



MONTANA WOMEN IN TIMBER

...by Holly McKenzie - February, 2010.

"This is My Office!" says a young professional logger standing next to his boom de-limber in the new DVD that Jim Petersen, handed me last week. Jim, of the Evergreen Foundation, helped edit the new production from Pacific Forest Foundation in Washington State.

The DVD is just 7 minutes long and it highlights young logging professionals as they showcase the positive attributes of choosing a logging career. It's no secret that the average age of our loggers is in the 50 year range. It is becoming difficult to find new recruits to fill the shoes of those older loggers who want to retire. Young men and women are often discouraged by school counselors and parents alike from considering the field of logging as a stable job prospect.

It is increasingly obvious that U.S. citizens are unwilling to perform hard physical labor tasks, such as logging, and of course, for this same reason, we are paying migrant workers to pick our fruits and veggies or maintain our swimming pools and landscaping.

This new DVD does a great job of helping to promote the logging profession. The logging operators in the movie are very professional and well spoken. They discuss forest stewardship and low impact equipment. Mostly, I love how the people in the movie are young, well mannered, and intelligent! It is very well done... but is it realistic?

My husband asked me if it showcases the young loggers rising at 3am to start work... or getting out of their machine in 12 below temperatures to fix a hose under the carriage. Nope! It is a positive movie. All jobs have their pluses and minuses right?

After Jim handed me a stack of these new DVDs to distribute to some high school and college counselors, they were sitting on the front seat of my truck when I picked up my son, Ian, at school. His friend, Chance jumped in for a ride up to his house and they were both immediately interested in the picture on the DVD case, because of the big equipment of course!

They asked what it was and I explained it was a short film to promote logging as a career... and I was astonished when young Chance said, "Well of course nobody wants to do that work... it's terrible for the environment, right?!"

Well here was a teachable moment for me. So I asked Chance what he thought was wrong with logging. "It destroys the animal habitat and cutting trees leaves them with no homes and us with no oxygen to breathe, he said." Wow, I thought... and this is coming out of Columbia Falls! From his house, Chance, could throw a rock over the train tracks and hit the lumber-loading shed at the Plum Creek MDF mill. I was amazed!!! If these kids can grow up amongst the timber dependent communities we still have in Montana... and not understand why we harvest trees, and why it is actually beneficial for the environment... then we really do have our work cut out for us.

So, I went into a long and 'probably-painful-for-the-kids' explanation of how thinning trees is helpful to the trees that remain and how we have over-crowded forests rather than a tree scarcity problem. And, of course, I told Chance that he needs to come over to the house very soon for a field trip where we go look at acres of lodgepole, ponderosa, and doug-fir forests of pole size trees (750 per acre) that have mountain pine beetles in them.

Then I told him about the half moon fire and where these forests surrounding Columbia Falls had originated just 81 years ago. Somehow that digressed into him telling me that his Grandpa was as old as that Halfmoon fire and he also fought Nazis in Germany during the War... so I'm not sure that my explanation will be retained in Chance's noggin... but I tried!

The critical point here... is that we all have our work cut out for us. We can go through life, blissfully assuming that everyone understands why managed forests are critical to a healthy environment... or we can take every opportunity to teach it and talk about it. If we truly wish to alter our societal distaste for resource management, I believe it will be necessary to incorporate Agriculture, Fishing, Mining, and Forestry into the curriculum of every grade in our school system.

Many of you have heard Peter Kolb, from MSU Extension, speak about his work in Germany in 2008. Peter brought back many interesting observations about the similarities of Germany and our State of Montana. But most fascinating to me, is the German nation's commitment to integrating resource management into the school curriculum. Mr. Kolb said that most German youngsters have their tree species memorized and they understand the diseases and pathogens that attack trees. They know why trees are harvested, replanted, managed to produce high quality wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities as well as commodities like boards and fuel wood.

I believe he mentions that 1/3 of Bavaria heats their homes with wood!!! The government and the whole country have a vested interest in their forest resource and the jobs it can provide. In contrast, our nation seems to squander her natural resources by shamefully allowing whole hillsides to die while sawmills at the base of the hill are closed and dismantled. I encourage you to take some time this year to talk to a youngster about the work you do... help them to consider another perspective. And just in case you were wondering, only 8% of Montana homes are heated with wood!

Ms. McKenzie is a consulting forester in Columbia Falls and currently the President of Montana Women in Timber. To learn more about Federated Women in Timber, visit their website: www.womenintimber.org