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# Wood Gathering Day

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# Wood



Author Jack Furbee with his parents, Clyde and Gertrude, at the farm of Jack's maternal grandparents in Wetzel County in about 1940.

Groundhogs had begun their hibernation; rabbits scampered toward their burrows having foraged on the hillside during the night. As the sun broke through the morning mist, trees came alive with activity as squirrels frisked about exercising themselves for another busy day. Life stirred on the woodland hillside of the Long farm, where my parents and I lived with my maternal grandparents in rural Wetzel County. Leaves covered a rutted farm road, which ran tortuously around the middle of the hill overlooking Pleasant Valley. Soon this well-worn pioneer road would be the path of a mule team and sled carrying father and son into the depth of the forest to cut wood for heating the Long house during the coming cold winter months.

Rising at daybreak, Dad found his cherished mules grazing near the little barn below the house. They followed him to their accustomed stalls in the crude basement stable, where they pulverized huge ears of corn having been placed in the feedboxes, part of the manger structure. Engrossed in their corn treat, they were unaware of their owner harnessing them for the day's labor. Fitting each with bridle, col-

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lar, back straps, belly bands, hames, traces, and bits, Dad expertly dressed the mules with every harness detail snapped, strapped, and buckled tightly for maximum horsepower.

I awoke in my attic bedroom to Dad's voice in the wood yard below. "Whoa, Jack.... Whoa, Jennie.... Easy now," as he brought his mule team to a halt by the fence near the gate. Jumping off the sturdy sled, which he had built recently, he fastened the reins to the yard fence. Jack and Jennie, his faithful mules, male and female respectively, rested quietly while Dad had breakfast before driving them into the nearby forest to haul wood.

I skipped every other attic step as I hurried down to enjoy breakfast with Dad. We were in a warm area of the small farmhouse near the cook stove, still hot from breakfast preparation. Three rooms were heated by three wood stoves, which consumed voluminous cords of wood during cold winter months. Born in the hills of the Van Camp community, between the Ohio River towns of Paden City and New Martinsville, I became part of a family whose job it was to accumulate enough wood for multiple stoves.

Dressed in warm clothes, I followed Dad out the back door and stepped onto the new sled before the gate in

the yard fence clanged shut. When the mules felt my jolt at mounting the sled, they came to attention from a brief slumber. As Dad picked up the reins, the mules stood at attention for their day of hauling wood. "Jackie, are you ready? Hold tightly to the standards [uprights on the sides]," Dad cautioned me as he concentrated on rousting the team.

"Git up mules," he ordered, assuming a more firm and deeper vocal quality for speaking to his team. Perking their long ears up and forward in a state of appropriate readiness, the mammoth-muscle creatures gave their strength to pulling the sled slowly at first, making a sharp turn in front of the woodshed where they



Jack with his dog and wagon in front of a mostly empty wood yard.



Clyde Furbee holds Jack on the back of a mule. These mules appear ready to work with harness, blinders, and a sled.

stopped momentarily for the wood cutter to get his tools: crosscut saw, ax, a sledge, and two iron wedges.

"Gee now, Jennie.... Easy.... Easy," was Dad's gentle direction to the female on the right. A beautiful long-eared lady mule, she pulled to the right followed by Jack, the male on the left. A system of check reins caused pressure on the bits in the right side of the mouth of each mule; however Jennie led the way at Dad's command. We had arrived at the wooded area where Dad stopped the team, tethering them to a fence post. As his amateur helper, I jumped off the sled while Dad threw the ax and saw over his shoulder. His deliberate steps made deep impressions in the moist humus. I increased the length of my stride to follow his footprints exactly. His steps would take the best route, I was sure, avoiding danger. I felt that I was safe.

"Here is a good firewood tree," Dad

said as he threw his ax and saw near its trunk. Having succumbed to blight in the 1920's, it was a dried chestnut still standing, like a ghost among living trees. As if Dad could rely on my limited, innocent presence, he seriously inquired aloud, "Where are we going to land this tree?" Wishing I had an answer, I stood perplexed. Like an accomplished surveyor, he cited an ideal place for the tree to fall. Notching the tree several inches from the ground, he began to saw the trunk on the opposite side of the notch. Thus, when the tree was ready to fall it would do so guided by the notch.

After aggressively pushing and pulling the saw back and forth toward the notch, Dad suddenly stood to his full height; he was uneasy about something. "Run, get me the wedges and sledge!" The saw was bound in the trunk as the tree began to lean in the wrong direction. A job that might

have been somewhat advanced for me — getting the wedges and sledge to Dad — was a priority before the tree fell in the wrong place. Dragging the sledge and clinging tenaciously to the wedges, I arrived at Dad's side. He grabbed a wedge and stuck it into the saw cut, driving it deeply to free the saw. With the other wedge he changed the direction of the falling tree, pounding the wedge tightly with the heavy sledgehammer to make sure the tree was falling where he had originally surveyed. Urgently he asked that I hand him the saw, which I found lost among the leaves. He inserted it again into the girth of the leaning tree. With a few more crosscuts the ancient chestnut tree began its crashing descent to exactly where Dad had planned.

I stood stunned at the intense industry of bringing the tree to the ground. The smell of damp, exposed earth and decaying leaves mingled

with sawdust and chips around the tree. The echo of the tree falling reverberated in Pleasant Valley below. The silencing of the birds' songs at the great furor, the momentary numbing of my senses at the recent combat we had experienced, and the raining down of broken branches, leaves, and general refuse from surrounding trees caused me grave uneasiness as I stepped back, hoping the disruption would pass.

Realizing I was at my limit emotionally, Dad and I sat on the fallen tree for a while simultaneously comforting our spirits and admiring our accomplishment. "You okay, Richie?" he asked, using a name of endearment for times of my discomfort. Seated below him on the fallen trunk, I simply looked up at my father knowing everything was in good hands. Words were never spoken.

It was almost noon when Mom brought us a lunch of ham sandwiches and a jar of fresh well water from higher on the hill near the house. After the short lunch break the tree was sawn into eight-foot sections. Several of the sections had to be split with the sledge and wedges so that we could lift them. Although the old tree had lost most of its limbs, some remained as they became eight-foot sections, too.

"Jackie, let's get the mules," he said. Somewhat exhausted, I was awaiting this invitation. Jack and Jennie were restlessly waiting near an old fence line. The mule driver untied the reins from the fence while I jumped on the sled. We were in the last part of our wood-gathering day, loading the disassembled chestnut tree. Each piece of wood had its place on the sled to make a solid load stacked high against the standards. The larger split pieces were on the bottom, while the looser limbs were on the top. The two mules, having been hitched to the sled piled high with wood, seemed to know their greatest challenge lay ahead, pulling the sled heavy with wood up the steep hill to the wood yard.

"Let's go home, Jackie. This has been a good day! The old chestnut will make great wood for the stoves. Since it's dry we will have lots of kindling to start the fires." My father spoke as if he had accomplished a task cheered by an imaginary multitude who had gathered around us, although I was the only one who heard him. Coming back to reality, he paused a while walking around the perfectly assembled load of wood and admiring the mules who had been so patient. Holding their heavy heads in his hands as he looked into their big, bright eyes partially covered

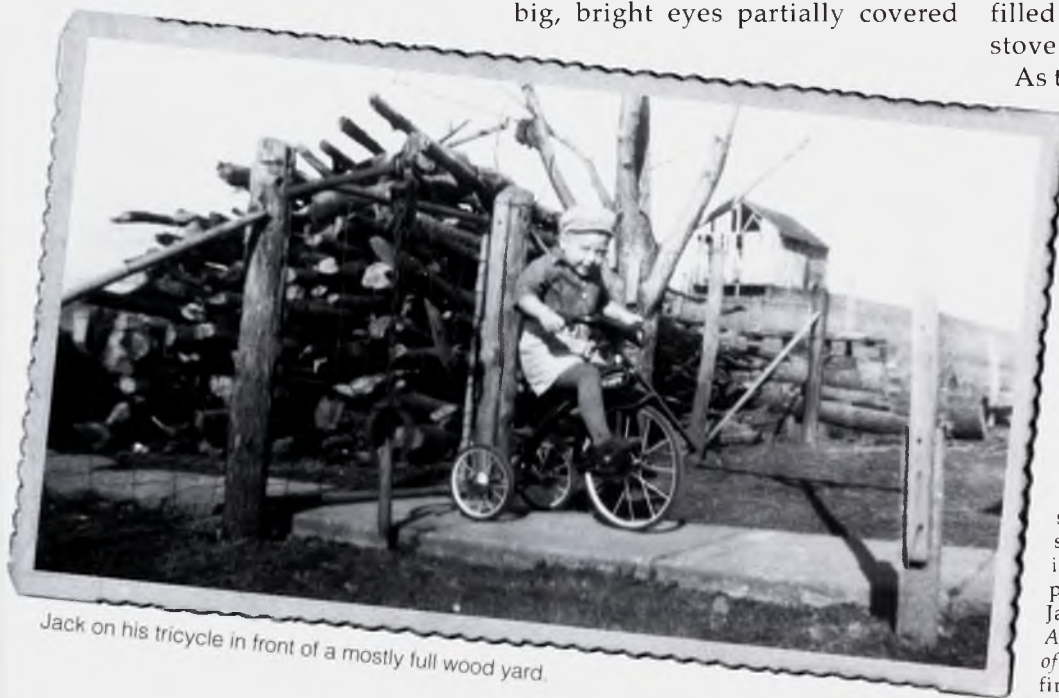
with blinders, he said affectionately, "Good boy, Jack.... Good girl, Jennie," to encourage his team for their final, intense exploit of the day.

Giving me a boost to the top of the load, he held the reins tightly as he issued the mules the firm command: "Git up! Let's go! Git up, Jack! Git up, Jennie!" The noble workers tightened on the double tree, pulling gently and in unison at first. Then mastering the load with their great strength, they surged forward with the sod flying from their powerful shod hooves.

Soon we pulled into the wood yard parallel to the yard fence. With the mules panting, sweating, frothing, and steaming, Dad unhitched the powerful duo and led them to the little barn where he gave them another generous treat. Climbing off the old chestnut tree, I threw open the gate and burst into the kitchen of the Long house before the gate clicked shut. When I entered the kitchen, Mom greeted me obviously concerned about my well-being. She never found out about our battle with the old chestnut, which lay harvested in the wood yard ready to be cut and split into stove-length pieces, placed into neat ricks, and later taken by wheelbarrow to the back porch from which the ladies filled their wood boxes beside each stove.

As the sun set, the forest regained its usual sylvan silence. Later in the darkness, nocturnal creatures inventoried the battered area to find one very old tree missing, the familiar chestnut, landmark of countless generations of wild creatures. 🍁

JACK FURBEE was born in 1934 in Wetzel County. He holds a master's degree and a doctorate in education from West Virginia University and served 35 years as an educator, counselor, and administrator. He now lives in Bourbonnais, Illinois, where he is professor emeritus at Olivet University. Jack is the author of the book *Growing Up Appalachian in the Van Camp Community of Wetzel County, West Virginia*. This is his first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.



Jack on his tricycle in front of a mostly full wood yard.