but the accompanying material indicated that they needed men who could work all day on snowshoes on the Canadian border or ride a horse on the Mexican border -- and the pay was \$2,000 per year. The closest I had come to riding a horse was Brenda, the mule, and I had never been on snowshoes, but I knew I was their man. Besides, to one earning \$150 per month, \$2,000 per year was wealth.

The first step was to quit my job and report to San Francisco for appointment formalities. With a certain amount of trepidation, I approached Oscar. "Mr. Evans, I've received a very interesting job offer and I want to quit..."

The reaction was instantaneous. "You're fired. You can't quit. You're all through. You've got no job to quit".

One could not quit Oscar Evans in mid-season, but there were conditions under which one not only could, but had to, leave.

Eight or ten years later, after I had joined the faculty at the University of California and showed signs of being reasonably successful in forestry, I would see Oscar from time to time at S.A.F. meetings or other gatherings. He would then announce loudly to all bystanders: "John here is one of my boys. I gave him his start."

As I have come to realize, in a number of ways, he did.