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Pearl Harbor Piling
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In 1975 or ‘76 Parker and I were thinking about logging. He had a cat to skid the logs, but we needed a way to load the trucks. I went down to a heavy equipment auction in South San Francisco to see what they might have in the way of a loading machine.

It was a three-hour drive down, and I’d left early, so there was time to kill before the auction started. I went into a coffee shop nearby and sat at the counter. A grizzly old guy next to me looked at my suspenders, “You a logger?”

“Yeah, I’m going to the auction next door to find a loader.”

“I drove truck up in Washington before the war.”

“Where?”

“Up east of Everett.”

“How did YOU load?”

“With a little hoist and a hay-rack boom mostly.”

“With end tongs?”

“Yeah sometimes. Sometimes we muscled them on with peavys, it took a lot of men to get a load on. I’ll tell you what the trickiest load was… piling for Pearl Harbor, must have been 1939 or so…”

And he was off, telling one of his good stories to a captive audience willing enough to suspend disbelief.

“We built a set of brow logs cross-wise to the road, see. The loading donkey was at one end, so we could yard the piling up parallel to the road. The front truck was no problem, it was a Mack or a Chevy, and had bunks and blocks. But instead of a trailer, we used another truck in back and cribbed up with 8x8’s off the frame.”

“How’d you attach the cribbing to the frame?”

“I don’t remember, maybe we chained it, but I think we drilled and bolted it. It was tricky, because the cribbing wouldn’t pivot like a bunk. So turning tightened and loosened the chains. That was nice timber, no limbs, maybe thirty inches on the butt and eighteen inches at the top, a hundred and sixty feet long – the best logs we’d ever seen. Anyway, we had those trucks positioned, then we got all the men on the show and rolled the piling up onto the trucks with peavys. Butt end forward, the trucks were about a hundred feet apart, so fifty or sixty feet were hanging past the back truck. We could put three on, and that over-loaded the trucks considerably.

I drove the front truck, and getting down that mountain was scary as hell. The piling rubbed the bank on the outside turns, like to swipe my truck right off the road, and the piling was way out over the canyon on the inside turns, like to twist the cribbing right off the back truck. The trucks would go, but there was no way they’d stop. And they’d get high-centered when either truck went down in a dip, the piling would drag on the road, so we had to pour on the coal. A big problem was crossing the railroad tracks in Everett. The grade was built up from street level, the first time across it broke the wrapper and hung up and we came to a complete stop – blocking traffic and blocking the train. I forget how we finally got loose, maybe the railroad crew had a Simplex jack and we jacked it, pulled forward till the jack tipped over, again and again. The railroad crew had to pound the track back so it didn’t de-rail the train in the middle of town. After that we learned to hit that track at a pretty good clip. It still peeled what was left of the bark off the bottoms of the logs though.

Anyway, we were feeling pretty cocky when we pulled into the Navy Yard with that first load, the first of many. Days of work, the limit of all that big steam logging machinery and just about all the men could handle. ‘Let’s see what you sea stiffs can do with this!’ I reported to the Officer of the Day and he told me where he wanted the trucks. About an hour later, here came the biggest crane you ever saw. As big as a city block with steam hoists all roofed over, a hundred feet in the air, on steel lattice towers mounted on four flatcars, rolling down rails on the dock. It picked up all three of our piles at once like they were matchsticks…”

I’ve been telling, or re-telling this story ever since. Sort of tongue-in-cheek, a west coast Paul Bunyan tale. Not that I doubted that piling came out of the Washington woods and got driven into the coral sand at Pearl Harbor, it’s just that I know from personal experience that logging stories tend to get better over time, logs get longer, checks get bigger, wrecks get worse, and this was a good one. And then, almost forty years later, a re-print of an old photo came up on EBay – and there’s the old guy’s Chevy, there’s the cribbing, there he is sitting with his door open, looking at the camera. And there are the smooth bellies of the logs that he so carefully polished on the way down the mountain.




160 Foot Piling From Arlington Wash.