

# Offbeat Oregon

## Old-time loggers and millworkers were tough, stoic characters

BY FINN J.D. JOHN  
FOR THE SENTINEL

Nearly everyone whose family has been in Western Oregon for more than one or two generations has an older male relative who's missing some parts — one or more fingers perhaps, or part of a foot — as a result of an industrial accident in the woods or at the sawmill.

It was, throughout the first three-quarters of the last century, just a common risk of the job. One was constantly working with sharp, fast-moving objects — axes, circular-saw blades, and later chainsaws — designed to tear through tough material. A thumb in the wrong spot, a slip of the foot while swinging an ax, and something really bad could happen.

Dr. E.R. Huckleberry of Garibaldi was the man who was called to the scene when it did. Over his 50-year career, Huckleberry patched up dozens of accidental amputees, and was often left shaking his head at the mental and physical toughness of his patients.

"The heavy, outdoor labor seemed to breed a hardy race of men or eliminated the weaklings. I am not sure which," he wrote in his 1970 memoir. "But they were a group of stalwarts, who recovered from injuries quickly, and took trouble in stride."

Of course, the average person has no real idea of how he or she would react if disaster of the sudden-amputation variety struck. Often people are astonished at the competence and toughness an average person displays. The story of rock climber Aron Ralston, who, pinned under a rock and knowing he'd starve to death if he didn't, summoned up the courage to amputate his own arm comes to mind. Likewise, there was a student at Crane High School in Eastern Oregon who, about 10 years ago, crashed his "four-wheeler" miles from home, badly enough that his forearm was torn off; he somehow summoned the presence of mind to rig a tourniquet, collect the arm, and ride back to town with it.

Still, some of the cases Huckleberry recalls are hard to top. Getting one's limbs amputated in a horrific accident isn't a contest, of course; but if it were, one of his patients would probably win it.

Probably the most egregious of these was a man who'd already lost his left hand at the wrist in an earlier on-the-job accident and had learned to use his ax one-handed. This fellow was deep in the woods doing some contract work, bringing out some shingle bolts, working alone, when his ax slipped and bit into his left forearm — cutting all the way through one of the bones and severing an artery.

"He walked almost half a mile to where he had left his pickup," Huckleberry writes. "When he got there, he found he had a flat tire."

Not only that, but his jack and lug wrench had gone missing. So, he hiked back to the job site, where he'd left his ax; retrieved it; and came back to the spot. There he cut a sapling to use as a lever; used it to lift the side of the rig up (it was probably a Model A Ford pickup, so this would be less difficult than it sounds today); tapped at the sides of the lug nuts with the edge of his ax until he got them to start turning; changed the tire; drove 10 miles to Dr. Huckleberry's; and presented himself for treatment. Huckleberry ligated the artery, stitched up the cut, and set the bone — while the logger sat there and took the pain like it was no big thing.

"Needless to say, he was pretty white by the time the job was finished," Huckleberry wrote; "but he drove his pickup home and was back at his contract in less than a week."

Cutting shingles seems to have been a particularly amputation-prone way to make a living. Huckleberry recalls having to patch up and treat stumps for a lot of them — particularly shingle sawyers, who did fast close-in work feeding shingle blanks into a bandsaw.

"In fact, a few stubby fingers was sort of a status symbol among them," he writes. "One day a young shingle sawyer was brought in with the fourth, third and second fingers severed at the base. I sewed up the stumps, and they healed nicely. About two weeks after he returned to work, he was brought in again, with a saw cut halfway through the first finger."

Luckily, the cut wasn't far enough to clear the bone, so the finger could be saved. Huckleberry patched it up; and then the young man looked

over the job, and said, "Doc, it's a good thing those fingers are gone, 'cause if they had been there, I'd have cut them off, sure as hell."

It wasn't just their ability to soak up gruesome injuries that earned the loggers and mill workers Dr. Huckleberry's respect. It was also their cool-headedness in the face of near death.

One sawmill employee was standing on scaffolding painting the top of a new 200-foot smokestack one day when a gust of wind caught him at the wrong moment, and he toppled over the edge. As he fell past the scaffolding, he grabbed at each "floor," trying to catch himself. Somehow, he managed to get his arm over the third or fourth one and hang on. In the process, he scraped himself up pretty badly.

"He pulled himself onto the platform, climbed down the ladder, and came in to have the skinned places dressed," Huckleberry recalls. "Then he went back to the job, got another bucket of paint, climbed up to the top, and started in where he had left off."

A somewhat similar story involves highway workers, working on cutting a roadbed out of the face of Neahkahnie Mountain, near the top of a nearly vertical cliff 300 feet above the ocean. Two men had been lowered from the cliff top on boson's chairs to drill holes in the cliff for dynamite charges to go in.

They were working at different levels, one just above the other, when the man above fell off his chair. The man below grabbed him as he fell past — but the sudden tug on his shoulder caused it to actually dislocate. Despite the pain, the man did not let go, and pulled his buddy up onto

the chair. Then the rescued man pulled the two of them up to the top with the block and tackle and drove him to Dr. Huckleberry to have his shoulder-bone put back into place.

"Then he went back on the mountain, let himself down over the cliff, and resumed drilling, all alone," Huckleberry concludes.

Even when life wasn't at stake, loggers and millworkers seemed to have a particularly stoic attitude toward pain, and some of it may have been cultural; many of them were Scandinavians, and Scandinavians have a reputation for stoicism.

"One day a squarehead (Scandinavian) came into the office with blood pouring from a scalp wound," Huckleberry recounts. "He was a lumber piler and a sudden gust of wind had blown a board from a nearby pile, hitting him on the head."

The cut was a big one. Huckleberry got the bleeding stopped, cleaned it up as much as he could, and put in a bunch of stitches. Then he advised the man to take a few days off work to recuperate.

Nothing doing, said the "squarehead."

"With a cut like dis on my leg, or my arm, I no can work," he explained in his thick Norwegian accent. "But on my job a head I don't need. I work."

(Sources: *The Adventures of Dr. Huckleberry*, a book by E.R. Huckleberry published in 1970 by Oregon Historical Society Press.)

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