Wood for the Home Fires

By Clarice Tate Uhlmeyer

In 1901 my parents, Thomas and Esther Tate, moved their family to Big Pine from Smokey Valley, Nevada. A couple of years later they bought a 160 acre ranch about a mile north of town, but as there was no house on the property they bought one in town. Father did his farming by going back and forth on horseback or in his light one-horse buggy. He kept one hired man year 'round, to whom he gave board and thirty dollars a month. They came home to a hot meal every noon. At haying and thrashing times he took a whole crew back and forth to meals in a larger wagon.

The days were getting short and the nights cold before the last crop of hay was cut and stacked. Then and then only could farmers turn their attention to getting in wood for the long cold months ahead. Gathering enough pinon wood to keep at least two stoves going full blast the whole winter was no small chore. My father took on even more than that, selling wood to the townspeople who had no means of getting it themselves. Many farmers raised locust and cottonwood trees, both of which grew fast, for their own use.

It took days to get ready for the first trip into the pinon woods of the White Mountains east of Big Pine. Axes and saws had to be sharpened, wedges and sledge hammers assembled, horse shoes, shoeing equipment, and other tools collected and stored in boxes where they could be easily found to set up the wood camp which would be in use for many weeks.

The "big wagon," as we called it, was used and an extra horse led behind. Among things to be taken were several bales of hay, a sack of grain, a tent for stormy weather, two large barrels to be filled with water, a heavy harness and singletree for the extra horse, chains, and bedrolls wrapped in heavy tarps (sleeping bags were unheard of in that day). A special place was kept open for the tin-lined "grub box" containing prepared food, butter, milk, several dozen well-wrapped eggs, and other perishables. Fresh vegetables from the garden were put into a wet barley sack and a lug of apples and pears stowed away somewhere.

Table utensils, tin plates and cups, and a large piece of bright new oilcloth to cover a makeshift table built on the spot, were also put in a wooden box. Cooking pots and pans blackened and dented by many years of use were tucked into a sack. All this cooking gear, together with a grate to go on top of rocks assembled for the cooking fire, had been carried down from the store room above the rock cellar days before, washed and polished up as best as could be done. Ten-pound lard cans were

filled with flour and sugar and the lids securely fastened.

The days before the men were to leave, Mother baked bread, a couple of pies, and a jar of cookies which would all go into the grub box. About the last thing to go on the wagon was a quarter of beef, securely wrapped in canvas. This was hung high in a tree at the wood camp, safely away from chipmunks and other invaders.

By three o'clock the next morning Father was up, and had aroused the other two who were to go with him usually my uncle and brother. Ali went out to feed and harness the horses while Mother prepared a hearty breakfast of steak and eggs, fried potatoes, hot biscuits with sweet butter and honey, and coffee. The men ate heartily as they knew what was ahead of them. They lingered a little over smokes after the meal, Father with his pipe, the others with cigarettes, but as Father intended, they were on their way before daylight. This was the usual routine.

The first few miles were easy going and the horses pulled steadily along. From the foot of the hill, it was a different story. The road wound back and forth over washouts and ruts deep and dusty, and riding was anything but luxurious. The higher they went the steeper the road became. The horses had to be stopped often and the brake set so they could breathe deeply and relax as this first load was far heavier than the many following would be.

This was Westgard Pass, a toll road, kept up by Scott Broder, a man past middle age. He lived at the toll house where there was a fresh water spring, and that is where the barrels would be filled. The wood crew always stopped to pay the toll, give Scott his mail and anything he might have ordered from Joseph's store. This was a service all his friends did.

The horses were unhitched, tied in the shade, and given a little grain while the men went in to share their lunch with Scott, with coffee he had made. This was the only long break they would have, and even though early in the day, it was convenient. My folks had gone over this road so many times during their trips from Big Pine to Smokey Valley that they were old friends of Scott, so mother usually included some special thing for his larder.

With barrels filled and horses watered and rehitched, they would be on their way once more. Between the toll house and the summit was the steepest part of the road. Soon they would reach the "narrows" where the road went between two solid walls of rock. There was always a little anxiety until they were through this part, especially in murky weather, for if caught here in a cloudburst there was no possible way for either man or animal to escape. In later years these walls had to be blasted for a two lane highway, but for now one man walked ahead to make sure there was not another outfit coming down.

Above the narrows the pinon trees became more thickly scattered over the hillsides. At the summit the crew took the first rough road that veered to the south and followed it for a few miles along the ridge into the thick woods. Then they started looking for a suitable campsite until they found a place sheltered by a large bluff from the northwinds. Their first chore was to tend to the horses, which they tied a short distance from camp. They decided where to put what before unloading so the heavy things would be handled only once. Rocks were arranged for the cooking fire, the grate put on and a pot of coffee put on to boil. Father drank only tea so his special pot was put on also. He drank it strong, either hot or cold. When camp was set up to their liking everyone sat down for a leisurely smoke. This over, it was time to start supper.

Steaks were cut for the evening meal, as well as a generous hunk for tomorrow's stew, before hoisting the quarter into its tree. They would cut up some onions and cucumbers in vinegar, heat the pot of beans Mother had cooked the day before, fry the steaks, get out the homemade bread, fresh butter and a fruit pie and have a meal fit for the gods. While two of them washed up and stowed away the rest of the food, a third raked out a few coals from the dying fire and tossed in some pitchy pinecones. Later they would rake the cones out and extract the delicious nuts to eat before going to bed. For exercise they usually scouted around checking on the timber near at hand.

The wood cutters never clear-cut, choosing trees here and there, dying ones if possible. They looked for straight logs. Plenty of pinon trees were not so large they couldn't be felled, trimmed and snaked by one man and a horse. They were satisfied that they had chosen the place well. Scarcely had the sun set before they were rolled up in their blankets and snoring. It had been an arduous day as many ahead would be.

They needed no alarm clock. Father had spent a large number of his working years driving stage, so had schooled himself on waking when he wanted. He was awake before dawn and had the coffee pot and tea kettle on, with breakfast well on the way before the others rolled out. They fed, watered, and grained the horses and when they returned there was a huge pile of hotcakes, bacon and eggs, and plenty of steaming coffee ready. They wasted no time eating and when through each washed his dishes in a pan of hot water, helped stow away the remaining food, and rolled his bed roll tightly to put into the tent put up the night before. They slept out-of-doors; the tent was used for sleeping only in stormy weather. They had done this so many times they had the whole process down to a science.

Each man harnessed a horse and they went into the timber to start the day's real work. The previous winter and spring winds had felled many a good tree so they were saved the trouble of cutting them, this first day at least. By early afternoon they had far more than enough for the first load. They loaded the wagon, had an early supper, and were in bed with the birds. The next day two men went down with the load while the third stayed to continue bringing in logs.

The two who went down laid over one day, sawing the logs into four foot lengths, splitting them into desired sizes, and laying the four-by-four piles that would extend the length of the half acre lot. By the time they finished late in the fall there would be many such piles practically filling the whole lot. The third day they returned to the woods taking any needed supplies and an extra barrel for water. They would lay over one day up there, again helping to bring in logs to the growing stockpile, and come down again the third day.

Thus with two trips a week the long rows grew quickly with the addition of several eight-foot lengths each week.

Often on the way down with a load, someone who lived along the way would come out and stop them, asking that they leave a log or so for their use. The men would unload the desired amount, estimating the price, and once more be on their way. Many a time Father stopped at some desolate place without being asked and left logs for people he knew did not have the means to pay.

The two helpers often alternated trips to town, giving each a chance for a hot bath and hair cut. On every trip Mother would have fresh bread and some kind of sweets for them to take back, together with the late papers, which were always several days old when they came anyway.

The men had little time to read but always liked to scan the headlines to see what was going on in the outside world. Strange as it may seem the papers came from San Francisco, referred to as "Below" in those days. They came first to Reno, thence to Mina where the broad-gauge took off to Tonopah. The narrow-gauge, nicknamed "Slim Princess," picked up the mail at Mina and brought it on down to the Owens Valley. Most outside travel went north, either by train or by team over Westgard or Montgomery. The roads south were poor.

Some years there was an early snow storm and the men were held up for a short time, but as a rule they could work into early November, when they had to break camp and go down for the winter. Occasionally they made a trip or so in the late spring. Toward the end of the fall season the stockpile would be large enough that an extra trip now and then was all that was needed to clean up before the storms came.

Thus the last of the logs came down faster than they could be split and piled, so it was some time before the long neat rows were finished.

Neighborhood children had a habit of gathering at "Tate's corner" in the early evenings to play. There was little or no traffic. These long rows of wood afforded wonderful hiding places if the games happened to be Hide-and-Seek or Run-Sheep-Run.

After all the exhausting weeks for both men and horses, the highest price Father ever charged for a cord of wood was twelve dollars. The fact that all the equipment was his own, left over from freighting days in Nevada, that wages were low, and that much of the food, both crops and animals were grown on his own land, made the undertaking profitable and brought in quite a few dollars to add to the family coffers.

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