Tree Planting¹

By

David Gledhill²

At eight cents for every tree planted, one's values change.

The news that fires have left much of northern Manitoba a charred wasteland leaves many tree planters with mixed feelings. As one planter, a struggling film maker, in the off season, put it, "It's too bad but just think of the contracts up there next year." A 'burn' is one of the 'fastest' types of ground. In the tree planting world speed is everything. One human 'machine' on our crew, Al, could plant, on good ground, a tree every six seconds, 600 trees an hour, 6000 trees a day.

Each May, after university exams, an increasing number of tree planters disembark from crowded VIA passenger cars at whistle stops across the Canadian Shield. The train I was on stopped for one very cold midnight hour at Chapleau, while baggage men searched, unsuccessfully, for one tree planter's pack sack, tent, tree planting bags and shovel. I woke to hear someone shout out, 'If we find it, we'll be sure to send it on.'

A tree planter learns to put up with such cold comfort early on in one's career. Most wander into the business having heard friends describe both the horrors and the pleasures.

This year, on my contract halfway between Thunder Bay and Armstrong, our campsite was discovered, upon our arrival, to be littered with raw sewage, thanks to the winter timber cutters. Even though there were still snow drifts in the bush, by the third day of planting, we were falling over in the field with heat stroke and dehydration. The second week ushered in a month of freezing nights when down jackets were appropriate breakfast wear.

Those breakfasts at 5:30 in the dark morning to the sounds of 'Guns and Roses' or 'Talking Heads' on the ghetto-blasters were a pleasure that many of us could have done without. Yet, that was the time we had to open our eyes, eat, and make our lunches in order to get out to the blocks of land to put in a 10-hour workday. Fortunately, the cooks supplied us with meals so good that we were reluctant to eat in restaurants on our days off.

Sentiments about being part of a global reforestation effort dissipated when faced with the reality of carrying tree bags, weighing 20 to 30 kilos, filled with 300 six-inch seedlings, genetic clones, in paper pods, and stooping over one to two thousand times a day, having first opened up the soil with a shovel. We also had to contend with swamps, acres of unplantable rocky ground, changing planting guidelines, difficult co-workers, rainy days, clouds of black flies and mosquitoes, an outbreak of 'beaver fever', giardia (a parasite that left us with noxious burps and the feeling we'd been run over by a timber truck), and never having our supervisor, a renowned West Coast blues guitarist, play for us.

Figure 1. Tree deliverer unloading a tray of seedlings.

While our camp of 50 planters was a mixture of university students, musicians, artists, travellers, and bicycle couriers, tree planting seems at times an ideal exercise for MBA students about to enter the ruthless business world.

The 'highballers' amongst us were the ones who knew exactly what they could get away with when it came to: the quality of the trees planted, the amounts of the 'cream' (ideal planting land) 'gorbied' (grabbed for oneself) and how to make sure that the tree deliverer, bosses and timber company assessors treated them well.

One typical highballer, Alice, a five-year veteran who made at least \$200 a day, was infamous for never being able to ribbon off a rectangular block of land to plant. (At eight cents a tree, one appreciates planting in sandy soil over typical Canadian Shield gravel.) Alice's lines curved to include the best ground and exclude the worst. Confronted by furious slower males, planting the ground beside her, she would giggle and say, 'Gee, I guess I'm a slow learner.' When one of them started to plant her land, in retaliation, she shrieked, swore and threatened him with her shovel.

Highballers were also successful at avoiding 'replanting', a horror the rest of us faced. The '95% quality' on our contract meant that we were allowed a maximum of one badly planted tree in twenty. A second tree planted with too much or too little of the tree showing, at too much of an angle, in unsuitable ground, or too low in the 'brackie' (the planting hole scooped out by the 'scarifying' machine), and planters were sent back in to check every tree. The average daily income of \$150 was reduced to nothing.

Conversations, which at the beginning of the season might dwell upon such diverse topics as the influence of Balinese music on the avant garde composer Philip Glass or the hopes for cold fusion, became increasingly centred upon

¹This article has already appeared in Sunday editions of the Toronto Star and Ottawa Citizen, but I found it amusing and wish to pass it on to the forestry community.

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Figure 2. Tree planter at work.

the finer points of planting. It was nothing out of the ordinary to hear two normal humans argue for hours over the merits of planting with a long-handled shaft shovel as opposed to a shorter D- or T-handled shovel. Other rivetting debates included: steel toed rubber boots over leather boots, long underwear over track pants, long sleeved shirts over short sleeve shirts, 'Musk Oil' over Avon's 'Skin So Soft' to keep from inhaling the blackflies, safety glasses over visors; and

for the women: how to protect one's nipples when planting topless in hot weather (the preferred method was with thick duct tape).

Tree planting was not good for the body. Wrists, elbows, and shoulders gave out with tendonitis. Knees complained with all the repetitive motions under increased pressure while toes frequently went numb from the stamping to close the hole. Many tree planters showed masochistic tendencies preferring to tape up the offending body part, take an anti-inflammatory pill, and keep on working rather than take a week off from work as the doctors recommended. The prospect of being out of action if the rest of the crew should have got good land to plant was unbearable for most.

When I told my crew boss, an expert rock climber, that my 'shovel' arm was numb she advised me to ignore it and keep on planting as the damage would only be 'temporary'.

And then there was the psychic damage. Our crew began to have tree planting nightmares ranging from 'the never ending land' to 'planting eight-foot high seedlings'. In the field, towards the end of the contract, tempers frayed and on our days off in town, rest and relaxation became crazed. (Our hotel in Thunder Bay kept two floors of battle scarred rooms which they allotted to tree planters.)

Half the camp swore that this year was their last as the contract had not been as magical as promised and they had not made as much money as planned. But that was what they said the year before. Next year, come early May, most of them will be on a train heading north. The food was good and the earth needs trees, even genetic clones.

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