

Encounters with Forest People

HJ Andrews Experimental Forest, Oregon Cascades, November 2014

1.

Bob: Emerges in camouflage from the forest and says, "Hope you don't take me for one of those commercial mushroom hunters."

2.

Terry: Seven a.m. and it's raining. He's headed across the gravel yard for the maintenance shop. Work clothes, cowboy hat, sandals over white socks. And while he seems more gnome-like, in contrast to my ent-like looming – we wear pretty much the same get-up.

Except, my socks are gray.

Terry waves and makes a drawled, droll comment about the rain. I reciprocate, relapsing to a Spokane home-town twang.

Story I hear later is he hails from Louisiana. Came north to the Andrews because God told him to. If that's fact, it's to God's credit.

Terry's a wizard at working wood. His touch is counterpoint to the energy-tight-envelope design of the writer-residence. His crafted trim and furniture sing – cut and polished from blowdown fir and cedar. Strange grain. Unexpected limbs twisting out. *Witch's broom* he calls the clusters of gnarled limbs. Sanded, varnished, and featured; the retained bark anchored to sapwood with oak dowels inserted 5" deep and stained to match the bark – all dark and oiled as the surface of ripe horse chestnuts.

The day I have to leave we finally to get around to talking in that rainy gravel yard. We admire the raucous ravens strutting to the compost. Their cheek and complex talk.

3.

The lady at the general store. The Clovis. One afternoon I swing though the hamlet of Blue River. Somewhere nearby there's a site, a warehouse where, I've heard, Clovis spear and dart points were found and salvaged some decades back.

I buy a six-pack of Ninkasi oat stout, catsup, and a loaf of bread, and check out with the adept lady at the register. She makes change precisely with thalidomide hands, smiles, and gives precise directions. She knows the spot, just a half mile distant.

On a bench above the confluence of the Blue and McKenzie Rivers the warehouse is falling into disrepair. Becoming its own artifact, unlikely to last as long as those now-archived, fluted points.

Here the Clovis camped, repaired their weapons, provisioned, and moved on.

13,000 years ago.

4.

Ryan: Tall, thin, forest service botanist – two days short of 39 – has the flex and enthusiasm of youth. Still – he doesn't climb mountains – “Too many broken bones.” A friend disappeared soloing three peaks in Glacier Park. “Probably hit a summit, cracked a beer, and went on. You don't feel it out there,” he says. “Took 'em 5 days to find him.”

I don't understand why he's telling me his life story in the HQ parking lot after heading-up a mushroom foray to the old growth slopes of Castle Rock. But it's intriguing.

Grew up in North Dakota, joined the army, then afterwards moved to LA where day-times – he worked as an EMT. A club bouncer at night. Wild friends got him kicked out of apartments twice-a-year back then. Read Kerouac. Decided his heart was out-of-doors so got a biology degree and started paying dues with the National Park Service.

An itinerate botanist, he's worked 22 national parks – one stint ran six months on an island 700 miles off Hawaii. Only 2 birders for human company.

When I ask him how he deals with all the changes, he says, “You know how everybody now's into *extreme* this and that? Well, I'm an *extreme relaxer*.”

Ryan thinks he's settling now – learning the fungi of Cascades old growth in the service of Spotted Owls. He's going to focus he says, get a graduate degree in botany.

But when he sees a remote job opening – his eyes get this gleam.

5

Tom: At 55. he heads-up the spotted owl prey study at the Andrews – tracking populations of night rodents. Been doing this small mammal work a long time.

Still nimble on side slopes strewn with downed timber, duff, and decay, he says, “Every time this survey's on I lose 15 pounds. Most of it the first week.”

“It's good work but you have to pay attention. I'm starting to slow down.”

Tom hires and leads his crews of young bios. They're putting in years on the temp circuit, building resumes to get those rare permanent jobs doing what they know, love, and are best at. He rotates grid assignments every day – human nature to do your best when others will check tomorrow to see if your live-trap-sets succeed.

What most surprises me is how attentive his trappers are to the comfort of their catch – each set shielded with bark shingles propped against drips and leaks. Traps checked daily, all damp cotton nesting changed-out against the chill.

The catch is mostly northern flying squirrels and Townsend's chipmunks. An occasional pika, spotted skunk, or mountain beaver. Red-backed voles get counted on the small trap grids. Peanut butter and oats for bait, but – mostly – these rodents feed on truffles and forest mushrooms – spreading and seeding their spores.

Of the crew, Tom says “If they don’t know mushrooms when they take this job, they do when it’s over.” His wife is German, his father-in-law Russian – both avid mushroom foragers. Tom’s own ardor is tepid. Likes chanterelles well enough , but says his father-in-law eats Elfin Saddles and even Slippery Jacks. Tom shakes his head in resignation, but I'm thinking – this whole crew and family, as well, predicated on fungi and these old, old trees.