IZEE: Growing Up In A Logging Camp

by Russ Miles[1]

I was ready to start the fourth grade, the year we moved to Izee. Prior to that time, the Miles family had lived in Bates, Oregon. Bates was a company owned, sawmill town, too. The biggest difference was that the houses in Bates were painted, on the outside.

My sister, Rita, had married her high school sweetheart, in June, and had moved to Eugene, Oregon. We would not be able to see her more than a couple of time a year—as it was ninety miles to the paved highway, and then over two hundred miles from there. My brother, Robert, would begin his high school in a few weeks. Robert would have to be boarded in Canyon City or John Day, Oregon. The Izee school had only first through eight grades available in its two rooms.

Mom had assured Dad and me, “Robert will be just fine. He will only be fifty-eight miles away. He can come home on the weekends and for spring vacation. We know how important it is to get a good education.”

Mother had never attended high school, herself. Born Mildred Heck, with eight siblings, she was working in a Baker City laundry by the time that she was twelve years old. As the dominant parent, Mother never expected too much of my father. Her kids were her life and she could handle everything.

Mom had never known her father, a Nez Percé Indian, who, like her mother's other three husbands, had died young in Baker City, Oregon. All that she had known about her father was that he was a Catholic. She had made his religion her own. Her mother was a Nazarene. Back then, some people called them ‘Holy Rollers’ and Mom wanted no part of embarrassment.

Being poor, born nearly deaf, offered enough ridicule for any smart child, as my Mother had been. When she had gone to grade school, she sat in the back of her class, ashamed, in her hand-me-down clothes. When called upon by a teacher, she usually answered, “I don’t know,” rather than admit that she couldn't hear the question. She had educated herself by reading books and was anything but stupid. She wanted babies. She would handle everything herself. Her own Mother had, she expected to, and she did.

“Oh Buddy, Rusty, look! There's the school… It says IZEE School Dist. # 31, over the door. The town must be right around the corner…” Mom was excited.

I looked. It wasn't as big as my old school, in Bates. There were just two swings and two teeter-totters. Two school rooms, and two outhouses. We waited, expectantly, for the Izee town to appear. It didn't.

“Well, it has to be just up ahead… Here comes another lumber truck toward us, Bud… For heaven sakes, move over a little bit…”

“That's sure a fine looking load of lumber, Mildred. They say they've got enough trees to run for the next twenty years. They're running three crews of fallers, now. That's a lot of hungry lumberjacks to feed!”

“We'll do just fine, Bud. Now, you relax. We'll meet the superintendent and he'll offer us the job. I'll be right here with you. We'll be fine.”

“You just remember, Mildred, they found the last cook hanging by a noose above his cookstove. They said his food was bad,” Dad declared. “He made good men eat beans, everyday,” My father continued, with genuine sympathy advocating for the culinarly abused laborers.

1. Used with permission.

"Bud, you know, very well, that the poor man and his wife were having problems. They said that he committed suicide!"

"Well, he wouldn't be the first cook that they've strung up in a logging camp!"

"Bud Miles, you stop thinking about such things," Mom demanded.

"Well, he won't be the last one either, Mildred," Dad persisted... before changing the subject. "Rusty, are you watching for this town, Son? Keep an eye open for a big buck! I saw some fresh tracks in the dust where he crossed the road, back there. It looks like a black bear, or something, has rubbed himself against that tree!"

I looked. There was some dark chocolate hair glistening on the broken branch of a green juniper. I could see some of the bark was missing from the tree trunk too. No one could spot game sign like my Dad.

I wanted to be the first to see Izee. I was real thirsty. The dust stirred up by that last lumber truck was, still, hanging thick in our 1952 Ford. I rolled the passenger window down to try to get some fresh air. Mom handed me another piece of Juicy Fruit gum.

"Throw the other one out, Rusty. This will make our mouth's taste better. We'll be there any minute and I'll get you a cold glass of water, first thing."

It seemed like we would never reach Izee. The ruts and bumps of the dirt road tossed our car and we helpless victims in every direction. Around each corner, lay dustier road and another corner that we couldn't see beyond. The schoolhouse turned out to be twelve miles from the town. Dad was getting anxious.

"What time are we supposed to meet with this man, Mildred?"

"His name is Mr. Ellingson, Bud. He is expecting us at around 1:00 O'clock. It's not even 12:30. We're doing fine. Step on it, a little… You're not even going thirty miles per hour… That last log truck—that passed us—was going twice as fast on this same road!"

The loud blast of the air horn behind us meant that another log truck driver agreed with Mom. Dad pulled to the right as far as he could, without leaving the road. The truck, loaded to the top with fresh cut pine trees, roared past us before I could roll up the window.

"I told you so, Bud. Now let's go!"

"I'm not going to follow that crazy man, too close. Chains break on loads like that. You can't stop by the time you see the logs through all the dust… So, you just calm down, Mildred. I want us all alive when we get to this mill."

As the dust trail of the log truck settled in the distance, Dad increased the speed to thirty-five m.p.h. Billowing from more bumps, a new layer of road powder inside the car, settled upon us. It was well over 100 degrees, inside the car and out. We continued on, in our hot pursuit of the elusive logging camp. I had, pretty much, given up hope on ever getting to Izee. At eight years old, you can keep the faith, while riding in a hot car, for just so long.

Mom saw it first. "Look, Rusty! A real ball park!"

The backstop appeared from out of nowhere. Except for a few wooden benches, it was the only thing there, situated in the gully between the creek and a hill. The hill had one small trailer, perched on the peak.

The next sights were less than encouraging. More single wide trailers and make-do-mobiles with clothes flapping on rusting lines. This was the "Upper camp," where many of the less permanent workers with families lived.

"Keep on driving, Bud! These shanties are not the main town. It has real houses. They said we will see the mill when we get here."

We continued on—around another two more corners—to the "main camp." Rounding the last curve, we saw the smoke from a sawdust burner drifting slowly over three rows of wooden structures, houses of the main camp. Steams and gasses could be seen bursting forth from the many operational buildings of the Ellingson Timber Company sawmill.

Arrogantly, on one side of the creek, the sawmill sprawled on the large, level side of the landscape. All but a few of the houses were close

together on the other. Like bleachers in a stadium, rows of adequate housing ascended the mountainside due limited flatland on their side of the creek.

Actually, this creek was the south fork of the John Day River. Our former hometown, Bates, Oregon, lay eighty-eight miles to the northeast, and was on the middle fork. There is, also, a north fork of these tributaries. After the forks all join the main John Day, it flows on to expand the Columbia River.

In those days, sawmills were built on creeks in remote areas where timber was in close proximity. A sawmill could be expected to operate for fifty to seventy five years. The towns were the necessary outgrowth of a place to house the laborers for the mill, loggers to cut the trees, log truck drivers—to haul the fresh logs in—and lumber truckers—to transport the finished dry boards out.

The lumber companies that built the mills owned the towns. These were not one-horse towns. There were no horses or cows or pigs or sheep. Just families who rented company owned houses, from the company, while the men held jobs at, or for, the mills. Permanent workers, at the mills, got first choice of the housing. The better the job, the better the house, made available from the cheaply constructed one-level structures. Most had only two bedrooms, no matter how many children were in the household. Most families had one or two dogs that roamed freely.

The mill workers were permanent. So long as they could perform their work adequately, and their families did not disrupt anything, men had a job and a place to live. The companies made all of the rules. People with too many family problems were fired. There were, always, people who wanted a job. Many people worked their whole lives for these companies, raising families, perfectly content with their lots in life.

Then, like now, most problems developed when people felt too isolated or blamed each other for their own dissatisfaction. When a worker was injured on the job, the company took care of the medical. When the injury to a good worker was severe, the company might find him another job that he could do. Unmarried men, and those waiting for a house, 'batched' in bunkhouses. Women were not allowed to work in the mills. Once grown, single women were not even allowed to live in the towns.

Most sawmill towns had two sections, one where the "Permanent" workers lived and a second section, where the temporary or seasonal workers, with families, resided. These might include the contract or gypo loggers. People who worked at the mills usually didn't get too close to the families of the people who might be gone in a few months or years when their jobs or contracts ran out. Izee was a logging-camp. The company, that owned everything but the land it was built upon, made no pretense of this being——or ever becoming—a town.

Our first stop in Izee was at the 'commissary.' That was the word used for the company owned store. It was the only store in the camp. Can goods, toilet paper, dog food, cleaning supplies, candy bars, and cigarettes, were the major items stocked. A gas pump was in front and the prices were 'sky-high.' Most people bought their groceries in John Day, when they went in to town to cash their paychecks. There was no bank in Izee. No alcoholic beverages were sold in the camp, either. The land lease agreement, allowing the mill with its necessary housing, clearly prohibited alcoholic sales of any kind. The mother of the rancher owning the land was a devout Catholic. When the mill shut down permanently, all evidence of it prior existence would have to be removed.

The wood floor of the commissary was raven black, having recently been oiled. Dad observed my hesitation to step on it. He assured me it was all right.

"They do this, Rusty, to cut down on wear and to make the floor easier to keep clean," he said before asking the man where he could find Mr. Ellingson.

Mom found the ice-chest cooler and bought me a seven ounce 7-Up. Boy, did it taste good.

Johnson, the commissary clerk, who was also responsible for the separate mail section, pointed to the superintendent's house. Dad and Mom were to apply for the job of running the cookhouse. It

was an important position for the company that had enjoyed, too much, turnover in years past. It would not, anymore.

Dad was hardly inside the door when he told Mr. Ellingson, “A man can’t do an honest day’s work on an empty stomach. You've got to feed him, and you've got to feed him real good!”

The Superintendent gleefully agreed and set about selling my parents on taking the job.

The position required that the cookhouse operators, a husband and wife team, work about sixteen hours a day—seven days a week. Of course, the job wasn’t represented that way but that is actually what would be required, to handle it successfully. Included, with the position, were the attached living quarters, and all meals for the operator's own family. Although no restaurant——or other eating establishment—was allowed in Izee, residents that occupied houses, neighbors, or even friends were not allowed to eat at the Cookhouse. It didn't matter how much people were willing to pay.

Dad was offered the position, as ‘head chef’ and Mom would be the ‘second’. Her job would be to help Dad, bake all of the breads, make the deserts, and serve the tables. Together, they would prepare the meals for all of the forty five to eighty single men—mill workers and loggers—who lived in the bunkhouses.

By five O'clock A.M., the loggers and woods crews would sign in for breakfast. The mill workers came in at 6:00. By then, the woodsmen would have eaten, packed up their lunch boxes, and departed. All meals were deducted from worker's paychecks. This was no free lunch.

Lunch for a mill worker was between when the lunch-time whistles blasted, at noon and at 1:00 P.M. A man might have to run to get there. Dinner was served from 5:30 until 7:30, seven days a week. The Superintendent spent more time selling them in taking the job than my folks spent trying to get it.

While Dad and Mom were going over details of what the position entailed, I asked if I could walk down to the swings that I had noticed when we had arrived. Mr. Ellingson thought it would be a great idea, a chance for me to meet some of the kids who were playing there. He was quite proud that the company, only recently, had the huge swings constructed for all of the children in the logging camp to use.

Mom walked me outside, with a stern reminder that I had my new clothes on.

“Don't get into any fights,” she said. “I have heard that these Izee kids are the toughest and meanest on this earth… And, watch out for the rattlesnakes… If you see one, Rusty, promise me that you won't go near it. Your father and I will pick you up in a few minutes. You see that big house across from the swings? That's 'The Cookhouse.' It's going to be our new home…”

Rattlesnakes! We don't have rattlesnakes in Bates! I could feel my heart hammering against my stomach as I walked—what I believed to be—‘The Rattlesnake Road.’ Maybe, I thought, if I kick that rock ahead of me, it will scare them away. But, I didn't want too kick it too far. I might need it to kill a snake.

I could see two boys and two girls at the swings. They're all watching me. The girls look friendly, but the boys—they want to fight. They're both bigger than me. I remembered that my Dad had said, “The bigger they are, the harder they fall!” If they give me any trouble, I'll show them that Bates kids are tough, too.

I wished that my brother, Robert, had come, this first time. Instead, he had gone camping with the Boy Scouts, that day. Robert can beat up anyone. Well, anyone but Okie Joe. He's taught me to never back down from a fight. I ain't never yet! Anyway, them boys are looking at me funny. I kicked the rock off the dirt road in the direction of the swings. The biggest boy stepped forward to challenge me.

“Whatta ya doin' kickin that rock?”

“Lookin’ for rattlesnakes. What’s it to yea?”

“That's my rock!”

“Oh, yea?”

“Yea”

“Here, take it then!” I kicked the rock at him. He had long legs and jumped out of the way.

“Where da ya think yer goin’?”

“Those swings.”

“They're mine, too…”

"Oh, yea?"

"Yea, my dad built 'em!"

"Mr. Ellingson said they's for everybody…"

"Yea, well, I'm next!"

"O.K.," I said, willing to wait my turn. But, I could see that 'Long-legs' didn't like it.

"That's a funny looking shirt… you Roy Rogers?"

"No?"

"Sez Roy Rogers… whata ya doin wearin his shirt?"

"It's mine. My mom bought it—for me—this morning … in John Day."

"Oh, yea?"

"Yea! You wanna make somethin' of it?"

"If I do, you'll be sorry…"

"Oh, yea?"

Two buttons flew off when he grabbed me by the collar. But, my head moved faster than his fisted fingers! When I slugged him in the stomach, Long-legs doubled over. So, I punched his snorting nostrils. Blood squirted, everywhere. It spurted at my new shirt, too. Fear gripped me! Mom's gonna be mad.

Our fight was over for that day. Long-legs left holding his nose and swearing that he'd 'get even, later!' His faithful friend—who even looked a little like Tonto—went with him. So did one of the girls who had been on the swings.

"Do you want to swing," the other girl asked me?

"Okay," I answered, trying to wipe some blood off my shirt.

"What's your name?"

"Rusty Miles."

"Are you going to live here?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Which house?"

"That one—right there…" I said, pointing.

"Oh, good. I live right across the street. I'm Diana. We can be friends."

We were flying high, in the swings, when our family Ford pulled up. Mom got out of the car.

"Rusty, did you fall down? Honey, are you all right? Look at your shirt! What, on earth, happened to you?"

"He started it… Mom, I didn't mean to…"

"Hush up! Get into this car, right now… before anyone sees you like this… Let's go, Bud… They want us back here, and on the job, Monday morning.," Mother urged.

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In Gale Ontko's *Thunder Over the Ochoco, Vol. I*, you meet the Indian legend, Guardian of the Ochocos. That is him you see below the top of the rimrock out on the ledge. There he still stands today. The Indians felt that the Guardian protected them and their lands from harm.Turns out that the Guardian was rather ineffective against the white scourge that came out of the east.