

THE TRUTH ABOUT TREE SPIKING

BY JUDI BARI

In May 1987 millworker George Alexander was nearly decapitated when a spike shattered his sawblade at the Cloverdale, California, Louisiana-Pacific (L-P) sawmill. This grisly accident sent shockwaves through Mendocino County, and eventually led Northern California Earth First! (EF!) to renounce tree spiking. Southern Oregon Earth First! joined us, but that's all. The rest of Earth First! still endorses spiking, and many of them reacted to our no-spiking policy by denouncing us as traitors or dismissing us as wimps, without ever examining the reasons for our actions. Because of this, and because some of the new activists in California have been talking about tree spiking as if it may be a viable tactic, I think it's time to reexamine the issue. Recently, George Alexander and his wife Laurie agreed to talk about the 1987 tree spiking. The following account of the incident is based on my conversation with them.

"I was the perfect victim," began George Alexander. "I was nobody." George, a life-time Mendocino County resident and son of an old time Willits logger, was 23 and just married, with his wife Laurie three months pregnant, at the time of the accident. George's job at the mill was called "off-bearer." The off-bearer operates a huge bandsaw that makes the first, rough cut on the logs as they come into the mill, sectioning off slices of wood that will later be cut to standard lengths and planed for finished lumber.

The off-bearer has one of the most dangerous jobs in the mill. The saw that George Alexander worked on was sized for old growth logs -- 52 feet around, with a 10-inch wide blade of high-tension steel. "That saw was so powerful that when you tuned it off you could make three more cuts through a 20-foot log before the saw stopped," George told me. One of the dangers of working as an off-bearer is that if the blade hits a hard knot or metal debris (from old fences, choker chains, nails, etc., embedded in the wood) the saw teeth can break off and go flying. If it's bad enough, the whole sawblade can break. To protect against this, workers have to wear a heavy face mask and stay alert, checking each log as it goes through.

George knew the job was dangerous, but he was also confident of his skill. "I always figured that if that blade ever hit me, it would hit me on the run," he said. He knew every sound the saw made, and could tell by listening when something was going wrong. He also knew to look for the tell-tale black stains that usually show up on the smooth surface of the debarked logs if metal is present in the wood.

Although George Alexander was an L-P employee, he was no company man. Louisiana-Pacific management had earned his disrespect long before through the callous way they treat their employees. "We're not even people to them," he said. "All they care about is production." The perfect example of this was Dick Edwards, the day-shift foreman. Edwards was always after everyone, but he seemed to go out of his way to harass George. In the months before the tree spiking, Edwards would often stand on the catwalk overlooking George's work station with L-P's Western Division Head Joe Wheeler, just watching George work.

Louisiana-Pacific has never been known to spend much effort maintaining equipment or worrying about worker safety. But in the weeks preceding the tree spiking incident, conditions had got even worse than usual. Cracks had begun appearing in the bandsaw blade, and the blade was wobbling as it ran. When George and other workers complained, foreman Dick Edwards shined them on, saying the new blades were not in yet and they would have to make do. "That blade was getting so bad," George said, "that I almost didn't go to work that day."

Normally when a big tree is sawed they start from the outside and square off the edges first. But the tree that George was sawing on May 8, 1987, was a 12-inch pecker pole; and because it was so small, he took the first cut down the middle. Halfway through the 20-foot log, the saw hit an 11-inch nail. "That nail must have been recently placed and counter-sunk," George told me. He had checked the log when he started cutting it and had seen no sign of the metal. And because the saw hit the nail square-on, there was no warning sound. "Usually there's a high-pitched metal sound and you have time to get out of the way," George explained. "This time I didn't hear nothing but 'boom!'"

The next thing he knew, George was lying on the floor covered with his own blood. "I knew I was dying. And all I could think of was Dick Edwards, and all the shit he gave me when I complained about the saw. I tried to beckon to Edwards so he would come close enough for me to get my hands around his throat in a death grip. If I had to die, I wanted to take that bastard with me."

A 12-foot section of the huge sawblade had broken off and hit George in the throat and face, ripping through his face mask and cutting into his jugular vein. His jaw was broken in five places and a dozen teeth were knocked out. The blade was wrapped around him, and his coworkers had to blowtorch it off while they tried to keep him from bleeding to death. "The saw hit me flat," George said. "If it had hit me with the teeth I'd be dead. I'm only here because my friend Rick Phillips held my veins together in the hour before the ambulance came."

Louisiana-Pacific didn't call the press right away, but when they did, they had a field day. "Tree Spiking Terrorism," screamed the headline in the Santa Rosa Press-Democrat, while the Eureka Times Standard proclaimed, "Earth First! Blamed For Worker's Injuries." Mendocino County's Sheriff Shea put out a widely quoted press release that was almost gleeful in its condemnation: "This heinous and vicious criminal act is a felony offense, punishable by imprisonment in State Prison for up to three years," he wrote. "Still undetermined in the investigation is the motive of the



suspect or suspects, to deter logging and milling operations or inflict great bodily injury and death upon lumber personnel." Even Louisiana-Pacific president Harry Merlo got into the fray, blaming "terrorism in the name of environmental goals" for George's injury.

Meanwhile, George and Laurie Alexander had a different take on the incident. "I'm against tree spiking," George said from his hospital bed, "But I don't like clearcutting either." Laurie also tried to include Louisiana-Pacific in the list of culprits. "I hate L-P," she told me. "I like trees." But the press wouldn't print a word of what Laurie said, and George's comments about mill safety and clearcutting were mentioned in only one news article, by Eric Brazil of the San Francisco Examiner.

Earth First! was much less generous, displaying practically no sympathy for this innocent man's ordeal. And after advocating tree spiking for years, even putting out a manual on how to do it, when the shit came down, they tried to disassociate. "This is probably the first time we've made international news, and we weren't even involved in it," was Earth First! co-founder Mike Roselle's flippant statement to the press. "This raises the whole question of violence. Not just tree spiking, the violence of cutting down ancient forests."

Dave Foreman was even less concerned about George Alexander. "I think it's unfortunate that somebody was hurt, but you know I quite honestly am more concerned about old growth forests, spotted owls and wolverines and salmon -- and nobody is forcing people to cut those trees."

This arrogance didn't win Earth First! many supporters in the Redwood country. But did Earth First! spike that tree? The answer is probably No. Back in 1987 Earth First! was just getting started in Mendocino County, and its only issue at the time was old growth. There was no consciousness among Earth First! activists about baby tree logging -- and the spiked tree was only twelve inches in diameter.

There were also other signs that this may have been the work of a disturbed individual instead of an organized group. Louisiana-Pacific traced the spiked tree to a cut on Cameron Ridge Road near Elk, where neighbors had been complaining about L-P trashing the forest and threatening their water supply. One of the local residents was a strange man who drifted in and out of the area and mostly kept to himself. He was described by neighbors as a rightwing survivalist. Three weeks before the tree spiking incident, loggers reported finding mutilated animals around the site -- a beheaded deer hanging from a tree, a skinned dog draped over a bulldozer -- hardly Earth First! tactics, to say the least. But if this was the work of a lone crazy person, that still begs the question of where he got the idea of spiking trees. The answer is probably Dave Foreman's book, "Eco-Defense."

There is also reason to believe that the tree was not spiked at Cameron Road at all but while laying on a log deck after it was cut. The saw hit the spike about nine feet up the

tree. If you figure a foot for the stump, that means it would have to have been spiked ten feet off the ground.

But it doesn't really matter whether an Earth First!er, a lone survivalist, or Harry Merlo himself spiked that tree. The point is that if you advocate a tactic, you had better be prepared to take responsibility for the results. And I don't want anything to do with causing the kind of injuries George Alexander suffered.

While he was convalescing from those injuries, he was contacted by someone from the yellow-ribbon gang of pro-timber stooges. George doesn't remember her name, just that it was "some woman from Humboldt County." She asked him to go on tour with her denouncing Earth First! for the tree spiking. George refused.

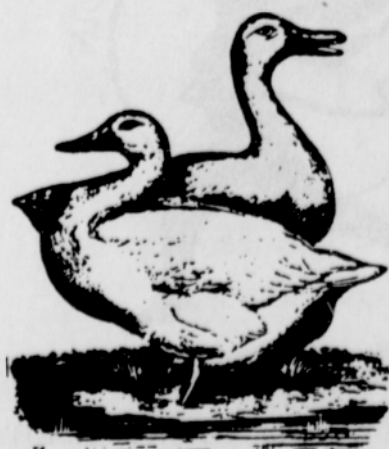
No matter what you think of Louisiana-Pacific's forest practices, this much should be clear: George Alexander is not the enemy. He has no say over any of his bosses' policies, either in or out of the mill. I have heard Earth First!ers say that doesn't matter, he shouldn't be working in an L-P mill. Well, I shouldn't be driving a car either, but that doesn't make it okay to put a bomb in it.*

After Alexander refused to go on tour denouncing Earth First!, he was forced to return to work at L-P before his injuries were healed. His and Laurie's baby was about to be born, he needed the money, and there were not many jobs in Hopland where they live. George got worker's compensation for the time he was off work, but L-P didn't offer him a cent for the trauma and hardship he suffered. They made a big public show of putting up a \$20,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of the spiker. But George Alexander had to file a private lawsuit to get anything at all. And while the company was crying crocodile tears over his injuries in public, they were fighting him tooth and nail over his damage claims. He ended up with just \$9,000 and an involuntary transfer to the night shift. "They used my name all over the country," George told me, "then they laid me off when the mill closed down."

"L-P is just sorry I didn't die," George Alexander said. "Yeah, I know," I replied. "They're sorry I didn't die too."

Tree spiking is a failed tactic by any standard. It has been practiced by Earth First! for ten years now, and I think it's safe to say that the results are in. Here's Dave Foreman's on tree spiking, from "Eco-Defense." "Tree spiking is an extremely effective method of deterring timber sales, which seems to be becoming more and more popular. If enough trees are spiked in roadless areas, eventually the corporate thugs in the timber company boardrooms, along with their corrupt lackeys who

*Judi Bari was almost killed by a car bomb in 1990. The FBI visited her in the hospital and charged her with bombing herself.



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