

TIMBER!



Logging the Trees That Built the West

by Cam Parry

As oxen strained against the weight of a giant redwood log, the hearty shout of "timber" could be heard echoing far off in the canyon. The camp was a bustle of activity, and the mouth-watering smells of fresh biscuits and a slowly simmered stew rose from the cookshed and drifted into the woods. Soon the dinner bell would ring and a crew of hungry loggers would make short work of hearty plates of food as they crowded around the long table. After dinner the filers would grab all the daylight they had left to sharpen their buck and falling saws (in order to do a good job it sometimes took two hours just to finish one long saw). Large piles of plates and utensils

had to be washed in preparation for morning pancakes, horses and oxen were to be checked, and gear was to be ready for daybreak. Then came the pay-off. All the crew would gather round the sawmill boiler and tell stories of the great woods and the Pacific Northwest as only they could tell them. These were the pioneers of the forests, men who met giant redwoods and firs head-on, with simple tools. They lived and died in the woods, dependent on their skill, courage, and a touch of luck. They were legends long before their time had passed, grabbing all they could get out of life, while earning a dollar a day for putting that same life on the line. These were the men of the

great woods and this was to be the background for the boyhood of Ralph Sturgeon.

"Most of the fellows were young, different nationalities and different backgrounds. They were wonderful crews and the finest men you'd ever want to meet. I look at some of these old pictures of different logging crews and I often wonder how many of these fellows made it out of the woods," said Sturgeon.

If you can say some children are born with a silver spoon in their mouths, then you'd have to say that Ralph Sturgeon was born with a falling axe in his hands. From stripping tan bark to making cord wood and then

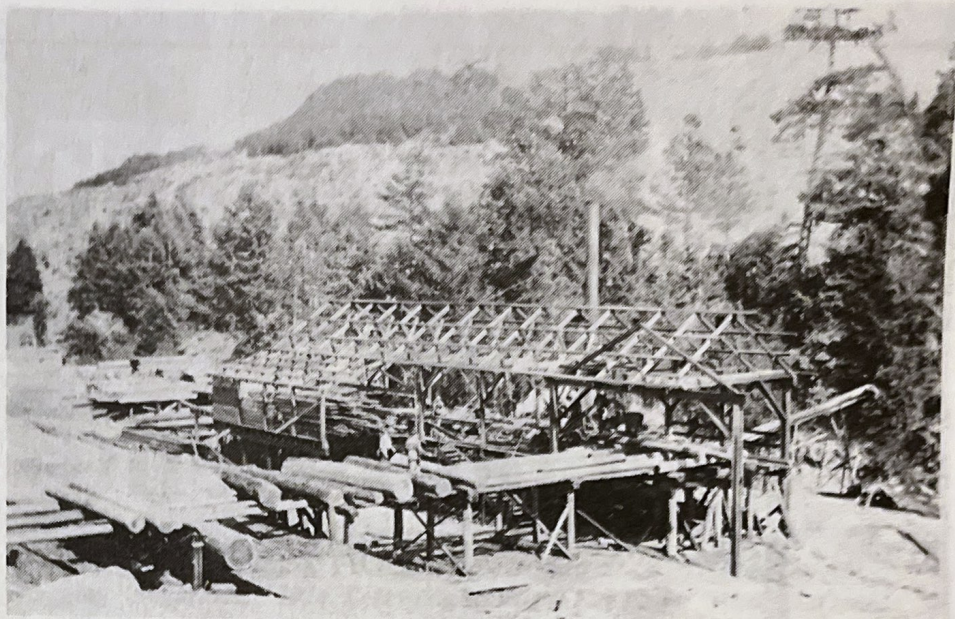
logging and milling, the Sturgeons earned their keep the old-fashioned way; they broke their backs for it.

Sturgeon's father Wade went into the wood business with William Kingwell right after the turn of the century, setting up near Occidental. The elder Sturgeon and Kingwell made stove wood, pickets, posts, and some shingles. "Most fellows back then had

"The women back then were our 9-1-1. They were the ones that kept us all going, and handled all the emergencies."

their little homesteads of maybe 10 to 40 acres and built themselves a cabin. You didn't have to pay 2,000 dollars a month on a home loan and worry yourself to death, like now. But, you know they did everything just to keep going and they still could never get a dollar ahead. It just wasn't set up back then for a fellow to ever be able to make much money. Besides making wood, they also ranched and worked in the fruit," said Sturgeon.

A lot of the wood the partnership made was moved by rail out of Occidental. "They had 4-foot wood and they had stove wood. They had to pile the wood in the rail cars, because they couldn't throw the stuff in loose. I remember them telling that sometimes the rail cars would get moved around in different positions and the cars would bump each other. Now if their



Sturgeon's mill in Coleman Valley, under construction 1912-14.

stacks weren't in there real tight when the cars bumped, over they'd tumble and then they'd have to start stacking all over again. God, it was terrible when that happened."

Leftover wood from the tan bark operation was often made into charcoal, as the demand for charcoal exceeded the demand for wood. Many of the Italian families in Sonoma County first came here as charcoal makers. "They were charcoal men in northern Italy and they were sent for, so they could make charcoal here. You see, they'd strip the tan bark and there would be a lot of wood still lying

around and there was a demand for charcoal, but not really that big a demand for wood. So, these fellows came here to do that, and I'll tell you, it's one of the dirtiest jobs you've ever seen, making charcoal," said Sturgeon.

Sturgeon's dad used a single-bit axe and a 4-foot saw when cutting tan bark. Sometimes he could de-bark the base of a good-sized tree and not have to fall it.

It was tough work, but Sturgeon is quick to give credit to the women behind the men that worked in the woods. "I'll tell you, if it wasn't for the women in this whole damn set-up, none of us would have existed. They were there doing the cooking and the nursing and the cleaning. They even milked the cows because papa had to go out early to make a buck. I'll tell you, the women back then were our 9-1-1. They were the ones that kept us all going, and handled all the emergencies."

Around about 1913, Wade Sturgeon decided that he wanted a sawmill. He would get out of the tan bark business and go into the lumber business. Boss Meeker (for whom Camp Meeker is named), knew that Sturgeon wanted a sawmill and he also knew that a fellow named Sugarman (who owned a supply-type hardware store on Fourth Street in Santa Rosa) had purchased the old Korbel sawmill that had been sitting idle for years. Sugarman had paid 500 dollars for the mill, so Boss Meeker offered him 600 dollars for it. So Sugarman sold it to Meeker, and then Meeker sold it to Sturgeon for 700



The crew of Sturgeon's mill, 1914. Wade Sturgeon is leftmost in rear row.



The Death of an Old Friend

by Lori Fisher

Editor's Note: This story first ran in the Sebastopol Times in 1984.

The bigger they are, the harder they fall. The giant fir tree that Ron Sturgeon scaled last week, towering over the home of his grandparents (Norma and Ralph Sturgeon), is on the ground.

The fir is estimated to be more than a thousand years old. It was 205 feet high and 7 feet in diameter. It kept a silent vigil over the Sturgeon home for decades but would have demolished the structure had it been knocked over in a powerful windstorm.

Ralph Sturgeon, a long-time lumberman and sawmill owner, feels about trees the way Indians did about buffalo. They were his bread and butter, but he loved them too. It cost him many sleepless nights and tears as well, but the decision to sacrifice the tree for their safety was unavoidable. Grandson Ron contended that it would be as easy for his grandfather to cut off his own limbs as to cut down the old fir.

More than 100 people from Sonoma and Napa counties gathered Saturday afternoon, February 11, to see the event. One bystander commented, "Too bad it didn't grow way out in the wilds, where it would be safe." Another chipped in reply, "It did. When this tree started growing, Columbus wasn't even born."

One wonders how many storms the massive fir tree had weathered, how many bird nests it held aloft, how many generations of young bucks rubbed their velvety antlers against its rough bark before anyone ever lived in Sonoma County?

The Sturgeons' concern was a real

one. More than 50 smaller firs toppled in the forest behind their home in the last big storm, and this one directly endangered their home and their lives. Ralph commented that he felt as if the old tree somehow knew it was on death row. "It's seen so many of its kind pass through the old mill here," he said, indicating the old steam-run sawmill below where the old tree stood.

Taking the giant tree down was no easy task. Ralph's son Bob and his grandsons Ron, Mick and Dan Sturgeon comprise the Sturgeons' Tree Surgeon Service, and were the main orchestrators of this risky enterprise. A miscalculation, a snapped cable, or faulty timing could result in the demolition of the entire home, not to mention endangering their own lives.

Miraculously, the precision and skill of the tree surgeons defied gravity and persuaded the tree to fall well clear of the house below. The crowd's triumphant whoop rang through the misty woods. The Sturgeon men, all three generations, stood on the stump and posed for pictures. "Hey, we do this stuff every day," quipped Dan.

Everyone seemed comforted by the fact that the core of the old fir was very rotten — it was on its way out anyway. Perhaps a windstorm next week, or in a few hundred years would have been its finale. In any event, the Sturgeons will be sleeping more safely now that the giant tree is down.

Ralph Sturgeon said that after the tree was cut, "Someone placed a four-foot high white cross on its stump with a hand-written note at the base that said: 'God bless you, Dear Old Tree.' That really touched me."

dollars. All this time the mill was sitting over at Korbel, so it would have to be dismantled to be moved. Wade and his crew rented tools from Sugarman and took down the mill. They then loaded it on the broad-gauge railroad to Monte Rio. From Monte Rio, the mill had to be reloaded onto the narrow gauge to Occidental. "That was a job. That stuff was really heavy and hard to move," commented Sturgeon.

Upon arriving at Occidental, the mill was loaded in wagons pulled by horse teams. The equipment was then hauled up the grade out of Occidental to the site of the mill (off Coleman Valley Road on the Alex Hendren property). The mill took Sturgeon and his crew about a year to set up and was in full gear by the summer of 1914. "They had to deal with weather, and they still had to work to earn a living while they were setting the thing up," said Sturgeon.

The loggers for the mill proceeded to cut trees in the area known as the "Sugarloaf." Frank Craig, one of the finest teamsters in Sonoma County at

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the time, was hired by Wade Sturgeon to haul the logs from the Sugarloaf down to the mill. "Frank was something with a team of horses," said Sturgeon. "I saw teams get down on their bellies and pull for him. If a load didn't move, he knew there had to be some other way to go about it. He was just that kind of a guy, and there were damn few like him. It would just make the tears run out of your eyes to watch how he and that team would work together. It was real steep coming down from the Sugarloaf and it was just a marvelous thing to see him bring those logs down off the mountain."

Oxen were also used to pull the big logs and Sturgeon had 6 of them for this heavy work. "I often wonder how Dad made a go of it," said Sturgeon. "When the mill was in full production he'd go out to collect the money for the lumber. Now Dad would go out to collect 22 dollars and maybe they'd give him 10 dollars. I don't know how he did it. With the little he was able to collect, it was always touch and go."

Dairy men and ranchers paid their bills, though, and that was the salva-

tion for Sturgeon's new business venture. As long as those men could pay for their new barn and corral wood, the mill could keep going.

Young Ralph Sturgeon first went to work in the timber business in 1922, when he was 13 years old. At that time Mike Horrigan was the sawyer and Neal Ihm was the engine and boilerman at the mill. Of course, Ralph's dad, Wade, was the head of the operation. "I was just a damn skinny kid working with these fellows. I remember originally that my grandma started out doing the cooking, then Mrs. Miller and Miss Williams took over the duties at the cook-shack. There was a crew of about 24 men working at the mill and woods at one time."

Sturgeon learned quickly and well, with the most important lesson being, never trust anything to luck. The other important lesson was to always be on the uphill side of a roller (rolling log). "The fellows I worked with just belonged in the industry. They were dyed-in-the-wool sawmill men. There were always some that didn't belong, though. I remember a fellow that used to log with Andrew Blaney and Andrew would always say to me, 'Well, we got through another day of logging and he's still alive.' Andrew just couldn't believe that this fellow had made it."

To Sturgeon and others, the best part of logging life came after all the work was done in the evening hours. By now the boilerman would have shoved all the coals back off the grates and banked the fire up with wet sawdust to hold the coals all night. Some of the men would come down to the boiler after their various chores were done and sit around on the big wood slabs. "Then they'd commence telling stories, and I'll tell you, that's where I got my education. I was just a little guy, but a lot of what they taught me stuck. Mainly I remember safety. Some of these guys had a couple of fingers missing and one guy had a lot of leather built up in his shoe because he'd been in an accident and his leg was short. Some of the guys had scars on them. After seeing a lot of that, I learned safety," said Sturgeon.

"I remember also that the men at that time never told out of the way jokes in front of children or women. If I was coming up to a group of men and they were telling a "story," they'd all of a sudden change the subject. You know, that was a good deal, that they



Logging "Sugarloaf," 1914. Left to right: Roy & Leo Finley, Wade Sturgeon.

were like that back then. Some of them were boozers, though, and they never changed that a damn bit. Anyway, you'd get there in the evening and you'd sit on your big slab and there'd be sawdust all around, and then they'd roll their cigarets and start telling stories. These guys would stick the cigaret in their mouth and strike a match on their jeans. So they'd be talking away, and maybe that match would make it to the cigaret before it burned down to their hand, and maybe it wouldn't. Pretty soon that match would burn their fingers and they'd shake it out, light another match on their jeans, and just keep talking. Their attention was all right there, on the tel-

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ing of their story, and that match was just held out there while they told it."

Sturgeon said the loggers would tell work stories, fishing stories, or hunting stories. Love-life stories never made it to the campfire, that just wasn't something the men discussed in each other's company. Sturgeon feels of any television shows or movies made today, nothing can compare with the way these fellows told their stories in front of the boiler.

"I was a really young skinny kid, but you know, skinny kids are tougher than hell. I don't know how us skinny guys are that strong, but we are. They taught me how to work on a 49 miler, which is a push-edger. This was a single saw that was a table-edger that two

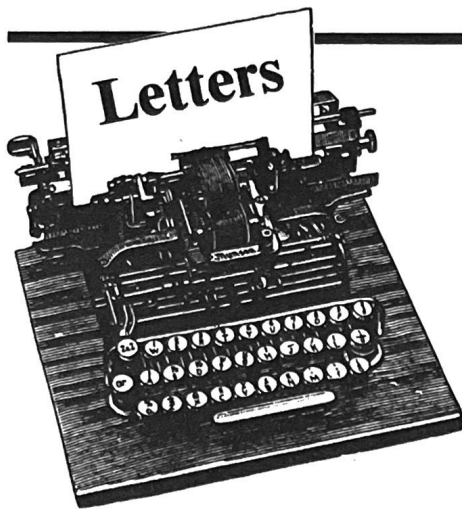
men worked on. I became the tail edgerman," said Sturgeon.

The early lessons Sturgeon learned in the woods and while working on the 49 miler stood him well, for when Sturgeon ran his own mill, they never lost a man, and they never had a serious accident. Sturgeon also became adept at falling and bucking trees, besides learning all of the business aspects of mill work.

In 1943, Ralph Sturgeon and his partner, James E. Henningson bought the mill (which was then owned by Donati, Gonnella, and Sturgeon). The mill had long since been moved to its present location off of Green Hill Road. "We had a crew of 12 men running the mill, with our biggest crew being about 32, counting the loggers. We milled millions of board feet there in the 20 years we ran the mill. We eventually bought 2,000 acres off of Willow Creek Road that was then called the Bodega Rancho. Andrew Blaney, Henningson, and I bought the property. This property went clear down to Freeze-out, within a mile of Duncan's Mills. We logged this property and also bought logs. Blaney did most of the logging, but my son and I, as well as the Morelli brothers (Frank and Vic), also felled timber on the property at one time or another."

The Sturgeon, Henningson, Blaney group also sold logs to Berry's Mill, and to Bob Schnieder, and the Cloverdale Mill. "We logged on that property for 17 years, until we sold it. The way we were logging on it, we could have just always kept going. But after we sold it, they eventually came in there

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to preserve a beloved local landmark, as well as insure the future of a very remarkable local historical collection.

Should you need any further information or documentation please let me know.

Sincerely,
Hannah M. Clayburn,
 Director/Curator

Editor —

The March 1988 issue of *The Journal* which focused on the Guerneville Bridge was fantastic! I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Enclosed is a check for \$25 for my membership renewal.

Susan Bulogar

Editor —

Thank you for your recent letter regarding your organization's recommendation to preserve the Highway 116 bridge into Guerneville. As an engineer, I certainly agree we need to preserve the type of steel truss bridge and I appreciate your efforts to this end.

I am sure you are aware that this is a bridge owned by the State of California and the Board of Supervisors has no jurisdiction. It may well be that the State Landmarks Commission has jurisdiction. It would be most proper for you to direct your thoughts and feelings to them.

Thank you for your help.

James L. Harberson
 Second District Supervisor

Editor —

Congrats (okay, kudos then. My darn tripewriter misspells) on your March '88 issue of *The Journal!* And welcome to our county's editorial group!

Your achievement in March was a tour de force, considering the pressures and deadlines. The result is superb.

I'm personally happy to see my friend Alexander's book reviewed in your BOOK CORNER. He wrote it, and well; I edited it with repeated readings, then promoted it thru publication — a long, tedious chore.

If you ever see anything in my little sheet that you covet, help yourself. It goes monthly to the County Museum, and conceivably I could send one to your home, if you're not already swamped there by retrospective prose.

Best wishes...

Brad Champlin

Logging...

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and just raped the damn thing. There was just nothing left. That's a hell of a way to log," said Sturgeon. "Don't ever let anybody tell you that there's more timber now than there ever was. That's a lot of bull."

When Sturgeon and Henningson bought the mill, it was entirely steam. Eventually they updated it to electricity and hydrolics. The original equipment is all still there, though, some of it being from the old Korbel mill, and of an 1880's vintage.

"I'd always walk around with anybody who was new and show them all of the equipment. You'd always want to put a young lad who was green with an older hand at the mill work. Safety came first."

Sturgeon and his crews did selective cutting on redwood so that they could achieve a sustained yield of timber for the mill. "If there was a nice group of 8 trees, we'd only take 3 of them. You see, a sustained yield is money in the bank for you. Some of these outfits now, the way they cut, it will be 80 years before they have anything standing there again. It's just a crime, a damn shame," he added.



Ralph Sturgeon, left, with Andrew Blaney, 1945.

The old mill is in mothballs now, "layed up" in graphite and grease, in perfect shape. Sturgeon has devoted the better part of 10 years to compiling oral histories, photos and notes, and a fine collection of timber artifacts. "I started talking to a lot of these folks before they were gone, making notes and studying. I'm the last one left that worked at Dad's mill, from back when I was 13 years old. Things are different now. You know the big social events would be the dances the towns had. Maybe there'd be one over at Forestville and then a month or so

later, one over at another town. You'd see everybody there, at those dances. At that time, there were only homes here and yonder, and pretty soon, before you know it, you'd marry somebody's daughter off a ways from your place," mused Sturgeon.

Thanks to Ralph Sturgeon, there is now a fine record of the grand heyday of logging, a record that enables all of us to look back at hard times, which were also the best of times. Back when homes were only off here and yonder, and the neighbor's daughter over the mountain would one day be your wife.