

How they log in Spain

(Continued from Page 1)

gasoline. Starting the siphoning process with his mouth, one of the men filled three five-liter cans, measured the remaining amount with a stick, and re-capped the drum. Then, carrying axes, lunch buckets and the gas cans, we moved out of the little town (I never learned the name of this place) and started up the valley, following a rocky footpath which led between the fields. I carried one of the cans of gasoline.

We walked about three kilometers in silence, our breath showing white in the damp air. Near the head of the valley we turned off the path and cut straight up through the pine forest, and after a few minutes of hard climbing reached a cache of chain saws and oil cans which had been stowed away under a tree.

Here we built a fire, sat down and ate breakfast of bread, cheese, sizzling chunks of bacon cooked on sticks, and local wine from a variety of bottles and botas. Then, after a cigarette, the saws were filled and the day's work began. The maderos worked in two teams of two, the fifth man working alone. I stayed with one team all day.

Essentially, one man worked with an axe as a bark peeler, while the other, working mostly with a chain saw (a small, Swedish model), felled and limbed the trees.

The bark peeler would search out trees (only Scotch Pine was cut the day I was there) which had been marked previously by foresters with an axe blaze and a die-stamp on the uphill side. He would peel the bark off these trees, from breast height down to the stump, with brisk shaving motions of his short-handled, broad-headed axe.

Once the trees had been marked this way, the second man would come along with his chain saw and fell the tree, using the traditional downhill wedge type of cut.

Then both of the maderos would go to work on the tree, the saw man limbing and topping, the bark peeler shaving off the bark, which collected on the ground in long, curling, fragrant strips. The

sun had broken through, and beads of sap stood out like tiny amber beads on the clean surface.

As the tree was limbed it settled gradually to the ground. When the saw man was finished, he too would take up an axe and, rotating the log, the two worked together peeling the opposite side.

When the log was clean one of them would pull a grimy tape measure from the pocket of his jacket and measure first the length and then the midpoint diameter of the log. These two measurements, along with a third identifying number, were recorded in crayon on the butt-end of the log and, correspondingly, in a small notebook. Later, from a book of tables, the volume (in cubic meters, not board-feet as in America) would be computed. This was the basis on which the maderos were paid.

The work went on seriously and without interruption until mid-afternoon, while I fiddled with my camera, stumbled, and tried, not always successfully, to keep out of the way.

I also tried my hand at bark peeling. It is apparently work which requires more skill than strength, and there is a real art to shaving off long even pieces. The result of my efforts was — and this would be a generous estimation — scruffy. Both of the maderos, laughing good-naturedly, offered tips and encouragement, and told me that with a few day's practice I would be as good at it as they were, a dubious prediction which fortunately went untested.

About 2:30 in the afternoon everybody stopped work, the fire was blown back to life, and lunch was cooked. Most people had brought, in small covered pots, a sort of meat and bean stew which had been half-cooked the night before, and needed only to be boiled briefly. Then, as cigarettes were passed around, several men opened small books of tables and, seriously and intently, figured the money value of the day's work so far.

The work resumed then and continued as before until nearly 7:30. The sky had cleared during the day, but now clouds were

again settling in on the higher slopes around us, and a fine drizzle began to fall. Finally the saws were drained, covered with sheets of plastic, and stowed under a tree. Lunch buckets, bottles, axes and spare sweaters were rounded up and, in the voiceless evening, we made the long walk back down the valley. From across the fields, faintly, came the tinkle of sheep bells. The two men I worked with had cut and peeled 47 trees.

I was told that most of the timber cut in this part of Spain was Scotch Pine, although I also saw good stands of European Silver Fir and some species of small-leaved oak which I couldn't identify. By Oregon standards the trees are small, a good sized specimen running around 18 inches in diameter at breast height.

Forests are harvested on the "selection method," that is, only scattered, mature trees are cut in any given stand. The climate is a dry one, and the trees grow slowly. I counted the growth rings on several of the largest trees, and their age always came to well over 150 years.

Lumber is generally sold as "standing timber" directly to private mill owners, like Abos, who are responsible for both the cutting and the transport of the timber. The trees are dragged, one or two at a time, by horse or mule, to the nearest road, where they are loaded on trucks for the journey to the mills. Abos owned two trucks (in the five ton class), with relatively simple hydraulic winches and booms mounted behind the cabs.

"What about Nixon, eh?"

That night I drove with Abos to the city of Jaca, about fifty kilometers west. Several of the maderos live there, and he personally picked them up and drove them home every day in his Peugeot.

He described his mill in Zaragoza, which employs about a dozen people. He wanted to modernize it, but thought that, given the limited amount of forest industry in Spain, his mill, and others like it, had just about



"The bark is peeled from breast height downwards."

Story and photos

by

Charles Holzhaeur

reached their optimum size.

Still, he was happy. He loved Spain, and although expressing cautious reservations about the Franco dictatorship, generally thought that "Franco has brought us along the right road." Governments were governments anyway, he said. "What about Nixon, eh?"

I asked him if he thought there was any danger of the Spanish forests disappearing. He waved his hand at the dry, ordered countryside passing by the window in the silvery light of the quarter moon. "No, hombre," he grinned. "In Spain we take care of our land. The authorities would never let it happen."



Logs ready for the trip to Zaragoza.