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FLAT CAT SPUR

MEMORIES OF SPRING FIREWOOD GATHERING

Seeing magic
in the mundane

By **HEATHER DOUGLAS**
For The Daily Astorian

When I asked my dad recently about a place called “Flat Cat Spur,” he said he has no memory of it — even though he was the one who named it. Handing out nicknames has always been my dad’s specialty.

Twenty-seven years ago — when I was 15 years old — our predawn missions to gather firewood often began with the smell of my dad making his homemade French toast and an unnaturally jubilant wake-up call that he seemed a touch too eager to deliver: “Up an’ at ‘em!”

After breakfast, we would load everything into the back of his green 1965 Chevy pickup. The smell of the gas can, the rattling of the chainsaw in the back of the truck, and our family springer spaniel, “Lucky,” frantically sniffing the air in anticipation of an unleashed woodland adventure are visions that float cozily in my mind whenever I picture a chainsaw slicing through a fallen tree.

On one of these missions, deep into the coastal Oregon forest, my dad unofficially named the offshoot of his favorite logging road “Flat Cat Spur” after he found the petrified body of a house cat that had been rolled out into a miraculously thin pancake by a logging truck. The poor beast was what one would imagine from a Looney Tunes cartoon — a completely flat cat preserved in the most unflattering moment of its demise.

The helpless creature was probably abandoned far from civilization by heartless humans, and while it had somehow managed to escape wild animals and the elements, ironically its manner of death was by a human contraption. Back then, I could picture the log truck hurtling down the pit run, dust flying behind it and the cat never knowing what hit it. At least I hoped that the poor beast’s last moments weren’t too horrifying.

As a voracious teen reader entering high school, at the time I had taken a rebellious foray from the classics I adored like Walt Morey’s “Gentle Ben,” Thomas Hardy’s “Tess of the D’Urbervilles” and Jack London’s “Call of the Wild,” into the twisted pulp fiction of “Pet Sematary” by Stephen King. I remember reading it with a mix of horror and awe: what kind of mind can imagine all of this stuff?

But while Stephen King’s aim was to terrify his readers with dozens of horrifying scenarios, my dad processed the world around us with morbid humor. In his mind, the living, the undead and the dead were all fair game for a personalized nickname. And so the spot was nicknamed after the flat cat.

Heading home

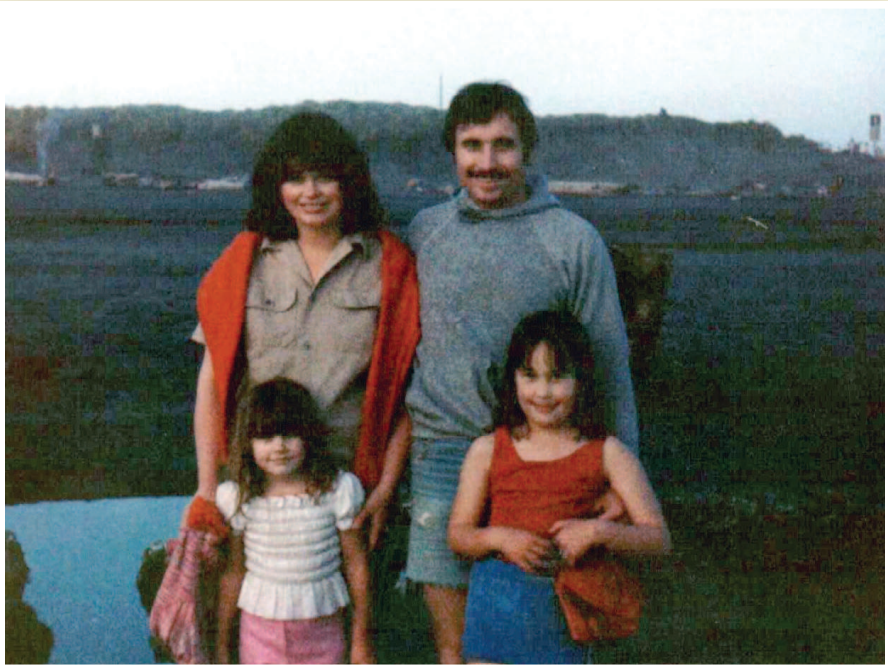
After the chainsawing was finished (usually in the afternoons) on Flat Cat Spur, and my dad had the 6-foot rounds loaded and stacked into the bed of the pickup, Lucky was temporarily promoted to the cab of the truck. With the flick of a hand, he hopped into the middle of the striped-cloth bench seat. As I draped my arm over his brown-and-white-spotted back, we bumped down the logging roads with the smell of Lucky’s panting hot breath and the sawdust on our flannel shirts.

Once back home, the wood had to be quartered and stacked. After that, all that was left, was for one of us to bring in armfuls of wood over the course of the winter and place them beside the wood stove without allowing too many hitchhiking spiders inside the house.

While finding firewood was a late spring activity, going on a ‘dump run’ in the old green Chevy was a year-round chore. Several time a year we would load up the truck with lawn clippings, garbage and scrap wood and take old Williamsport Road. First was weigh-



Heather Douglas and Lucky at Coffenbury Lake (1991)



Left to right: My sister, Rachel Morrow, mom Cynthia Douglas,



Heather Douglas as a baby and father Dave Douglas (1980)



My dad Dave Douglas and me (Heather Douglas) (1981)



Dave Douglas and orphan kittens (1985)

ing. My dad would put the gear shift — a 3-on-the-tree with manual steering — into drive and position us on the scale.

After weighing, the short drive up the hill to dump the load was met with a disorienting cacophony of busy seagulls and a putrid smell. My dad told me he had nicknamed the gray shimmering sludge that lined the concrete floors “dump gravy.” Instead of gagging, I doubled over laughing.

I asked my dad not too long ago about the mythical Flat Cat Spur of my memories. I was momentarily vexed that he had no memory of this place. As a teen, Flat Cat Spur was a place of inexplicable wonder for me. As Lucky and I tramped off into the forest with the sounds of my dad’s chainsaw in the distance, I learned about the magic of nurse logs and wondered if anything really dies, or is simply recycled.

I learned the great effort my dad made in replenishing our wood every spring after an endlessly rainy and dark Oregon winter. I learned how to appreciate the magically mundane task of chopping wood and using humor as a salve for the sometimes unappealing chores we must complete in life. I learned the simple satisfaction of a day of hard work. Because of this gift, my life has been rich with Flat Cat Spur moments ever since.

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