

184  
*slipper's soliloquies*

By Fred Slipper

Last week I had a very interesting experience. Wayne Estes is a young man I have become acquainted with since I returned to Sedro-Woolley. Usually Wayne would be working during the week, but last week he had an accident. He works in a sawmill, and according to Wayne, one of his fingers and the saw had a difference of opinion, and as is always the case, the saw won. So for the next few weeks Wayne will be on the injured reserve list, and has some time for other pursuits. He mentioned he was thinking of going mushroom picking, and I asked him if I could go along. Wayne has a tendency to be kind to older folks, so he said OK.

We started upriver about noon but didn't have much luck in finding mushrooms at Wayne's favorite spots. As it began to look like our trip would turn out to be just a pleasant drive, Wayne asked me if I would like to take a tour through a working cedar saw mill. I had never had this opportunity, so was glad to see just how a large cedar sawmill operated.

Having been in the saw mill business for many years, Wayne knows the workers in most of the mills around here. As we were in the Grandy Creek area he took me to the Iron Mountain Cedar Products Mill, the biggest operation in the upper valley. As we walked into the mill I could tell Wayne did know the various people working there, and he took a lot of kidding about his banded finger. Wayne responded with the attitude "see, it can happen to the best of us".

He took me to the area where the logs first come into the working area. The log is put on a chain drive chute and from there is handled by a fellow called the "deck man". Wayne says this is one of the most important operations in the business, and after watching for a while, I could understand why. Everything about the operation is handled by hydraulic controls operated by the deck man, and his job is to get the most usable material out of each log. As the log is brought along the chute, it is cut into either a 24-inch length or 16-inch length. The larger one is for shakes, the shorter one for shingles. The cutting saw is a chain saw with a bar about ten feet long. By watching the content of the log the deck man decides what length each cut is to be, and this is often determined by the knot structure of the log. When the final cut had been made on the uneven butt of the log, the waste was only about 4 inches!

After the cuts are made from the log they go to the splitter, who operates a hydraulic wedge. This, too, requires more skill than is apparent in just watching, as the chunks split off must meet certain requirements.

We first followed the shorter cuts, propelled again on a chain, to the shingle sawyer. (This was the machine where Wayne had his accident) It is entirely automatic, and the chunk is cut into tapered shingles, first two butt cuts, then two tapered cuts.

The longer cuts go to another splitter, who splits them into shake blank size. These blanks then go to the shake cutter, and this is truly an art, in my estimation. The operator handles the shake blank by hand, and the blank is cut diagonally, making two pieces out of one, each with a butt end and a tapered end. Kind of hard to explain, but truly a job that requires great concentration, as the whirling saw blade is only inches from the operator's fingers.

The final operation is the packing of the finished product, and this, too, requires a great deal of skill, with good concentration and fast hands. One of the shingle packers was a lady, and she seemed to be doing an excellent job.

All in all, it was a very interesting tour of one of the upper valley's prime industries. I was fortunate in having an experienced sawmill man as a guide who could take the time to explain the various operations to me. On the way home I lamented

the fact we had not found what we originally set out for — mushrooms — but Wayne assured me we would give this another try in the next few days.