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Skagit Valley Grew Up With Logging Industry

Logging, as one of our old-timers put it, is "gittin a tree to water." Over the centuries this primary objective has remained unchanged – only the method has been improved. As logging has been, and still is, one of the upper Skagit's biggest industries, the history of the valley has been closely tied in with the cutting of the enormous stand of fir and cedar that was found by the first explorers up the river.

It did not take the first settlers long to realize the wealth they had at their fingertips, so evolution of modern logging can easily be traced right here in our own communities, according to the records, the earliest logging was done by cutting down the tree with an axe, rolling with cant-hooks and handpikes to the nearest water, floating it to where it could be whipsawed or broad-axed into boards of timbers. At this area cedar was most plentiful, so early homes were built of the easily worked and nearly split wood. A cedar home could be built with half the labor of a log cabin. ... A like manner, cedar was most in demand and took most of the attention of the first loggers.

The first major step in productive logging was made with the adaptation of the skid-road and the bull team of oxen. The skid-road was merely a series of small logs placed across the path where the logs were to be pulled. A team of 8 to 12 oxen were harnessed to the log, the "skids" greased and the team hauled the log millward. Horses later replaced the oxen, mainly because they could

be maneuvered more handily, were faster and pulled better.

With the horse came the wheels. Eight wheeled wagons made the job faster yet where ground was hard enough for a roadway. Then in the early 1890's the first steam donkey arrived to provide the method still used for first handling of the logs in the woods. The first donkey was a steam engine geared to an upright spool around which the cable was coiled like a capstan to pull the logs into the desired position. A horse still had to stand by to haul the line back to the woods. Next came the horizontal drum, still with the horse as "haul back." The next innovation was a second drum so that the line could be handled both ways. The donkey has now developed into a complex machine which can handle many lines and do almost any hauling or loading job required.

Another big step forward was the "high lead", which revolutionized the yarding problem. Some logger found that by placing the main lead cable on a high stump, the log came in better. Soon they had the lead on top of the highest tree. This required rigging skill and sailors were widely sought to handle this new line of work.

In the woods, however, the axe and the bucking saw comprised the only tools needed to get the trees ready for the complex operation of getting them to market.

Where water was not available as transportation the railroad was a natural

conclusion. The hills and valleys became criss-crossed with railroad tracks. Switchbacks and low grades brought locomotives and flat cars to the top of the mountains. It took thousands of dollars to build the bridges and lay the tracks, but it paid off with big dividends. Now a whole mountain could be logged from a single line of track.

When the big areas began to become depleted, logging went back a bit and smaller operators sought to cash in on untouched areas too small or unhandy for the larger operations. Skagit Steel showed the way with a tractor with spool-like wheels which would run on a double track of logs. This eliminated the expensive "loxy" and the steel rails. Shortly afterward some logger tried out hauling a log on a truck load made of plank. It was ideal for the small operation – and was relatively cheap. A short bit of road, a lot of trips – but cash in the bank for the guy who wanted to get out on his own.

The rest of the story you all know. Trucks are now bigger than the first locomotives and can get into places where no locomotive can climb. They are fast and efficient for the short term operations now in vogue. The railroad is still king for the long haul to the mills, but from the woods to the loading dump it's all truck.

It's a far cry from the "bull-team" and the whiskered loggers of the early day camps to the modern machinery and the men who live at home and ride to their power saw jobs in the hills, but it has been a history-making evolution for the Skagit Valley. New developments and replanting, together with the idea of selective logging of only trees that are mature will extend logging as an industry into practically a perpetual industry here.