

Retired Logger Interview

With Earl Steinhoff

By Nora Drews

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Nora Drews: This is Nora Drews with Earl Steinhoff. I was asking him a few questions about logging because he is a retired logger.

Earl, are you from the U.P.?

Earl Steinhoff: My parents were originally from the U.P. I was actually born just outside of Detroit. We moved up here in 1960 and been here ever since.

Nora Drews: So, what made logging your calling?

Earl Steinhoff: Well, I actually worked for my father in the summers as a kid. I started skidding logs with a bulldozer when I was 8 years old. That would have been the summer in 1961. Just worked in the woods with my dad when I was a kid, all through highschool. Then got into it myself after that.

N. Drews: Did you dad get into logging from his father too?

E. Steinhoff: Huh, no. He just was in the area with all the logging going on, he more or less picked it up on his own. At one time before we moved to Detroit, before I was born, he had a log truck that he hauled logs with. And then he went, during WWII he was in the Navy. And after that he needed to work and that's how he ended up in Detroit at GM Diesel. It's a mechanic, actually machinist down there. But he did not like the city and that's how we ended up coming back here. And he just kind of.... We also raised mink and we had a mink ranch that my grandfather had retired from that my father took over. And we got, we had a little saw mill and we cut timber for that. It was just a four foot long, and we made fish boxes for the commercial fishing that went on here in Browns Addition. It was quite a big thing back then. And then I just kind of wandered from there into logging as full time business. And when he [Earl's father] became ill in 1972, at that point we had become partners just prior to him becoming sick. And huh, that's how I kind of got into the business myself. Because he, having heart problems, he could no longer go in the woods and I kind of took it over from there. And I just continued on logging and my brother worked with me, my younger brother. And then, in 1980 I got out of the woods for about a year or so. Tried something a little different and it didn't work out. I got back into logging and was there ever since. And in 1994 my brother and I became partners. We expanded our business into mechanized logging. And huh, in 2005 we went out of business, in 2005 I retired.

N. Drews: Right, so your brother, Milo Steinhoff, you guys got started in 1994?

E. Steinhoff: The two of us together as partners, yes.

N. Drews: And being a mechanized logger, is that when you started using machines?

E. Steinhoff: That's when the mechanized logging...huh, there had been mechanized logging prior to that. But that's when we started mechanized logging. Prior to that it was all done by hand with a chainsaw. And we would pick up the timber and then we, we call them forwarders, they were 4-wheel machines with loaders on them. And we'd pick the wood up and put them on the back of it. And bring it out to the logging road and packed it up which is putting it in piles for trucks to come in. And take it to the paper mill.

N. Drews: Wow.

E. Steinhoff: At that point we had started a tree length operation with a Timbco Fellow-buncher, which is a large tractor machine with a boom on it. And you would actually grab a tree up to 30 inches in diameter and cut it, bring it down and we would have men come cut limbs off the tree. And we would take the tree, full length out with the carpal skidder, which is a four-wheel drive, large rubber tired skidder with a large clamp on the back that would grab the piles. We put these trees in piles with the fellow-buncher and grab these piles and pull them out to a, what we called a landing which was a big area. Where the slasher, which is a large machine that would take the trees and put it in the back of, what we called a bunk on the back. It had a large circler saw, 60 inch circler saw and an arm that controlled hydraulically and the lengths you could control hydraulically and how long you wanted to cut them. Rather you were cutting logs or pulp wood. And huh, this would hydraulically, this 60 inch circler saw, the arm would come over and it would cut a quarter and a half of wood at a time. Excuse me, a half a quart of wood at a time with one swipe of this arm. And you would deck that wood in huge piles for the truck to come in and take to the mills. But huh, the skidder would haul all these trees in and any of the sharp pieces or any of the limbs or any inverted wood that got, not, that was waste wood, we would haul back in the woods and scatter it around in the woods so we didn't have huge piles of this debris around here. We were very conscious about esthetics in the woods and how everything looked when we were done. We tried to be real neat with the wood, with the way we treated the wood. We tried to treat it like it was own back yard.

N. Drews: Keep everything looking nice.

E. Steinhoff: Yeah, everything looking nice and always in mind is, coming back to these hard wood areas, we always worked with just hard wood basically. These areas would be, you would come back in and harvest timber every 10-15 years, depending on the sight. So, we were always looking ahead. You're always trying to make the stand better, always trying to improve the quality of the trees. We just wanted, you know, we wanted to be able to look back and try not to see a mess which is one of the miss about logging. That loggers go in and just, a term I've heard used is 'hack and stack' and make a mess and leave, you know. Well, it's not that way. You know, there was that way more. But now it's, it's very good now. It's all controlled. Very good people in the woods now, a lot of mechanized logging, a lot of control over the way the environmental factors are

handled. You know, your rivers and streams and swamps and your wildlife areas are all taken into consideration. Erosion and all that kind of stuff. It's really controlled real well right now and it's for the good. As a logger, I think it's really good because at one point when I was younger it wasn't that way. There was a lot of miss-management in the forest. And now there is a lot better management going on now.

N. Drews: Doesn't the DNR actually, they are the ones that kind of say where the places can be harvested next?

E. Steinhoff: Well, not where we worked because we worked a private company. It was previously owned by Cleveland Cliffs Company. They owned 360,000 acres of land and they basically could do what they want with their timber. But the DNR have concerns with their own land. If you are buying timber from them, stumpage, your buying timber from them, then they control how every things done, the transfers. In private land ownership, it's between the land owner and logger basically how it's going to be.

N. Drews: So, when your going in and cutting only certain trees down and leaving some trees still standing, the healthy ones that can grow and mature. How do you get trees not fall on each other?

E. Steinhoff: Well, that's where the mechanized logging is good. Previous to that you would hand fall timber. It was very dangerous hand falling timber because there was that problem, trees hanging in other trees. But then you got to remember, these are professional people who do this for a living. And they cut their timber and huh, it's always done with safety in mind. And if a tree does hang up in another tree, you have to bring another machine over and pull it down. Then the other machines can harvest it on the ground. With mechanized you don't have that problem because the tree is taken down. Now, machines are so sophisticated that a machine will cut down a tree, basically, lets say a comfortable say, a 24 inch tree now with the machines they have. And I'm talking hard wood which is a heavy tree. And it will take it down and process it without a man using a chainsaw into the various lengths that you would cut them into which is basically pulp wood because your thinning out these miss-managed stands and trying to grow log trees now. Where as before, they were just going in and just taking out all the good timber and leaving, what we called 'junk timber', pulp wood, crooked trees, defective trees and things like that. And now it's just the opposite. You go in and you take, you get rid of the bad trees and try to manage the good trees. So, it's mechanized so much now, it may not, they call it a processor machine. It cost upwards of 800,000 dollars. One machine and do the work of, like seven or ten piece cutters which are individuals that would cut the trees down, cut them up into pieces, pile them with the forwarder machine that comes in and picks them up and brings them out to the road. So, they're very expensive but one man can do so much work and it doesn't matter if it's raining or windy. The weather has not a lot to do with production. They keep the forest protected, not beat it all up and leave a mess behind. It's very good, they're very good machines out there right now. The development of a sound forest.

N. Drews: With so many dangers that are involved with logging, with all these machines now, it's not quite so dangerous?

E. Steinhoff: Yeah, a lot of the danger has been taken away because of that. In fact, men are inside of enclosed caps, behind machines with windows with 1 inch lexon protective glass on them. And there's always a danger with any kind of job of that nature, but it's taken so much of it away. Well that and there's a lot of young men, young men don't want to get into that kind of work today. I mean, cutting timber for a living is a very hard job. It's only for a few. You know, years ago, it was the only way there was to do it, so, logging a bit...it's just too hard of work for most people to do.

N. Drews: Well, isn't, as far as pay for timber, hasn't that not changed much?

E. Steinhoff: Well, it's changed. It's actually, it pays half way decent. Just like any other small business. They're mostly small businessmen doing this. And it's just too hard to offer the benefits as a paper mill for instance. These guys are out there risking their life, especially years ago when it was all done by hand basically. I mean the cutting part was hand fell. And they would go out there and work for close to the same pay as the men as the mills but they had no benefits. I mean, so by the time they add it all up in this day and age they're making twice as much money at a pulp mill and no risk with the union and not risking hardly anything, as far as their lives or breaking limbs and things like this. Verses the guy who goes out there with a chainsaw and cuts. I have a nephew today that is cutting trees for a small operator. We worry about him, my brother and I, talking about Milo [nephew's father], my brother was my partner, and we worry about him cutting timber. He's working for a fellow that still does hand fall, there's quite a few who still do hand fall. It's a dying way to log, there's not very many do it verses in the woods 10 years ago. Because it's hard to find the men to do it. It's dangerous and there isn't a lot of men who want to do it.

N. Drews: What kind of scary stories do you have of when you used to log?

E. Steinhoff: Lot of them, back in my younger day when I used to cut with a chainsaw all the time, I've been near death so many times. I don't think I could remember all of them, it's very, very dangerous work. Many times, just, so many stories of things that happened that you were just lucky to dodge and with your experience you got out of tough situations. I was on a logging job one time, working with a fellow. He actually was killed on the job sight. I was running a skidder at that time and he was...it was actually two days before deer season and I think it was 1984. And he huh, it was early in the morning and he fell a tree across his little trail. A skid trail we called them we used to bring the wood, the main trail would bring the wood through the woods and out to the road. And he fell it into the sun and when it went down it shook loose a dead tree down at the base, down at the ground. And he fell the tree, you could see what happened cause there was about three inches of snow on the ground. You could see his foot prints and he did everything safe but we feel because he was looking into the sun, this tree when it fell, it loosed up and the other tree came down in the opposite direction and fell right, square on top of his head. He died instantly. [Long pause] You know, I've taken many men to

the woods busted up and cut and things of this nature to the emergency over here. Been at the emergency myself quite often, beat up and things like this from wood cutting, it's very dangerous. Rolled skidders down huge hills around the Munising area here. I've rolled a skidder over in a hill before and managed to live through that. A lot of close calls... I'm trying to think of one of hand to give you the details on.

N. Drews: Well, didn't you have an employee of your own, a sawyer that actually ended up getting himself twice?

E. Steinhoff: Oh yeah, I had young man who was doing the lending and popping behind me. The timbco, in our mechanized operation, cutting the limbs and that alone are dangerous. Hand falling is two or three times worse but it's still dangerous cutting limbs. Yeah, he cut his nose all up one time. The chainsaw kicked back and went across his face and cut his nose up. Many times, he cut his foot once. Dan, he's been cut several times.

N. Drews: And he's still working in the buisness.

E. Steinhoff: And he's still doing it, yeah. There's lots...I've got all kind of war wounds on me from cutting with chainsaws. It's just part of it, it's dangerous. You do it all day, every day, some thing bound to happen.

N. Drews: With it being so dangerous, what was so great about it that made you want to do it? What was your favorite thing?

E. Steinhoff: I don't know. Once your out there in the woods and you do logging, it just kind of...kind of one of those things. You just enjoy being out there in the woods and enjoy working with the timber, the men. It just huh, I always loved working with the wood and being in the woods and things of that nature. I don't know, we got a little saying you know, 'Don't let that boy go in the woods and get saw dust in the crack of his but, you'll never get him out of there. He'll be there the rest of his life working in the woods.

N. Drews: That's a good one! So, out of all the things that, I know people have miss conceptions about logging. What would you want people to know about logging?

E. Steinhoff: I think the most I would want people to know about logging, as far as the miss conception. Environmentally, logging done properly is such a sound practice. It's a renewable resource. It can be done in the right way so that a track of land, an acre of land, a half acre of land, whatever, it can be managed and you can take timber off there forever virtually. Because it's like having a garden, take a carrot bed if your familiar with gardening at all. If you take the carrots and you through your seeds down and you don't thin them out when they start to grow, you end up with a whole bunch of little, tiny carrots. But if you go through and you thin them out so that they have room to grow, then you end up with large carrots. And carrots you want to have, nice carrots. But if you don't weed the carrots out, you end up with a lot of small, crooked, nasty carrots.

N. Drews: And that's exactly the same as in the woods?

E. Steinhoff: It's basically the same theory in heart. I'm talking hard wood now. I've not done a lot of soft wood, all my life I've been in hard wood management. And soft wood, I know gets done in a different way. They cut and replant. And that's a sound practice for soft wood management. You cut a row of trees out in maturity, say red pine for instance or jack pine, 60-80 years old and you go through and take out rows instead of taking out, you know it's done in a whole different way as hard wood. There's two different ways of doing it, it more planting involved. There's no planting in hard wood, it's basically, well, there is some of it done experimentally by the government. But hard wood mostly regenerates on it's own. And you just try to keep the stands, the trees spaced. You don't want them too spaced out too much, but you don't want them too tight. You know, you got to keep huh, there's a happy medium there. And you try to keep that and your timber will grow tall and straight.

N. Drews: Well, thank you Earl for all your time and for answering all my questions. This is Earl Steinhoff in Munising, MI. Retired logger.