

Mostly about People

By Wally Tralrig



Last Of The Pond Monkeys

Old Tom Scribner — and by old I am not referring to his age—is 66.

He has walked on water for 30 years, Old Tom has, and retired several years ago as one of the last of the lumber industry's pond monkeys.

A pond monkey rides the logs, leaps from one to another, maneuvering them from where they were dumped into the pond to the bull chain—spiked conveyor belt which carries them up into the sawmill.

He retired to Davenport, land of the eternal white Christmas, and the reason Tom is news today is because he made a comeback this summer.

His nostrils got to flaring for the flavor of wet fir and pine and fresh cut bark to such a degree that he ignored his infirmities and spent three months in Truckee on the Douglas Lumber company pond for \$2.86½ cents an hour.

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He had a time for himself, did Old Tom, and he came back cussin' a bit more than before he went away. Swearing is a veneer one acquires on the job, like thin forest dust and calluses.

He's a grizzly sort, gnarled, but not a big man. He has narrow, sloping, suspended shoulders, a laugh like sandpaper in conflict and the toothless radiance of a man who has come to some sort of a conclusion about life.

And he has much knowledge, both in his muscles and head, about log riding.

He came in talking the other day, eager to tell of his summer's work, as if it had been some kind of adventure.

Old Tom allows that he's just about the oldest pond man in the country now. He put 50 years into lumbering, starting in the savage days of IWW.

"They're generally stoved in by logs afore they reach my age," he said, not unprudently, "or arthritis's got 'em. The hands and feet are wet all day, y'know. Oh, yeah!"

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Old Tom found himself somewhat of a celebrity out there on the Truckee pond.

"Them tourists," he said, shaking his head, faking disgust, "kept taking home movies of me all summer long, or comin' over to ask fool questions, like: 'What's the object of soaking them logs?'"

"But I know what they were really after—waitin' for me to fall in!"

Now, anyone with any sense knows a pond man is proudest of all about his dunking record.

A lumber pond is from five to 16 feet deep and it's a mighty pretty sight to see a man run zig-zagging across, each step on a different log.

Your mind's working fast, like sizing up girls at a taxi dance, because a lot of those logs won't hold your weight if you tarry on them for more than a second, so you run and select, zig-zagging. Zagging when you should have zigged will put you in the drinks.

"When a man's running logs, his eyes can't dilly-dally on the feet; they got to be looking ahead in bits and flashes, else suddenly there mightn't be any logs."

He rasped a laugh. "I've seen green men running logs with their eyes on their feet, and suddenly come to open water—by gar, you can hear the splash clean over in the next county!"

"I didn't fall in this summer—I average about a fall every four years—you get stupid or lazy. The last time was in Diamond Lake, Oregon — stubbed my toe on a knot."

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"Well, when a pond man goes in the whole mill is likely to stop. The whole damn crew will come whoopin' and hollerin' to the bank, making swimming motions with their arms. It's an occasion, it is!"

"In the spring it is especially chancy, when the bark is loose and skins right off like there's soap underneath.

"There's plenty of tricks, I'll tell you. We carry 16-foot aluminum pike poles and we navigate by prying at the log end. It's the devil himself to pay when the wind's against you, I'll say."

Old Tom can nip out a good lumber tale, and he's quite a writing fellow.

He was editor of the Redwood Ripsaw, a mimeographed paper in Davenport, now extinct, and he has recently finished a book which will be entitled: "Lumberjack."

Here's how he describes breaking a pond jam of new logs:

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"Well, I figured I better break that dang (an expletive modified, oh, about 1000 times)



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