

A Green Chain Green Horn

By Larry O'Donnell

[Editor's note: Larry wrote this wonderful story to capture his experiences working at Weyerhaeuser Mill C during the summer of 1958. He went on to work a total of six summers there. We are very appreciative of him sharing this story with NPRHA members.]

The assistant personnel manager took a final measured look at me. "Are those steel toed shoes?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, somewhat nervously.

"Good, good," he mused. "Let's see, you've got your gloves and safety shoes. You'll need a leather apron but there's probably an old one over there you can use. I think you're set. Let's head over to Mill C."

With that we headed out to his car and the short trip to Mill C. This was an exciting day for me. After a frustrating month of job hunting I had finally landed a summer job – and it looked like a good one. Through my dad meeting a Weyerhaeuser Company foreman while both were on jury duty, I had managed to get an interview at Weyerhaeuser's lumber mill in Everett. The interview had been successful and now I was starting my first day at the mill. The job was very important to me as my bank account was near zero and I would be starting my final year of college in the fall.

We arrived at Mill C, parked in the lot, and made our way through a series of wooden walkways to the foreman's office. This was a different foreman than my dad had met but a man who I knew slightly from his having traded at the grocery store where I previously worked. The foreman then led us out through a different part of the mill across catwalks and down stairs. Then we were outside striding along a wooden platform which extended about seventy-five yards out from the main mill. We followed a walkway to the end of the platform. We stopped and, for a minute, I had a chance to survey the set up. The entire platform was elevated about four feet from the ground. There was a raised section in the middle of the platform about three and a half feet high. On either side of the raised section there was a wooden walkway which ran the length of the platform. The raised section was about thirty feet wide where the platform joined the mill building and then narrowed in three segments to about fifteen feet at the end of the platform. On the top of the raised section pieces of lumber were being carried along by chains from the mill toward the end of the platform. There were men along the walkways on either side taking the pieces of lumber off the raised section and putting them on carts.

"This is your spot and here's what you do," said the foreman.

He grabbed a piece of lumber from the chain and guided it across the walkway. In one swift movement he dropped the piece of lumber on one of the carts, which were parked side by side on the ground next to the walkway.

"This is the 16 foot station," he said as he gestured toward the platform and carts in the immediate vicinity. "Your job is to take those boards off and put them in the right cart. You'll get more 2 x 4's than anything. They go right there. This is the comeback load here. That's the lumber that someone

missed. And this last one here, next to the comeback is for the resaw. And that one off the end is for scraps. Have you got that?"

"Yeah, I think so," I stammered.

"Good," said the foreman. "Rube, here, will kind of help you for a while."

The foreman motioned toward a middle aged man in blue bib overalls who had been standing nearby.

"This is Rube."

The man in the blue overalls extended his hand and we shook. With his other hand he gave me a leather apron which he showed me how to put on.

"You'll catch on quick," stated the foreman and then he and the assistant personnel manager left.

"Got your gloves on?" asked Rube.

I put my gloves on and then began to follow Rube around. He grabbed pieces of lumber from the chain and guided them skillfully toward the proper carts. He made it look amazingly simple. Then he asked me to try some. I clumsily grabbed a piece of lumber, mostly carried it toward the cart and then hung on to the end of the board as it skittered crossways on the stack on the cart. I reached down and, with difficulty, finally placed the board properly on the cart. I was grateful that Rube was there to get all the other lumber off while I floundered around with the one piece.

"You'll get the hang of it," chuckled Rube. "It just takes a little while."

For the next hour I worked next to Rube, doing the best I could. He constantly reminded me which lumber went on which cart. Leverage, he said, was the key to handling lumber. Make the lumber do the work, he emphasized. He showed me how to use the rollers on the end of the raised section by pushing downward on the end of lumber. This forced the lumber against the rollers and then downward toward the carts. Then one could hold on to the end of the piece of lumber and guide it on to the cart. Rube stressed the importance of building neat stacks. He showed me how to build the outside rows first and then fill in the middle, and how to stabilize each stack with strips. He also demonstrated the way to pull two or more pieces of lumber at once by stacking one piece on top of the other.

After about an hour, Rube asked me if I thought I could handle it myself.

"Sure," I nodded, without any real feeling of confidence.

He left and I was on my own. It was totally different without Rube there. I was constantly scurrying back to the chain for lumber but a large part of it still went past me and began to pile up at the end of the chain. My stacks of lumber were becoming crooked and I frequently had to jump to the ground to straighten out a stack. Sometime I would put a board on a wrong cart. Then I would have to jump down and carry the lumber to the correct cart. All the time I could see more of my own lumber going down and piling up in an ever-increasing heap at the end of the chain. Keeping up seemed totally impossible. I jumped around in a near frenzy of inefficiency. Sweat poured down my forehead, through my eyebrows and into my eyes making it difficult for me to see.

It was a great relief when Rube reappeared. He smiled and quickly began to work. In a few minutes he had eradicated the pile at the end of the chain and straightened out several of my loads. I didn't say much to him; words could not have expressed my gratitude. As the morning proceeded he would leave and then reappear to help me. His smiling face was always a welcome sight. He was pleasant and never chastised me for what I thought must be an atrocious performance.

Sometime around noon a whistle blew from the mill. The chain stopped and the other men, whom I had scarcely noticed up to this point, jumped down from the walkway. I continued to put lumber on the carts. This seemed like a good time to catch up.

"Hey!" a voice boomed across the now quiet area. "It's lunchtime." It was Rube. "Leave the lumber and eat your lunch. The lumber will be there when you get back."

Rube showed me where the lunchroom was and I walked over to it. It was a smoke-filled room with two groups of men playing cards and others eating lunch. I sat down on a bench along the wall and began to eat my lunch. My hands shook as I held my sandwich and my legs felt very weak. Nobody seemed to acknowledge me but I really didn't care. I was too tired. After eating, I sat in a comatose position until the other men started back to work. Most went into the mill and the rest of us went back to the platform area. I went back to my station at the end and put on my gloves and leather apron. I took a deep breath and wondered if I would make it through the afternoon. Then the whistle blew, the chain was turned on, and the endless onslaught of lumber began.

The afternoon was not much different from the morning. Despite my frantic efforts, I would slip further and further behind until Rube would bail me out. I didn't feel quite as awkward with the lumber, however, and some of the boards slipped into place just as planned. The afternoon ground on as slowly as the morning and it was a great relief when the whistle blew ending the work. This time I didn't need Rube to tell me to leave the lumber. I put the board in my hands on the cart and took off my apron. After a brief stop at the time clock I was in my car and heading home.

I was collapsed on the sofa when my dad arrived home from his job. He was eager to hear about my first day at the mill. He had worked there some ten years previous.

"Well, how was it?" he asked. "Where did you work?"

"It was tough," I replied. "I don't know the name of the place I worked but it was tough. I was buried in lumber all day."

Then I began to describe my day. He smiled and then started to chuckle as I continued my description.

"Hell," he interrupted, "you're working on the green chain."

"The what?" I asked.

"The green chain. Don't you remember me talking about the green chain when I worked there?"

Then it began to click with me – the green chain. I remembered comments from dad when he had worked at Weyerhaeuser. Comments such as "I think they're trying to kill me off in the planing mill. It's noisy, dirty, and awful hard work. But, at least they haven't put me on the green chain." Yes, the

green chain. It was always mentioned in the same tone as a German concentration camp or a medieval torture chamber. The green chain! And here I was working on it.

My dad delivered a few more uplifting remarks about the green chain and then I left to visit my girlfriend. She was anxious to chatter about something of import to her but I interrupted.

"Guess what," I blurted. "I work on the green chain."

"Oh," she remarked with apparent disinterest.

"I said the green chain."

"So?" she added, as though I was supposed to justify my comment. Obviously she missed the point. Only me and my dad, indirectly, understood my real predicament. I would be buried in lumber and sweat all summer. I might not survive to finish my final year of college.

My girlfriend and I parted on a slightly sour note and I went home to get a good night's sleep. I was too tired to sleep really well and the full impact of my physical exhaustion didn't hit me until I rolled out of bed the next morning. My hands were swollen and it took great effort to make a fist. My legs felt like jello and my shoulders ached. After breakfast I eased myself into my car and left for the mill.

I arrived early enough to walk around the green chain area before the shift started. The name "green chain," I had discovered, came from the fact the lumber had been freshly cut; it was considered "green" until it was properly dried. Our job was to sort the lumber by size so it could be shipped over to the kiln for the drying process. When the lumber came out from the mill on the green chain it was mixed up by size. There were six stations on each side of the chain and each station was manned by one person. Each of the twelve men took from the chain the lumber for his particular station. The very longest and very shortest lumber was pulled first. In this way all lumber was removed from the chain. All, that was, except the boards that arrived at my station for the "comeback" load.

By the time the whistle blew I had my gloves and apron on. Someone must have pushed a button and the relentless chain started. There wasn't much sound to the chain, just a low subdued squeak and the constant thumping as the chain hooked into the gears at the end of each section. The work load was immediate as the lumber had been left on the chain when the night shift ended.

Rube spent part of the time with me but not nearly as much as he had the first day. He did arrive at the right times to help me from getting hopelessly swamped and he continued to give me helpful advice. "Don't carry the lumber. Let the rollers do the work... Look ahead at what's coming. Meet your lumber before it gets to the stack where it's unloaded... Don't let the lumber rub through your hands. It wears out your gloves." The advice from Rube and my on-the-job internship was beginning to pay off. By noon time I felt much less clumsy and at times I was almost caught up.

When the noon whistle blew I didn't go to the lunch shack. I ate my lunch outside and wandered around the area again. It was a sunny day and I noticed that a couple of the men had stripped off their shirts and were sunbathing. I took their lead, pulled off my shirt, and flopped down on a stack of 2 x 4's. It wasn't exactly a Beauty Rest but the chance to rest was welcome. The sun felt good and I was almost asleep when the whistle blew to start the afternoon shift.

My confidence and skills grew and by mid-afternoon I was feeling that I might be able to handle the job. Occasionally I was actually caught up. I was putting less lumber on the wrong stacks, my stacks were not as crooked, and there was no pile at the end of the chain. Rube arrived less frequently and when he did, he spent more time visiting than pulling lumber. He was, I discovered, a sort of straw-boss of the green chain. His real job was to pull the filled carts and move them with a small jitney to a track. There the carts were arranged in a train to be pulled over to the dry kiln area. When he had left me that first day, it was to take out the filled carts and replace them with empty ones.

Rube was with me when a man came around inspecting the lumber. He would pick up boards, look at them, and place them back down. He didn't say anything to me but he and Rube visited some. Then, loud enough for me to overhear, he said "I think this new guy is going to be OK as soon as he learns to face his lumber."

"Yeah," said Rube, as he winked to me, "Larry's OK."

Then the man left and Rube showed me again how to face the lumber. It was easier to pull that way, said Rube, and it enabled a person to keep on top of things by knowing what was coming.

By mid-afternoon I was managing to stay on top of things to the extent that I began to observe a little more of what was going on around me. During a slight lull in my work I noticed that the worker closest to me seemed to be very busy. He was red-faced and pulling lumber as fast as he could. I knew he was mumbling about something and finally I could overhear him.

"I don't know what in the hell my new partner is doing!" he sputtered to no one in particular. "How in the hell am I supposed to get all this off? I can't pull all these fucking boards."

By this time I was busy again but I didn't forget what he had said. Do you suppose that I might be his partner, I wondered? Should I be helping him? He hadn't helped me. The next time Rube appeared I asked him about this.

"Yeah," he said. "Fred gets a little excited at times. You two are both in this 16 foot station. I figured you were probably busy enough without worrying about this to start out. If you do get a chance, though, you could help him."

Rube left and in a short time I noticed that Fred was swamped. I headed toward him and grabbed a couple of 2 x 4's.

"Where do these go?" I asked.

"The fucking things go right there!" he bellowed as he pointed at a cart. "I wonder what the hell they're going to do with all these goddam 2 x 4's?" he continued.

I helped him with a few more pieces of lumber and then rushed back to catch up on my own lumber. Each time I had a lull I would race up to help Fred and each time he seemed a little less gruff. He continued to complain about the quantity of 2 x 4's but with less vengeance.

In late afternoon the onslaught seemed to be on me. I was over-run with lumber and was scurrying from place to place trying to keep ahead. My shirt was soaked with sweat and I was constantly mopping my forehead to keep the sweat from running into my eyes. At some point in the afternoon I looked up wearily and there was Fred pulling some of my 2 x 4's.

He smiled as he whipped the boards off the chain.

“Aren’t these fuckin’ 2 x 4’s something? They must be building a whole goddam city of 2 x 4’s somewhere.”

“Yeah, they were something,” I agreed.

Just before the whistle blew Rube showed up. “How are you guys doing?” he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“We got a fuckin’ lot of 2 x 4’s,” Fred replied, “But my partner and I took care of them.” He turned to face me, “Right?”

“Right,” I agreed.

Soon the whistle blew. I was as exhausted as I had been the first day. My hands were sore and my legs felt like two lead fireplugs, but I knew a little more about pulling lumber – and I knew I had a partner.

The evening consisted of a routine which became a summer ritual: a warm bath, a good dinner – with lots of conversation, including good-natured ribbing from my dad about the green chain, a rest, a visit to my girlfriend’s house, and to bed early for a full night’s rest.

The next morning, I was sore but I seemed to loosen up as I moved around. I got to the mill about 20 minutes early and meandered around the area. The chain itself jutted out from Mill C into the adjacent Weyerhaeuser Kraft mill. On one side was the Snohomish River and from nearly every station on the chain one could view the changing river scene. A few minutes before the five minute warning whistle blew I put on my gloves and apron. Then I stretched out on a load of lumber until the whistle blew.

That morning was different. For the most part I was keeping up. I was still busy but there was a degree of efficiency to my work. It was easier to identify the lumber for the proper loads. I was anticipating and meeting lumber before it was past its load. I was even developing a certain rhythm in pulling the lumber. I would hit the end of the board forcing it against the rollers and down toward the load. Then with both hands I would guide the lumber into the spot I wanted it in the stack. Frequently, I would stack one board on top of another before I pulled them. When my work was a bit slack I would go help Fred and he would do the same for me when he had a chance. There were a few moments of lull for both of us and we would stop then to engage in a little small talk.

Rube still stopped by quite often. He would visit and give me hints. One of the most difficult chores was starting new loads on the empty carts. Rube showed me how to start a new load by guiding the board on the adjacent load and then dropping the board on the empty cart. “If you find a pitchy board, set it aside,” he told me. “Then, when you have a chance, coat your gloves with the pitch. It’ll make your gloves last longer.”

Sometime before noon the foreman stopped by. “How’s it going?” he asked. “Are you getting the hang of it?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I replied.

“Yeah, Rube says you’re doing alright.”

Shortly after that, the same fellow who had inspected lumber the first day came by. This man, I had found out, was the lumber grader. He was actually checking his own work more than mine. Rube was with him. He worked from stack to stack, picking up boards, examining them, and putting them back down.

“By God, Larry, you sure build good loads for a new man,” he stated. “Goddamn Johnny has been here twenty years and he still builds loads that I’m afraid to stand next to.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Rube smiled.

When the noon whistle blew I knew that I would make it – not just through the day – but maybe through the whole summer.

At noon time I ate my lunch outside again. This seemed preferable to the smoke-filled lunchroom although it wasn’t particularly appetizing outside either. The air was always filled with the rotten egg stench from the Kraft Mill. Occasionally, too, there was a downriver drift which delivered fumes from the rendering plant. That odor was absolutely nauseating. When my lunch was finished I again sunned myself on a stack of lumber. The sun felt good although I was sometimes sprinkled by fine debris which fell from the fumes emitted by the Kraft Mill smokestack.

The afternoon was much like the morning. I was more at ease and even began to whistle a tune. When the whistle blew to end the shift I didn’t feel like collapsing. There was actually a bounce to my step when I walked to my car.

“By God,” I thought. “I’m a real mill worker. I work on the green chain – the 16 foot station. What do you think about that, world?”

After those first painful days I began to adjust to what became a comfortable summer routine. First of all, I was grateful to have a job. The pay was good, almost \$2.00 an hour. That was more than double what I made working in the kitchen at the college. It looked like I should be able to save enough to get me through that final year of college. Then I would have that degree and be able to start teaching.

The green chain itself was hard work but it did have some advantages. It was outside; it was quiet (compared to the screaming saws in the mill); it was clean; and it was safe. In regards to the latter, I was told that the last accident had occurred when a fellow on the 12 foot station had fallen off the walkway and broken his leg after spending his lunch hour at the nearby Shamrock Tavern. I was also fortunate to be working on the day shift. The shift was 7:15 AM to 4:15 PM with a full hour for lunch. Generally, I had the full weekend off. Sometimes we would work a four-hour shift on Saturday morning.

