

Nature, Militancy, and the Western Worker: Socialist Shingles, Syndicalist Spruce

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The more the worker by his labor appropriates the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of means of life.
—Karl Marx, *Estranged Labor*

Most of us in the industrialized world, sequestered in our offices and factories, fail to experience any connection between our labor and the natural environment that surrounds us. Exceptions may be made, perhaps, for workers engaged in the extraction and processing of raw materials—timber, oil, coal—but these workers are most often newsworthy for the antagonism they feel between nature and their jobs. Similarly, in the academic sphere, the field of labor history and the relatively young field of environmental history are often considered in opposition or in isolation from one another, which need not be so. A particularly fruitful arena for their merger exists on the western “frontier,” where generations of Americans have engaged nature as an object of transformation through work.

In the last decade, the history of the American West has become increasingly entwined with environmental history, as evident in the works of historians including Richard White, William Cronon, Elliott West, Donald Worster, and many more. Of course, in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner was already using environmental arguments to support his idea that a new national character emerged on the American frontier. Similarly, in 1931, Walter Prescott Webb’s seminal work on the Great Plains sought to demonstrate the dramatic impact of plains ecology on the institutional and technological adaptations made by the region’s settlers. And by the 1960s, labor historians like Robert Tyler and Melvyn Dubofsky were raising questions about the impact of the western “industrial frontier” on workers’ lives at the turn of the last century.

The continuing relevance of their work was evident in *Labor History's* 1999 symposium on Dubofsky's *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World*, while interest in western U.S. labor history continues unabated through the works of David Emmons, Elizabeth Jameson, Gunther Peck, David Igler, and others.¹

The early-twentieth-century West was home to hundreds of thousands of working people, who squeezed capital from the land, turning grasslands into meat; mountain ranges into copper, silver, and coal; and forests into planks of wood. Those western workers have usually fascinated historians on account of their apparent militancy. Much has been made of the setting of work—the particular spatial and temporal qualities defining late-nineteenth-century “western-ness”—in explaining western working-class behavior, yet insufficient attention has been given to how uses of nature shaped conditions that produced labor unrest. Nature is always the most elemental motive force of human activity, but in the trans-Mississippi West of the late nineteenth century, the drive to dominate the land and extract its wealth was as self-conscious and apparent as it ever could be. Abundant untapped minerals, woods, and grasslands offered a landscape of possibility that could have produced a variety of human social and institutional responses, but when faced with these possibilities, workers, capitalists, and political leaders behaved very conventionally. Their relationship to western resources exemplified this and demonstrated as well a connection between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of people.

This essay does not presume to explain with certainty the conditions confronted by all categories of workers on the “industrial frontier.” It focuses on timber workers in the Pacific Northwest in the hope that others may consider its relevance to western extraction more generally. Timber presents an interesting case study for several reasons. Just as mining dominated the mountain states and ranching the Southwest, lumbering characterized the Northwest, leading to concentrated applications of labor and capital. Yet, unlike mineral wealth, trees were a potentially renewable

1. Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis—Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton, 1991); Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover, 1996); Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981); Robert Tyler, *Rebels of the Woods* (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1967); Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1969); David Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875–1925* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Elizabeth Jameson, *All That Glitters: Class, Conflict, and Community in Cripple Creek* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); David Igler, *Industrial Cowboys* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Also noteworthy are geographers' contributions to studying the spatial aspects of labor-capital relations, as in Andrew Herod, ed., *Organizing the Landscape: Geographical Perspectives on Labor Unionism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

resource. And, unlike ranching, in which nature's capital—grass—became product through the medium of cattle, trees themselves were a direct source of wealth for their "owners." In addition, and perhaps crucially, large timber companies were often willing to engage with the nascent conservation movement and its federal proponents. While government policies directly or indirectly affected all western economic activity, whether on account of land allocation or the adjudication of water rights, timber was subject to its own conservationist federal bureaucracy, the U.S. Forest Service. Conservation, if judiciously applied, had the potential for flattening out the maddening boom-and-bust cycles that brought so much misery to laboring people. The timber industry was therefore unique in important ways that might have lifted timber workers above the condition of miners and cowboys, but this did not occur. Instead, wood harvesters and processors were an angry lot by the 1910s, driven by repeated economic hardship to militant unionism, spontaneous eruption, and occasional bouts of violence.

Because timber workers left no indication that they experienced their predicament any differently than steel or textile workers, this essay is not so much about their perceptions as their behavior, as well as that of their employers and their government. The pages that follow illustrate several related points. First, an interplay of federal conservation and antitrust efforts unwittingly contributed to embittering the relationship between timber workers and their employers by perpetuating exploitive patterns of woodland use that were fruitless for all but a few. Second, although workers' militant opposition to their own exploitation was often cloaked in socialist and syndicalist rhetoric, it occurred within a framework that shared dominant industrial values regarding "nature." And finally, the class gap that separated the practical lives of timber workers from the ideology of conservation a century ago may have enduring significance for the modern environmental movement.

Thirty-five years ago, Melvyn Dubofsky tried to explain the militancy of mountain state miners by challenging the validity of a Turnerian frontier to the experience of early-twentieth-century western workers. Dubofsky argued that the violent class conflict endemic to the time and place "came not from the 'general characteristics of the frontier' or 'quick on the trigger' employers and employees but from the general nature of early industrialism." He further stated that in the mining West, workers adhered to "a concept of social change . . . which was proscribed ultimately from the Marxian indictment of capitalism," because "the Mountain West from 1890 to 1905 followed the classic Marxian pattern of development"—capitalists who were bitter opponents of organized labor, exploitive working conditions, the use of state violence on behalf of capital, and consequently class-conscious workers. In short, Dubofsky's West was not intrinsically "western," but classically "capitalist."²

Twenty years after Dubofsky's essay appeared, Carlos Schwantes revisited the "wageworkers' frontier." Schwantes sought to provide a framework for studying

2. Melvyn Dubofsky, "The Origins of Western Working Class Radicalism, 1890–1905," *Labor History* 7 (1966): 132, 139.

unskilled and semiskilled western labor as a distinct group, with attention to a “range of experiences that cut across occupational and national boundaries.” Moving beyond mountain state miners to consider cowboys, loggers, and harvest hands, Schwantes proposed that western labor militancy resulted from shattered expectations. “The juxtaposition of sophisticated technology with a primitive environment and a rudimentary social structure created the popular impression that in the West anything was possible.” Yet “common was the wage earner who kept searching for, but never quite realized, his dreams of success, a marginal state especially hard to accept in a region where it was widely claimed that anyone who worked hard could get ahead.”³ This psychosocial analysis offered a tool for treating western workers as a “regional class,” but still left room for examining the nature of work, work processes, capital investment, and the role of government in the West insofar as these might have shaped workers’ attitudes and responses to exploitation.

More recently, the labor geographers Andrew Herod and Don Mitchell, while not limiting their analyses to the American West, have provided useful spatial explanations for worker behavior. Herod has noted that “only by understanding how workers have . . . a ‘sense of place’ regarding their own communities, or perhaps feel spatially trapped . . . , is it possible to understand why . . . locationally constrained workers may side with boosterist local capital . . . at the expense of developing alliances . . . that challenge established class relations.”⁴ Conversely, Mitchell, in his study of California migrant farmworkers, remarked that “the mobility of militant labor provided the pathways for connecting sundry place-based struggles . . . [and] took hold of the established spatial practices of industrialized agriculture and other resource based industries . . . and utilized them for their own purposes. Here lay the subversiveness of mobility.”⁵ Northwestern timber workers, divided as they were into relatively sedentary occupants of mill towns and migratory harvesters, or “timber beasts,” did sometimes exhibit exactly the sort of spatially shaped behavior posited by Herod and Mitchell. On the other hand, the behavioral demarcation of the two categories of workers was not always so neat. Sedentary mill hands were on occasion driven to remarkable acts of opposition, while migrants could just as easily take advantage of their mobility to move on rather than to face down exploitive conditions.⁶ Nonetheless, geographic explanations of worker behavior intersect usefully with historical interpretations of the working class in the extractive West.

In the last decade, historians with an environmental focus have treated the West in new ways that shed further light on the region’s workers. Richard White, for example, addressed the national dietary shift from pork to beef that accompa-

3. Carlos Schwantes, “The Concept of the Wageworkers’ Frontier: A Framework for Future Research,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 18 (1987): 39, 48–49.

4. Herod, *Organizing the Landscape*, 2.

5. Mitchell, *Lie of the Land*, 66.

6. The role played from time to time by radical socialists in militant strikes led by the AFL’s Shingle Weavers Union is well established by Norman Clark in *Milltown: A Social History of Everett* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970).

nied “the fascination with the free, apparently limitless grass of the West.”⁷ One wonders how perceptions of unlimited natural wealth affected investment, employment, and production in ranching, and thereby the lives of workers called “cow-boys.” Similarly, William Cronon redefined Turner’s “free land” frontier in terms of the consequences of natural abundance. Cronon’s West was a land so naturally rich that it “offered to human labor rewards incommensurate with the effort expended in achieving them. . . . The land might have been taken from the Indians, its profits might sometimes have been appropriated by absentee landlords, its small farmers might on occasion have suffocated beneath a burden of accumulating debt, but much of what made the land valuable in the first place had little to do with the exploitation of *people*. The exploitation of *nature* came first.” In his renowned book on Chicago and the West, Cronon adroitly described the transformation of nonhuman nature into commodities but left little room, by his own conscious design, for “social conflicts among classes and ethnic groups, . . . labor struggles,”⁸ and other manifestations of a distinctly human order.

In consideration of White and Cronon’s contributions, one might reasonably ask how the abundance of western resources and the manner of their exploitation affected the workers’ West. It may be significant that western workers, through their acts of extraction, stood on the front lines of the entire industrial system. In their engagement with nature as raw material, they were not only “proletarians,” or industrial “frontiersmen,” but also “nature workers”—whose task was to transform, at the command and to the benefit of others, the “objects of nature” into capital. One should consider that the relationship between nature and the industrial society to which workers belonged might have a critical impact on their fate. Some timber workers of a century ago were “trapped,” as Andrew Herod would say, in mill towns whose fortunes rose and fell with those of the timber companies. All timber workers, even migratory harvesters, were also “trapped” in a vast industrial forest, the exploitation of which defined the lives of all of its human inhabitants. And ultimately all Americans—workers, capitalists, and political leaders—were “trapped” in a systemic relationship to the nonhuman world in which people commoditized “external nature.” The conceptual unity this created framed the struggles between workers and capitalists and between people and their environment. Consequently, while the northwestern woods presented all the requisite attributes of forest, these natural qualities were deceptive, since timber barons and workers alike actually experienced the woods as factory.⁹ Capitalists imagined the woods as fortunes measured in cash and dedicated themselves to market shares, cost-efficiencies, and productivity. Workers imagined the trees as jobs and concentrated on getting work, maximizing pay, and, when possi-

7. Richard White, “Animals and Enterprise,” in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O’Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 258.

8. Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*, 150, xvii.

9. The industrialization of the woods is well described by Richard Rajala in *Clearcutting the Pacific Rain Forest* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 7–80.

ble, restricting the flow of labor power to obtain higher wages. Workers and employers in the woods danced the same dance of interdependency and mutual hostility as their counterparts in the Pittsburgh steel mills, the textile factories of Lawrence, and countless other dreary points of production across the land. Only the federal conservationists offered some prospect that relations among labor, capital, and nature might play out in new and unforeseen ways. Unfortunately, like most of us, their vision was sometimes clouded, their message inconsistent, and the terrain of their efforts not often of their own choosing. As for the trees, a special irony existed in the woods, an unperceived element of tragedy—natural abundance was transformed into the worker's greatest enemy. Capitalists responded to nature's wooded bounty with a pattern of investment and production that was irrational and destructive. Government failed to guide and restrain them, and the workers—busy conscripts at war with the trees—could not grasp the roots of the timber barons' folly. The result was a vicious cycle of environmental degradation, overproduction, recession, and bitter class conflict. Western timber workers' drift toward militancy, therefore, was born in a context that even the workers themselves did not precisely grasp—workers' economic vulnerability despite the natural abundance of their surroundings, human poverty in the face of the wealth of nature.

Any proper accounting of timber workers or timber barons should begin with the woods. Northwestern cedar, spruce, and fir forests might have been historically unremarkable if not for the progressive deforestation that followed the American people westward over two centuries. By 1880, the shifting lumberman's frontier had reached Washington Territory, where 80 percent of all manufacturing capital went into lumbering. Soon, technological changes altered the scale of the business. The two-man crosscut saw replaced the axe as the logger's principal tool, and band saws came to the mills, enabling a tenfold increase in the daily cut of lumber. In 1881, John Dolbeer of California invented the steam-powered donkey engine, facilitating inland timbering as tidewater stands were depleted. Logging railroads also appeared that required heavy capitalization and encouraged industrial combination. Finally, the arrival of the Northern Pacific in Tacoma in 1883 and James Hill's Great Northern Railroad in Seattle in 1893 coincided with the depletion of the Great Lakes forests and with a midwestern industrial boom, and created new transcontinental markets for Washington timber. Investment capital from Minneapolis and St. Paul followed the rails and produced a tenfold increase in northwestern timber production between 1880 and 1905, making the region's timber industry the largest in the world. The lumber product of Washington increased from 160 million board feet in 1880 to over 4.5 billion on the eve of Europe's entry into World War I.¹⁰ As a technologically prim-

10. Robert Ficken and Charles P. Lewarne, *Washington: A Centennial History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 36–38; Daniel Jack Chasan, *The Water Link: A History of the Puget Sound as a Resource* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 365; Earl Pomeroy, *The Pacific Slope* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 117–18; Vernon Jensen, *Lumber and Labor* (New York: Farrar and Rinehard, 1945), 99; Washington State Bureau of Labor, *Tenth Biennial Report, 1915–16* (Olympia, 1916), 93. Also useful is Robert Ficken, *Forested Land: A History of Lumbering in Western Washington* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987).

itive industry pioneered by small proprietors evolved into a much larger-scale mechanized operation, large lumber concerns worked hard to exert influence over smaller competitors and to create what amounted to a timber “cartel.” They did so to overcome the industry’s major economic problem—too much product. The tens of millions of acres of trees standing ready for harvest threatened a constant market glut and falling prices. Unable to control production, manufacturers concentrated on controlling costs, and timber workers ultimately bore the brunt of this Sisyphean process.

Overproduction, which was in effect industrial *overconsumption* of the woods, might have been averted by the judicious intervention of a new instrument of federal power—the U.S. Forest Service. A central goal of the Forest Service and its first chief, Gifford Pinchot, was to encourage conservation of the nation’s woods to avert “timber famine.” While the vastness of northwestern forests might have allayed such fears, they were not without sound basis. George Perkins Marsh’s challenge to the doctrine of inexhaustible nature was already taking root after the Civil War, and a new generation of environmentally concerned citizens to which Pinchot belonged could point to firsthand evidence of nature’s limits in the rapid exhaustion of eastern hardwood forests.¹¹ Even before his accession to the Forest Service, Pinchot preached conservation to the nation’s lumbermen in his capacity as head of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Division of Forestry in 1898. His Circular 21 program professed that sustained yield was synonymous with sustained profits and that “a forest [should be] treated as a working capital whose purpose is to produce successive crops.”¹² Unfortunately, Pinchot’s campaign was only an educational effort. When the Forest Service gained authority over the National Forest Reserves, it was given no power to regulate privately held timberlands and was compelled to resort to propaganda as its primary tool for dealing with private industry. President Roosevelt himself set a utilitarian agenda: “A forest which contributes nothing to the wealth, progress, or safety of the country is of no interest to the government and should be of little interest to the forester.”¹³ Against this backdrop, the Forest Service sought to find ways to use the National Forest System as a vast “demonstration” forest from which the sound practices of sustained yield would be passed on to the even vaster system of private lands. This proved to be a vain hope.

11. George Perkins Marsh challenged the nineteenth-century assumption that America’s natural resources were inexhaustible in *Man and Nature: The Earth as Modified by Human Action* (1864). Marsh noted with alarm the relationship between deforestation and the collapse of ancient civilizations. While his work was lost to public memory by the early twentieth century, a new generation of conservationists addressed similar issues. Donald Pisani’s “Forests and Conservation, 1865–1890,” in *American Forests: Nature, Culture, and Politics*, ed. Char Miller (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997) is an excellent article on the transitional generation between the Civil War and the 1890s.

12. David A. Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 20.

13. Theodore Roosevelt, “Forestry and Foresters” (address delivered before the Society of American Foresters, March 26, 1903; reprinted in *Forestry and the Lumber Supply*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Forestry circ. no. 25 [Washington, DC: GPO, 1903], 4–5).

The limits of power imposed on the federal foresters helped perpetuate timbering practices that were both environmentally and economically destructive.¹⁴ This produced the rarely considered confluence of some of the most severe labor struggles in the woods with the rise of the scientific forestry movement. Given the utilitarian mind-set that pervaded the forest technocracy, more attention was given to the harvesting of timber as an economic activity than to the harvesters of timber as social beings. The early conservation movement, as the historian Samuel Hays has noted, was in effect “a chapter in the history of production.”¹⁵ Government foresters and private lumbermen alike understood the obstacles to sustained-yield forestry. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, large blocks of prime timber were purchased in the expectation of future returns. Mill men bought equipment and built processing facilities with the same expectation. Most ventures were financed on credit, increasing competition for available timber and promoting high volumes of production.¹⁶ Intense exploitation of the forests resulted. Few experts linked this to the intense exploitation of people. In 1909, the Forest Service engaged Samuel Trask Dana to study social and economic conditions in the Great Lakes lumber district. His final report described the deleterious effects of cut-and-run timbering, including land despoliation, fires, ghost towns, and immiserated migratory workers. Revealingly, his report was not published until a decade later, when workers of the northwestern lumber industry conducted a disruptive wartime strike. Efforts such as Dana’s were rare—the next Forest Service study of working conditions was in the aftermath of the World War I strike. In 1919, Benton MacKaye belatedly concluded: “Timber mining, being a tramp industry, is a breeder of tramps; it is an industry of homeless men.”¹⁷ Some foresters, then, understood that their activities might affect the lives of the workers in the industry they were trying to reform. But without regulatory power over private land, the agency never had a significant positive impact on labor conditions.

Conservation aside, monopoly was the other burning issue of the day. While the Forest Service feared timber famine, antitrust advocates feared timber monopoly, in part because of the rise of trade associations in the industry. As early as 1897, when Congress passed the Forest Management Act, groups of lumbermen appealed for the restoration of the federal timber tariff. In 1902, the National Lumber Manufacturers Association (NLMA) was formed as the first nationwide trade association for the industry. In 1904, the NLMA invited railroad representatives to discuss box-

14. For further insight into the limits of federal forestry, see Robert Bunting, *The Pacific Raincoast—Environment and Culture in an American Eden, 1778–1900* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), esp. chap. 9; and Nancy Langston, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), esp. “The Feds in the Forest,” 86–113.

15. Samuel P. Hays, “From Conservation to Environment: Environmental Politics in the United States since World War II,” *Environmental Review* 6 (1982): 14–29.

16. Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service*, 18.

17. *Ibid.*, 23. From Samuel Trask Dana, *Forestry and Community Development*, U.S. Department of Agriculture Bulletin, no. 638 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1918), 3–5, 9–19; and Benton MacKaye, *Employment and Natural Resources* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1919), 21–22.

car shortages and rate concerns. In short, the wood products industry had devised an organized way to pursue its economic and political interests. Notably, the NLMA, its principal members, and editors of regional and national lumber trade journals were in accord with the general principles of the Forest Service. In 1905, the NLMA sponsored the American Forest Congress, marking the first time, according to President Roosevelt, that “the great business and forest interests of the nation” had combined “to consider their individual and common interests in the forests.” Frederick Weyerhaeuser declared the lumbermen’s readiness “to consider seriously any proposition which may be made by those who have the conservative use of the forests at heart,” and J. E. Defebaugh, editor of the *American Lumberman*, praised Gifford Pinchot for showing “that direct benefits could be made to result from forestry as a science and as a practice.” Among the resolutions adopted at the convention was a proposal to reduce timberland taxes to promote conservation and a call for the creation of eastern forest reserves by the federal government.¹⁸

Industrial representatives’ positive responses to federal conservation efforts did not, however, stem from fear of timber famine but rather from the competitive nature of timbering and the constant danger of overproduction. Natural barriers to combination aggravated competitive conditions. The industry’s resource base was too extensive, scattered, and costly for any lumberman or group of lumbermen to control effectively. The bulky nature of the raw material limited economies of scale by requiring production to occur near the stands of timber. Centralization of production was sometimes physically impossible and never cost-effective, making lumbering the most decentralized of the nation’s major industries.¹⁹

In the Northwest, competition between firms was reinforced by competition between regions. Washington State’s dominance was repeatedly challenged by its southerly neighbor. In 1904, the *Oregonian* proclaimed that “Oregon has more standing timber, of commercial value, than any other state.” In 1908, the paper anticipated that “Oregon has an industry in coming which in Washington in a few years will be practically exhausted.” Boosters in the Portland chamber of commerce further touted the state’s wooded abundance in the hope of attracting eastern capital.²⁰ In 1905, when the Canadian government under Conservative Richard McBride opened British Columbia to timber speculators, yet another timber boom fanned competitive flames. Over fifteen thousand square miles of Crown land were staked out by private companies, many of them American. Although Canada enacted a Forest Act

18. The NLMA and the American Forest Congress are discussed in William G. Robbins, *Lumberjacks and Legislators* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1982), 42–43; and in Harold T. Pinkett, *Gifford Pinchot, Private and Public Forester* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 56–57. The quotes from the various addresses delivered at the Forest Congress can be found in U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, circ. no. 35, *Forest Preservation and National Prosperity* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1905).

19. Thomas R. Cox, *This Well-Wooded Land* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 175.

20. William G. Robbins, *Landscapes of Promise: The Oregon Story, 1800–1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 228–29; from the *Oregonian*, June 9, 1904, and May 31, 1908.

in 1912 that was supposed to provide some protection for the resource, enforcement of its provisions was weak, and its authority did not extend retroactively to timbering licenses granted prior to 1912.²¹

The multiple competitive pressures confronting American timbermen made certain kinds of government involvement potentially appealing. In 1908, for example, Robert A. Long addressed the Roosevelt-sponsored Governors' Conference on the Conservation of Resources, urging the government to set a ceiling on the allowable cut, which would raise prices and promote more efficient use of raw materials. Since the 1890s, in the absence of federal regulation, regional trade associations had taken it upon themselves to try stabilizing markets through price lists and campaigns to control production. Until 1906, lumber trade journals published association price lists and openly promoted uniformity as an industrywide goal. Ironically, this one buffer against cutthroat competition and unbridled resource exploitation came under attack just as the conservation movement was gaining steam. Antitrust advocates were mistakenly inclined to view combination in timber exactly as they did in railroads and oil, with disastrous consequences for the woods and the workers. In 1906, because of a sudden climb in the price of lumber, Senator A. B. Kittredge of South Dakota convinced the U.S. Congress to direct the Departments of Commerce and Labor to investigate the lumber industry.²² This forced the trade associations to conceal their activities or to alter their strategies to enforce some rationality in the industry. One such association was the Shingle Mills Bureau, which strove to influence the expansive cedar shingle industry of the Northwest. Having failed over the years to control price competition, the bureau turned to controlling labor costs. It conducted a major open shop campaign throughout Washington State in the spring of 1906 that, while successful, radicalized the only timber workers to have achieved some consistent level of unionization. The 1906 struggle between the Shingle Mills Bureau and the International Shingle Weavers Union of America (ISWUA) exemplifies the negative impact of overproduction on workers and reveals the shortcomings of federal conservation efforts that did not touch the private sector and antitrust policies that did not so much prevent combination as redirect it.²³

Because shingle weavers were relatively skilled and concentrated in the mill towns, their union gave them a more readily chronicled voice than that of the migratory "lumberjacks." While shingle workers were processors rather than harvesters of wood, they were as directly affected by the lumber companies' treatment of the forests as were other workers in the integrated network of logging camps and mills. Because productivity gains made it possible for western manufacturers to pay wages that were somewhat higher than those of the East and South, shingle work was subject to technological changes geared to output to the same extent as work in the

21. Rajala, *Clearcutting the Pacific Rainforest*, 99–100.

22. Robbins, *Lumberjacks and Legislators*, 48–49.

23. The best history of the ISWUA, at least regarding its Everett local, is in Norman Clark's *Milltown*.

logging camps.²⁴ This productivity contributed in turn to excessive forest consumption and glutted markets. Notably, by 1904, shingle manufacturers had moved to a piece-rate system that, under conditions of high output, would yield the union wage. The union's tacit acceptance of this was reflected in an informal debate in the pages of the *Everett Daily Herald* in June 1904. An anonymous manufacturer complained that "the tendency the past few years to pay men according to the amount of work they do, instead of so much per day, has had a deleterious effect on the quality of the work. As a result our shingles have been getting into bad repute." President William Reid, ISWUA Everett Local 2, replied that "if the Puget Sound manufacturers will furnish us timber equal in quality to timber used in the California and British Columbia mills, we can guarantee a shingle superior to those made in any other district in the world. It is impossible to do so out of stumps and tops that have been logged over and over for the past ten years."²⁵ Reid's focus on timber quality rather than on work speedups suggests that organized labor shared the timbermen's goals of bringing more and more forest "under the axe" and failed to grasp the potentially negative economic and environmental consequences that would ensue. Of course, there is no reason that they should have understood this, but it reveals nonetheless a shared industrial mentality that crossed class lines. And insofar as forest economics and conservation are concerned, it is notable that a union that had plenty of experience restricting labor supply could not imagine the corollary possibility of restricting the flow of trees.

The product quality debate came about as a consequence of two successful strikes in April 1901 and June–July 1904 that led up to the 1906 debacle between the ISWUA and the Shingle Mills Bureau. In 1901 and 1904, overproduction presented an initial obstacle to union success, as employers tolerated the strikes in response to a glutted market for shingles. One manufacturer noted: "A shut down at this time cannot be otherwise than beneficial to the mill owners, as the market is overstocked and unsteady, and unless the production of shingles is reduced a slump in prices is likely to occur."²⁶ But in both cases the passing of a few weeks led to competitive jockeying in which larger producers conceded to union wage demands to secure market share over smaller ones. In both strikes, the Eclipse Lumber Company, the largest shingle mill in the major production center of Everett, led the return to work and dictated market conditions under which the other mills would function.²⁷ In 1906, however,

24. According to the *Shingle Weaver* of July 1904, the average output of a ten-block sawyer in the East was 105,000 shingles daily, compared to 180,000 in Washington State. At \$3.25 per day in the East, the eastern worker received 3.1 cents per thousand. At \$4.50 in the Northwest, the pay was 2.5 cents per thousand.

25. This discussion took place in the pages of the *Everett Daily Herald*, June 14, 1904, and June 27, 1904.

26. Oscar Nelson of the Bell-Nelson Mill Company and owner of Everett's Hall-Hill Mill was quoted in the *Everett Daily Herald*, April 18, 1901.

27. Everett Chamber of Commerce production and payroll data for all the city's mills appear in the *Everett Daily Herald*, February 22, 1901.

the weavers were shocked and angry to discover that lack of employer solidarity on the wage issue had come to an end. On April 12, the ISWUA threatened to strike the “shingle capital” of Ballard in an effort to enforce union scale throughout Washington State. At first, Ballard’s largest mill, the Stimson Lumber Company, agreed to the demand, while the owners of the city’s thirteen other mills agreed to lock out their employees until they accepted the existing wage rate.²⁸ Then on April 25 in Seattle, the Shingle Mills Bureau brought together representatives of forty-seven of the largest mills, producers of 60 percent of the state’s output. They resolved to assess “each manufacturer in the state of Washington . . . at the rate of (2) two cents per M. shingles of each day’s cut until an amount of \$50,000 has been accumulated [and to] disburse the fund in support of any contributing manufacturer against whom an unfair strike may be declared.”²⁹ The Stimson mill soon thereafter rescinded its union agreement. Washington’s shingle manufacturers, historically unable to control output or market price, cooperated toward an alternative goal—wage control.

Over the next three months, the shingle mills operated by recruiting labor from the lumberyards, the lumber mills, and the southern districts of Arkansas and Tennessee. A barbed-wire stockade housed strikebreakers in Ballard as the manufacturers moved to a nonunion workforce. Caught by surprise by the tenacity of the mill men, the ISWUA on June 17 decided to seek a settlement in Ballard, the failure of which would result in a statewide strike against all mills affiliated with the bureau. Unlike in 1901 and 1904, not only did the bureau refuse conference with a union committee, but not a single Ballard manufacturer, each of whom was approached individually, would agree to any terms of settlement. The general strike began on the morning of June 21. With the stakes raised, 151 shingle manufacturers, representing 75 percent of the state’s output, convened in Seattle on July 15 and unanimously agreed to reject the union label and any contract offered by the union. All agreed to operate on an open shop basis exclusively. This proved to be the turning point in the strike. After two more weeks, with no sign of weakening among the employers, the ISWUA called off the general strike. On July 31, the union advised its members to return to work wherever their union cards and union scale could be retained.³⁰ Most found themselves returning to work under imposed conditions. The “Battle of Ballard” was lost, but it would appear that the employers’ success in transferring the costs of overproduction to their workers led directly to an increase in the influence of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). President Bolger of the ISWUA complained: “The IWW is still trying to disrupt the unions throughout the United States, but it is hoped that the unionists will give them a wide berth. No organization with the interests of the working people at heart will go among members of another orga-

28. *Shingle Weaver*, April 1906, May 1906.

29. *Ibid.*, July 1906.

30. A full accounting appears in *Shingle Weaver*; June and July 1906; *Seattle Union Record*, August 11, 1906; *Everett Daily Herald*, July 16, 1906.

nization during the time of strife and strikes and tell them that they belong to the wrong kind of union."³¹

While the ISWUA sought to mollify its members by blaming defeat on "Chinamen and Japs"—gratuitously and erroneously—and on "free-born American scabs," the unionists displayed no understanding that their 1906 losses were linked to industry tensions deriving from overproduction in the face of antitrust concerns.³² Sadly, in the following year, depression hit the entire timber industry, further deepening the workers' plight. By 1907, production excesses had pushed nationwide lumber output to an all-time high of 46 billion board feet annually, most of it from the Pacific Northwest and the South, hopelessly glutting markets with only brief respite until World War I.³³ Because the depression in the lumber market coincided with the government's increased antitrust activity and its investigation of the trade associations, lumbermen became acutely sensitive to this aspect of federal policy. Fear of the Sherman Antitrust Act coupled with ample evidence of the dangers of overproduction pushed the timber interests more and more into alliance with the Forest Service. To the dismay of antimonopolists, the Forest Service responded to industry needs from 1907 onward by declining to make timber sales, for fear of flooding the market even further. Unfortunately, the annual federal cut was too small to make a difference one way or the other.³⁴ The industry's predicament was profound. Price-fixing might trigger antitrust action and was in any case impossible in a saturated market, Forest Service restraint was limited to public lands, and private conservation was unachievable in a competitive environment based on extensive woodland holdings purchased on credit. The timber industry continued to have only one effective way to profit and that was attacking the cost of labor.

In 1908, under these conditions, the ISWUA failed again to enforce its wage scale. The union, which had been at birth patriotic in philosophy and committed to "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work," fell into the hands of avowed socialists.³⁵ While President J. G. Brown was a ballot box socialist typical of his time, his rise out of the Hoquiam local to union leadership was significant. Socialism in the ISWUA represented a reaction to the weakness of the union in the face of concerted employer opposition and a reaction to the new competitive threat of IWW organizers. But it also coincided with the industry's inability to limit its consumption of the woods, with the limits of regulatory power imposed on federal conservation, and with misguided antitrust policies that threw fuel on an already destructive competitive fire.

31. *Shingle Weaver*, September 1906.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Robbins, *Lumberjacks and Legislators*, 41. Robbins also sees the IWW as a likely consequence of unstable conditions in the timber industry, but notes that the workers are beyond the scope of his study. See pages 12, 33, 243.

34. U.S. Forest Service, Annual Report (1911), explains the role of the Forest Service in depressed markets.

35. *Shingle Weaver*, April 1908.

Trapped in the maelstrom of these forces, workers found in socialism a container for the justifiable emotions aroused by their exploitation, but not a pointed analysis of the roots of their suffering, which rested in the irrational and unbridled exploitation of the woods. In 1912, during another long and bitter strike, Harry Call, first vice president of the Bellingham shingle weavers, wrote: “The most wonderful thing in the world today is the Class Struggle. . . . The system has forced labor into a fight that can never be stopped. In this industrial war women and children are not spared; there are no rules, no truce that either side are bound to respect. As long as that terrible fear for future existence remains there can be no peace; as long as children are torn from the mother’s breast and ground into their graves by the machine there can be no rest. But there is a future; men and women are becoming class conscious; the red peril is here for the capitalist.”³⁶ This rhetorical shift did not, however, represent structural or strategic changes in the union that might have better served the material interests of the workers. On the one hand, because shingle weavers were relatively hard to train and replace, the socialist ISWUA defended them by withholding labor to secure union contracts, which was typical of practices throughout the AFL. On the other hand, the socialism of the timber worker was identical to the socialism of the textile worker or the schoolteacher. Even the socialist ISWUA did not have the conceptual tools or the political imagination to link forest conservation to job stability. These organizational and ideological limits left most timber workers struggling with poor conditions until World War I, when suddenly everything appeared to change.

World War I generated new markets for American wood and a new terrain for relations between labor and capital, and government and industry. Production and employment in the United States benefited from Europe’s need for millions of board feet of lumber to build training camps, railroad cars, war matériel, crates, containers, cargo ships, roads, bridges, and the trench system of the Western Front. While the war reinforced conservationist trends in Europe, it marginalized them in the United States and mobilized the public foresters for military service abroad. When the third chief of the Forest Service, William B. Greeley, returned from wartime France, he stressed nature’s obligation to the war effort: “We had many arguments with the French foresters over cutting requirements and I found myself on the other side of the table from similar controversies with loggers back home. The Frenchmen were understanding and realistic—and mighty good woodsmen. But in issues between their established regime of timber culture and exigencies of Allied manpower or speed in getting wood to the front, the forest always won out.”³⁷ The victory of the forest, as Greeley put it, was rational in the context of small and ancient France, yet it irritated the public forester from the United States. Greeley’s attitude was emblematic for the nation—timbermen could produce all they wanted without fear of market saturation, workers could push successfully for higher wages with the knowledge that

36. *Ibid.*, March 30, 1912.

37. Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service*, 70.

their labor was in high demand, the federal government could relinquish its often conflicting goals of antitrust and conservation in the interests of national security—in short, everyone could behave “normally” thanks to the abnormality of the moment.

The short-term opportunity to satisfy workers' needs led to the IWW's emergence as the dominant timber union during the ensuing struggle in the woods. It was yet another irony that the most propitious economic conditions in a generation brought the avowedly revolutionary IWW its greatest organizational successes, especially in light of its history of practical failure. The IWW's first involvement with Pacific Northwest timber workers was in an unsuccessful strike of mill hands in Portland, Oregon, in 1907, followed by the Spokane free speech fights of 1909. Later, in 1911 and 1912, the IWW conducted an ultimately disastrous series of free speech fights and a strike in Grays Harbor, Washington, which forced the much maligned and defeated organization to withdraw to Centralia. In 1916, the militant organization gained national attention on account of its failed “invasion” of Everett, Washington, which was bloodily repulsed by a force of deputized middle-class citizens. By the spring of 1917, the IWW Lumber Workers Industrial Union could count three thousand members, scattered throughout the northwestern region, and primarily in the woods. This was roughly equal to the combined membership of the AFL Shingle Weavers and the AFL's effort in the logging camps, the International Union of Timber Workers.³⁸ The three organizations together comprised less than 10 percent of the industry's labor force.

The story of the great wartime timber strike is already well known. A brief recapitulation will serve to remind us of how predictably all actors behaved, but for a remarkably innovative government response to the labor problem. On March 5 and 6, 1917, one month before the United States joined the allied war effort, Lumber Workers' Industrial Union No. 500 met in Spokane and issued a strike call for July 1. Demands included an eight-hour day in the camps and mills, no Sunday work for loggers, double-time pay for Sunday work in the mills, and a minimum wage of \$60 a month for loggers and \$3.50 a day for mill hands.³⁹ If not for the IWW's professed revolutionism, these demands should appear eminently “normal” and unexceptionable.⁴⁰ In May, the Shingle Weavers Union tried to secure the eight-hour day in the

38. Jensen, *Lumber and Labor*, 125.

39. *Industrial Worker*, July 14, 1917.

40. The “normality” of the IWW's demands is reflected as well in a song written expressly for the 1917 strike, titled “Fifty Thousand Lumberjacks.” The song also reinforces the notion that “nature workers,” or perhaps their representatives, did not necessarily ascribe qualities to outdoor workplaces that would distinguish them in any fundamental way from factories. Timber workers did, however, have strong associations to their migratory status and to their homelessness. A representative excerpt follows: Fifty-thousand lumberjacks, fifty-thousand packs, fifty-thousand dirty rolls of blankets on their backs. Fifty-thousand minds made up to strike and strike like men, For fifty years they've packed a bed, but never will again. “Such a lot of devils”—that's what the papers say—“They've gone on strike for shorter hours and some increase in pay: They left the camps, the lazy tramps, they all walked out as one; They say they'll win the strike or put the bosses on the bum.”

shingle mills by conference. When the employers refused, the union set a strike date of July 16. In June, the International Union of Timber Workers (IUT) issued its own demands, including a minimum wage of \$3 for eight hours in the mills and \$3.50 for nine hours in the camps, union recognition, and the closed shop. Failing agreement by July 12, the timber workers would strike with the weavers on July 16. Blessed by the grace of markets that needed to be satisfied, regional employers were quick to respond in time-honored fashion. In Seattle on July 9, the Lumbermen's Protective Association pledged to raise a half-million-dollar war chest to fight workers' demands and to "unequivocally maintain a ten-hour day for the purpose of maintaining production in the lumber industry."⁴¹ The battle was on.

At first, the IWW focused on the Inland Empire and chose not to strike in western Washington, but several spontaneous strikes forced the union's hand, including a walkout in the Grays Harbor region at one of the Anderson and Middleton Company's logging camps as a result of a wage dispute.⁴² When the IWW officially entered the fray and the breadth of the strike became apparent, a federal government that had been loath to restrict timber harvests by assuming regulatory powers over private land ardently redirected itself to maintaining timber supplies. In short order, forests no longer brought to mind the Forest Service but rather the more "conventional" Departments of Labor, Justice, and War. The Washington State Council of Defense struggled to bring employers and unions to the bargaining table, but lumber operators refused, despite pleas from the U.S. Labor commissioner Harry White and Washington's Governor Ernest Lister. Employers declared their willingness to negotiate with legitimate unions, but said that in this case there was no one to talk to. While the AFL correctly treated this position as a subterfuge, it was doubtful that the organization could deliver the goods, since it could not prove the allegiance of most of the men on strike.⁴³ The war also tested the socialist commitment of AFL locals that had embraced this ideology a few years earlier. "Class warrior" Harry Call of the Bellingham ISWUA was a good indicator of socialism's situational appeal. In 1912, as noted, he had reacted to a series of union defeats with the rhetoric of "red" revolution. In 1917, however, Call expressed his anger in an altogether different way: "The I.W.W. and the manufacturers are in league to destroy not only our organization, but any union of the American Federation of Labor that they can lay their dirty hands on. . . . Our patriotism has stood the acid test; we have not defied the government. . . . Join up and carry on for the eight hours."⁴⁴

Call represented a general wartime shift within the AFL Shingle Weavers Union that, it was hoped, would help engage government power more aggressively on behalf of the workers. But by moving the union back from conventional trade

41. *Aberdeen Daily World*, July 6, 1917.

42. *Daily Washingtonian* (Hoquiam), July 10, 1917.

43. *Seattle Union Record*, July 28, 1917.

44. *Shingle Weaver*, October 20, 1917.



Loggers in bunkhouse, unidentified logging camp, Washington, 1892. Negative no.: D. Kinsey 155A.
Photo: Darius Kinsey. Courtesy University of Washington Libraries

unionism enveloped in socialist rhetoric to conventional trade unionism cloaked in patriotism, Call also reflected the “normalizing” effects of the war. And what then of the radical IWW’s influence among the far more numerous “timber beasts” in the woods? Reasons other than ideology probably played a more important role in shaping workers’ choices in the summer of 1917. First, the AFL unions had ignored the workers in the woods until 1913, and even then, the centralization of AFL locals in the mill towns limited communication with migratory workers in the camps. This was a problem that the IWW overcame by dispatching roving organizers, or “job delegates,” into the woods. Second, even the IWW’s structural flexibility had not been a substantial asset before the war, because economic conditions did not favor the workers. Even the militant IWW could not succeed in getting the trees to go on strike, and nothing short of this (or genuine conservation on private lands) could have rescued the workers from their plight. Timber harvesters constituted a vast migratory army of laborers who were attracted, as was capital, to the nation’s enormous stands

of trees, wherever these happened to be. Historically, such workers had been a dime a dozen. World War I created the first significant labor shortage in the woods and thereby provided workers with an opportunity to bargain their labor power into better conditions. Consequently, the war gave the IWW an opportunity to become “normal” in practice if not in ideology. Because it could succeed by mobilizing workers along perfectly conventional—while militant—unionist lines, it remains questionable whether revolutionary doctrines played any significant role in attracting a following.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the IWW’s professed revolutionism served as a bogey that reinforced the predictably conservative stances of the other players in the conflict—because of the IWW, employers refused to negotiate with their workers; because of the IWW, AFL unions pressed their claims of sole legitimacy; and because of the IWW, the United States feared the war effort would be undermined. All three groups could agree on only one thing, the need to cut trees.

Because the U.S. government was especially worried about strike-induced shortages of northwestern spruce—the only wood with physical characteristics suitable for aircraft construction—state and federal officials concluded that the IWW had to be broken by carrot and by stick. On July 17, despite the orderly nature of the strike, the Washington State Supreme Court issued an injunction against all forms of picketing. On August 7, Dr. Henry Suzzallo of the State Council of Defense failed to convince E. S. Grammer of the Lumbermen’s Protective Association (LPA) to accept an eight-hour day for the state’s timber workers. On August 2, Dr. Carleton Parker, investigator of labor troubles for the War Department, and Captain J. F. Blain, representative of the federal shipping board, had indicated the likelihood of federal intervention in the strike. On the night of August 11, Secretary of War Newton Baker took the momentous step of announcing his support for an eight-hour day in the lumber industry of the Pacific Northwest. On August 15, Washington’s Governor Lister joined him in calling for the same. LPA chairman Grammer rejected the proposal, claiming that timber workers were being paid extraordinarily high wages and that the strike was an IWW insurrection. As if to justify this appraisal, the IWW issued a general strike call for Monday, August 20, unless its “class war prisoners were all released from jail by that date.” By late August, the Justice Department planned to prove that the IWW strikes were criminal conspiracies to interfere with the war effort and with the constitutional rights of employers on government contract. On the eve of the planned August 20 general strike, Major Clement Wilkins led a National Guard raid on IWW headquarters in Spokane, arresting district secretary James Rowan—a veteran of the Everett Massacre—and twenty-six others. The organization’s most active leaders were being arrested, pickets intimidated, and on September 5, a federal grand jury in Chicago began its investigation of alleged Wobbly involve-

45. That IWW strength was as dependent as any union on a strong timber economy has been addressed by Richard Rajala, “A Dandy Bunch of Wobblies,” *Labor History* 37 (1996): 205–34.

ment in a German-funded conspiracy to sabotage the U.S. war effort. The IWW's days were numbered.⁴⁶

With its leadership cadre decimated, the IWW was forced to reappraise its tactics. The struggle became a "strike on the job": "Monohan, Wash.—Although the fallers and buckers work by contract in this camp, they sit down for two hours after they have worked eight hours. Malbron, Wash.—The Snohomish Logging Company got started with two sides running but on Thursday the steam went crazy with the heat and blew the whistle at 4 p.m. Sixty men rolled up and came out, leaving eight on the job waiting for the next shipment so the new crew can be instructed as to how the wobblies get paid for striking. This is the second time this stunt has been pulled at the camp and soon it will be eight hours for ours."⁴⁷ Ordinary workers repeated spontaneous "wildcat" actions over and over again, from locality to locality, without the benefit of strict organizational discipline. In September, the strike had come full circle. What began spontaneously in July and was then harnessed and channeled by the IWW was now again unchained.

By midautumn the strike had reduced shipments of the government's spruce to less than half the required ten million feet per month, demonstrating the urgent need for a settlement with labor. It was here that the federal government demonstrated a degree of regulatory power and efficacy remarkably superior to its peacetime conservation efforts. In October, the War Department sent Colonel Brice P. Disquewest to investigate the lumber industry. On November 30, with the support of the secretaries of labor and war, Colonel Disque opened the first local of the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen. Employers and employees both were expected to join and were sworn in writing to dedicate themselves to production, to the war effort, and to stamping out "sedition." By the end of 1918, membership is said to have approached 100,000, with the lumber industry divided into districts, each headed by a commissioned officer. Successful recruitment was partly due to intimidation, especially in demonstrating the danger of continued association with the IWW. But while IWW organizers were hounded and imprisoned, there was no widespread military violence against the bulk of ordinary workers, who probably cooperated with the Loyal Legion for simple economic reasons. On February 27, Disque determined that the eight-hour day was essential to labor peace in the industry and forced recalcitrant firms to observe it. On March 10, he issued industrywide regulations that included the eight-hour day, time and a half for overtime, and minimum and maximum wages, with the maximum being generally the rule for the duration of the war. This amounted to \$4.00 to \$4.40 for an eight-hour day of unskilled work—more

46. *Everett Daily Herald*, August 1, 1917; August 8, 1917; August 11, 1917; August 15, 1917; August 17, 1917; *Aberdeen World*, August 3, 1917; *Daily Washingtonian*, August 16, 1917; *Seattle Union Record*, August 25, 1917; *Industrial Worker*, August 25, 1917; Jensen, *Lumber and Labor*, 127. The whole saga of federal action against the IWW is also well recounted in Melvyn Dubofsky's *We Shall Be All*, 378–82, 396, 398–414. See also Robert Ficken, "The Wobbly Horrors: Pacific Northwest Lumbermen and the Industrial Workers of the World," *Labor History* 24 (1983): 325–41.

47. *Industrial Worker*, September 22, 1917; September 29, 1917.

than either the AFL or IWW had demanded at the onset of the strike. Disque and the Loyal Legion purchased a compliant and disciplined labor force with relative ease and alacrity, suggesting that the IWW's radicalism neither derived from nor imbued the mentality of the rank and file. Within a year of the first walkouts that signaled the great lumber strike of 1917, the unions were in shambles. The IWW was treated as a renegade organization, and judicial prosecutions drained its small coffers. The ISWUA disintegrated and merged into the IUT in March 1918. The new International Union of Timberworkers had only 203 shingle weavers and 2,324 timber workers in its ranks, but most of the material demands of the strikers, and especially the most important of all—the eight-hour day—had been won.⁴⁸

The war gave lumber companies and their workers an unexpected respite from the economic vagaries of the past, but it did not resolve problems endemic to conventional resource-use patterns. The federal government's novel and short-lived wartime experiment in "human resources" management trumped and upstaged its earlier limited efforts at "natural resources" management and was an ultimate cause of the transience of labor's wartime material gains. In subsequent years, the industry entered a prolonged period of decline, and workers' war-era gains dissipated. From late 1920 on, declining per capita consumption of timber led to sharp reductions in the number of operating camps and mills, and served as a disincentive to the youth who might have flocked to the timber districts for work. As the broad economic prospects and narrow military exigencies of the war faded, Loyal Legion membership dropped to about ten thousand. Independent unionism did not make a dramatic resurgence until the birth of the International Woodworkers of America CIO in 1937, nor did political radicalism resurface as a significant force in timber unionism during the 1920s. The timber recession of 1920 became a timber depression in 1926, to be alleviated once again only by the advent of the next war. The administration of President Harding had little interest in regulation or economic management and manipulation, and restricted itself to sporadic and inconsistent antitrust investigations that served only, as in the past, to create a climate of suspicion and uncertainty in the industry.⁴⁹

The Forest Service, whose conservationist role had been marginalized during the war, reemerged as the principal link between the industry and the federal government, and revived its prewar image as a champion of wise use. In 1922, in "Timber: Mine or Crop?" Chief Greeley challenged the industrial philosophy of "timber mining" that had produced the cut-and-run practices of the past.⁵⁰ Yet despite the nod to sustainable yield, the Forest Service drastically increased its own timber sales, shattering all previous records, while its legislative agenda was largely limited to fire

48. Wage and membership data is available in the *4L Monthly Bulletin* (Portland, OR), May 1918. The rise of the Four L has been well treated in Harold Hyman, *Soldiers and Spruce* (Los Angeles: Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, 1963), and briefly in Jensen, *Lumber and Labor*, 129–37.

49. For economic problems of the 1920s, see Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service*, 83–85.

50. W. B. Greeley et al., "Timber: Mine or Crop?" *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1922 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1923).

protection. Gifford Pinchot, who remained a staunch advocate of carefully regulated use, was isolated as an anachronistic radical and crank for his determination to finally bring direct federal regulation to private timberlands. No one in a position of government authority made any serious effort to regulate cutting until the Great Depression and the Roosevelt New Deal, and even then, industry self-regulation was the preferred option. During the twentieth century, as builders shifted to new materials such as composite shingles, concrete, and steel, the timber industry lost the role once attributed to it by President Theodore Roosevelt as the provider of the people's homes. Yet the industry's spectacular growth, geographic expansion, and aggressive timbering methods in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth left a legacy of despoiled lands and ruined lives that merits historical attention.

As already noted, the original cause of the timber industry's economic problems and of its laborers' hardships was the response by human beings to perceived natural abundance. But because this response was not entirely inevitable, its elements should be explained. Lumber companies, like other business corporations, are of course driven by economic self-interest. Today, one often assumes that this will pit them against private environmentalists and government environmental regulators, but in the early twentieth century, lumber trade associations found some common ground with the nascent conservation movement through the mediation of the Forest Service. Association leaders were not preservationists, but they could cooperate with federal foresters on reforms that might have produced price stability for their product. Acceptable forms of federal intervention would have included a reduction in taxes on standing timber, increased efforts in fire protection and control, import tariffs on foreign (Canadian) timber, the creation of new federal reserves in areas of greatest resource depletion, and even the establishment of a ceiling on the annual cut. All of these proposals had some degree of merit but also illustrated the limited ways in which timber producers sought to apply the conservationist impulse. Taxes on standing timber were a sort of inventory tax that unquestionably promoted cutting and sale, since there was no incentive to leave trees standing, for which a company would carry a cost in any case. On the other hand, lowering such taxes would cut company costs without discouraging further acquisition of timberlands. This would not have reduced logging, especially if it resulted in further accumulation of holdings on credit, as was typically the case. As for fire protection, this was certainly in everyone's interest, but the industry intentionally ignored two things. First, the lumbermen themselves were responsible for aggravating the risk of fire with logging methods that produced ample fuel in the form of slash and debris and that made it much more likely that fires would consume even the topsoil necessary for regeneration. Second, the lumbermen were seeking to transfer the cost of defending against their privately caused damage to the public at large. On the matter of tariffs, it is true that there was little point to increasing the flow of foreign timber into usually saturated U.S. markets, but creating tariff barriers would, while perhaps protecting American prices, not necessarily protect American trees. Higher prices, as in 1906, usu-



Yarding logs with spar trees, Bloedel Donovan Lumber Co., Skykomish, Washington, date unknown.
Negative no.: UW 1695. Photo: Darius Kinsey. Courtesy University of Washington Libraries

ally resulted in more exuberant cutting. Only two of the industry's proposals had any relationship to the most explicitly conservationist functions of federal authority—the creation of new reserves and the imposition of cut limits. The reserves, however, were proposed in areas of extreme depletion and would have been responding to devastation rather than preventing it. Large companies were also frequently accused of supporting reserves to keep smaller competitors from gaining access to remaining forests, and this was a plausible argument. Finally, cut limits were first proposed under depressed conditions in 1908, but were not a generally popular option. Any prospect of improved market conditions muted consideration of such dramatic government regulation on private land. Lumbermen wanted the kind of government action that would cut costs of production and raise or stabilize prices without compelling them to cede substantial managerial power to public authorities. A “red line” demarcated the principle of private management of private lands, and government was not to cross it.

The federal government also contributed to producing the characteristic conditions of American silviculture by failing to reach consensus on how to deal with rapid industrialization. Some leaders were inspired by the technocratic and managerial notions that produced agencies like the Forest Service, while others contin-

ued to hold to the “utopian capitalist” goals of “small producerism” that had yielded the various post–Civil War federal land programs and that continued to drive a good deal of antitrust sentiment. Both factions generally held, however, that private property was sacrosanct and that the nation’s natural wealth was a commodity in waiting. These facts shaped federal impact on the timber industry. On the technocratic side, President Theodore Roosevelt’s utilitarianism created clear parameters for Forest Service policy that emphasized the common interest between federal foresters and private timbermen, but allowed the latter to dominate the former. Forest Service technocrats could determine how best to allocate public forest reserves, which allowed them to teach sustainability by example, but they were denied the power to bring real conservation to privately held woods. Ultimately, this limitation proved to be a disservice to the industry, its workers, and the woods themselves. On the antitrust side, figures such as South Dakota Senator Kittredge and Washington Congressman Humphrey advanced the view that timber companies were dangerous monopolies on the order of Morgan’s Northern Securities Company and Rockefeller’s Standard Oil. These critics opposed not only legislation that promoted cost savings or market protections for the lumbermen but also the Forest Service as a conspirator in the anticompetitive aims of the industry. Antitrust advocates often saw the forest reserves as an unfair means of keeping new competition from emerging and of keeping wood off the market. Victory for the antitrust forces would have meant opening all the nation’s woods to the sort of unregulated exploitation that had already been typical since the Civil War.

While the conflict between conservationism and antitrust was not resolved by 1914, the advent of war did bring some temporary resolution to the economic problems of timbering. From a long-term conservationist perspective, however, World War I was a negative turning point because it reinforced all of the older counterproductive assumptions about how forests should be used. Even the federal government developed a stake in immediate production because of its need for northwestern spruce. Public foresters directed their attention to maximum extraction rather than to regulated use. Wartime market expansion, and especially government consumption, weakened fledgling links between the lumber trade and conservationists, as demand finally matched the historically excessive cutting that had once aroused concern. During the war, the United States government proved its ability to act as a regulator, but showed much greater determination to harness labor and guarantee output than it had ever shown in regulation of resource use. After the war, in the deregulatory climate of the Harding and Coolidge administrations, the Forest Service chose not to pursue legislative goals that were deemed bound for failure, and the timber industry reverted to its prewar economic predicament, compounded by declining per capita consumption of wood.

And what of the workers? Those with the power to conceive of and apply conservationism left workers with a limited tactical and strategic repertoire for addressing their own exploitation. It should be noted here that conservation was an eminently political affair. Lumber trade associations acted in part as political lobbies to

ensure that state and federal regulation conformed to their own economic interests. Lumbermen built bridges to public foresters, and foresters, in their self-perceived managerial role, sought accommodation with the owners of the woods and mills. There was no such contact between public or private conservationists and labor organizations, and there was the additional problem that most workers were not organized at all. Resource technocrats no doubt never considered the utility of engaging labor in efforts that seemed to require managerial power. For their part, unions were not yet ready to assume a political role that extended beyond defense of what was already barely attainable—the regulated workday. In fact, in November 1914, a former shingle weaver, Ernest Marsh, used his influence as head of the Washington State Federation of Labor to frame a ballot initiative that would have codified the eight-hour day. When it failed at the polls, workers' already limited faith in the political process suffered an additional blow.⁵¹ And while the AFL was willing to use that process, the IWW rejected it outright. The effect was to abandon state power to business interests like the NLMA, the Pacific Lumber Manufacturers Association, and the Washington Employers' Association. This makes government's failure to bring conservation to private lands even more understandable, but this failure aggravated excessively competitive conditions that ultimately fell on the shoulders of labor, as only workers were a truly flexible cost of production. And insofar as workers were treated as production costs, they reacted as production costs. When timber workers were in high demand, whether on account of skill or war, they unionized. Their unions—whether craft based or industrial; politically centrist, socialist, or syndicalist; militant or not—pursued a conventional strategy of restricting labor supply to maximize workers' pay. If they failed, which happened more often than not, it was because too many workingmen were prepared to fell and process too many trees that too many investors had already designated as industrial capital. When they failed, it should not be surprising that they became angry, and like others of that time, they turned their wrath against their employers and sometimes even against the principle of capitalism itself. But like their cogenerationists in other social classes, the timber workers of a century ago did not appear to understand the role of the woods themselves and the management of those woods in shaping the destiny of the woodsmen.

The conceptual gap separating the interests of timber workers and the interests of the woods continues to some extent today. In the last decade, as new timber wars flared in the Pacific Northwest between companies like Louisiana-Pacific and environmentalist organizations like the Sierra Club, the activist Judi Bari revived the issue raised long ago by Samuel Trask Dana and Benton MacKaye—the relationship between forestry practices and the condition of timber workers. Bari commented in 1994: “But what about the timber workers. . . . Their true interest lies with the environmentalists, because . . . when the trees are gone, the jobs will be gone too. Logging is listed by the U.S. Labor Department as the most dangerous job in the U.S., yet the current speed up has some loggers and millworkers working ten or more

51. Clark, *Milltown*, 132.

hours a day, six days a week. Clearcutting is the most environmentally devastating logging method, and also the least labor-intensive. In the long run, the only way to save timber jobs . . . is to change over to sustained yield logging, where logs can only be taken in a manner and at a rate that doesn't destroy the forest. This is exactly what the environmentalists are asking for." Bari lamented that timber workers have almost uniformly joined with their employers in resisting environmental policies that seek to protect the nation's woodlands. Bari longed for a revival of IWW militancy applied to new ends: "Historically, it was the IWW who broke through the stranglehold of the timber barons on the loggers and millworkers of the nineteen teens. The ruling class fought back with brutality, and eventually crushed the IWW, settling instead for the more cooperative business unions. Now the companies are back in total control, only this time they're taking down not only the workers but the Earth as well. This, to me is what the IWW-Earth First! link is really all about. And if the IWW would like to be more than a historical society, it seems that the time is right to organize again in timber."⁵²

Bari's linkage of social and environmental costs was correct, although she understandably spoke as an activist and not as a historian. Timber barons did not simply have a "stranglehold" on their workers, but rather employers and workers alike were locked into a poorly conceived struggle with the forests in which workers, as one would expect, paid the higher human price. The IWW did not break the timber barons' "stranglehold" on the workers; World War I, instead, created the market conditions in which workers could use the IWW to defend their short-term economic interests. As for "total control," the timber companies never achieved it, although they struggled mightily to do so. If one takes control to mean enforcement of an effective degree of stability and predictability over one's conditions of existence, we have already seen that this was certainly not the case. Moreover, timber companies did not first "take down" the workers in the last century only to turn presently to "taking down" the Earth. These processes have been and continue to be intimately related. As for the frustrated workers, Bari gave us the familiar image of today's timber worker as an angry opponent of environmental regulation—an "owl-eater," if you will. Although working-class anger now has a new target, the source of this anger may not be far removed from conditions already established a century ago.

Timber workers of earlier times could not be anti-environmentalist or anti-conservationist, because the intellectual framework for this did not exist among workers in 1906 or 1918. But even the absence of this negation demonstrates that the conservation movement of the early twentieth century had very limited class reach.⁵³ The nascent movement was the preserve of upper-middle-class men and women—intel-

52. Judi Bari, "Timber Wars," in *Timber Wars* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage, 1994), 11, 18.

53. This issue is put into contemporary context by John Bellamy Foster, "The Limits of Environmentalism without Class," in *The Struggle for Ecological Democracy*, ed. Daniel Faber (New York: Guilford, 1998), 188–217. See also Thomas Dunk, "Talking about Trees," *Canadian Review of Sociology* 31 (1994): 14–34.

lectuals, social reformers, enlightened businessmen, and technocrats. But for a few people like Samuel Trask Dana, conservationists ignored the relationship between resource use and the workers who made it useful. This century-old story of timber capitalists, timber workers, and timber technocrats echoes the historian Richard White's admonition: "If the issue of work is left to . . . movements such as wise use, with its single-minded devotion to property interests, then work will simply be reified into property and property rights."⁵⁴ And that leaves little room for workers to identify their interests as being embodied in a different relationship to "nature." It is unclear if any ordinary timber workers of the earlier day entertained conservationist and preservationist ideas, but we know that their unions were generally silent on that score. That silence, along with the application of a very conventional economic strategy, illustrates the pervasiveness of an industrial mentality that crossed class lines and gave ample consideration to production costs but none to consumption costs. And what were the costs of consuming the woods? One may measure them as primeval forests lost; land laid bare to fire; streams dammed, silted, and clogged; species extinguished; and watersheds destroyed. One may measure them in dead and dying towns, failed human dreams, tramping labor, poverty, and in the great irony that those who made possible the nation's homes were themselves homeless. Finally, one may measure them in bitter and frequently bloody class conflicts that were all the more tragic for their futility. Workers, capitalists, and political leaders all gazed on the wealth of nature and imagined the wealth of men. They failed to grasp how to achieve it. ■

54. Richard White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" in *Uncommon Ground*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 174.