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Erik Loomis

Masculinity, Work, and the Industrial Forest in the US Pacific Northwest¹

Work and Manhood

I grew up in the Pacific Northwest of the United States during the 1980s. My father worked in a plywood mill during the battles over endangered species protection for the northern spotted owl, a rare bird that requires virgin forest to survive. The media, both regionally and nationally, covered the increasingly volatile protests both for and against owl protection. Environmentalists claimed the loggers “raped” the forest and wanted to cut every remaining tree, as Roy Keene’s article for *High County News*, “Raping the Private Forests,” suggests (1990, 13–14). Loggers countered that environmentalists did not care about their jobs. In fact, the job losses in the industry during the 1980s and beyond had little to do with protection for owls. Decades of overcutting, export policy, and automation had devastated the livelihoods of the Northwest’s timber workers through the 1970s and 1980s. Forest mismanagement was at the heart of the crisis. Yet, due to cultural differences, environmentalist indifference at the impact of unemployment on timber workers, and an effective corporate campaign to use the owl as a cover up for its own responsibility, greens and workers could not find common ground.

Part of these cultural differences has to do with connections between masculinity, work, and nature. Generations of loggers created a proletarian masculinity through felling some of the world’s largest trees in dangerous conditions. They defined themselves as independent men recreating the landscape through brute force and personal bravery, personified in the character of Hank Stamper in Ken Kesey’s 1964 novel *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Ending the tradition of cutting the big trees also closed a heavily gendered work culture that had long-term implications not only for men’s finances but also for male loggers’ views of themselves as men. The decline in industrial employment in the United States over the last half-century has also affected genealogies of masculinity and self-worth, with large-scale impacts upon gender roles, class relations, and control over the economic value of landscapes.

¹ Parts of this article appear in *Empire of Timber: Labor Unions and the Pacific Northwest Forests* (Loomis 2016).

The loggers' connection between work and their view of themselves as masculine men did not always follow employer dictates that proper manhood meant laboring loyally for the company. Timber workers used their labor organizations to press their own environmental agenda. In doing so, timber workers constructed ideas of masculinity defined through work in nature; they made their own connections between their work and their ideas of themselves as men throughout the twentieth century. These constructions shifted as often as the environmental issues that concerned them and ranged from unions in the 1930s claiming they needed government regulation of the forests to raise their families in a dignified fashion to loggers in the 1980s decrying how environmental protection of the forest undermined their work traditions and masculinity. Examining the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) of the early twentieth century as a case study, this essay shows how historicizing ideas of masculinity, nature, and work can serve as a useful window into understanding natural resource workers today who struggle with economic instability in an era of globalization, deindustrialization, and environmental transformation.

Radical Manhood

The industrialized nature of the early twentieth-century timber camp and logging mill brutalized workers. Whirring saws, logs flying through the air, and working on floating logs meant that workers risked their lives every day. With no workplace safety laws, hundreds lost their lives each year. Loggers spent off-hours in remote timber camps, isolated from women and society at large. Instead of mattresses, loggers collected hay for makeshift padding. The hay and rain-soaked, unwashed bedding created a perfect environment for flea infestations. Most companies refused to build sanitary latrines and many located toilet facilities near water supplies or the kitchen, allowing for an increased risk of cross-contamination and gastrointestinal diseases. Methodist minister Oscar McGill testified to the US Commission on Industrial Relations about one Washington camp where the owners placed the toilets between the bunkhouses, leading to a smell so foul that the workers slept in the forest instead of their bunks. Kitchen facilities were as shoddily built as bunkhouses. Companies stored meat in the open air, allowing flies unlimited access. In an article entitled "Who Says a Logger Lives?" in the IWW newspaper, the *Industrial Worker*, in 1910, one logger described the butter served in camps as "white as wax, and as rotten as a putrid carcass, if smell goes for

anything.” A man sitting next to a logger named Egbert Oliver in one camp opened three successive eggs, each inedible. In the third was a half-formed chick. The logger ran outside and vomited. In 1917, a new logger came into an Oregon timber camp. His boss assigned him to a bunkhouse crowded with 80 other workers. Those 80 men shared one sink and one towel. Unfortunately for his bunkmates, this new man had untreated gonorrhea. He used the towel to wipe his infected body. Soon, an outbreak of gonorrhea set in in the workers’ eyes.

In 1907, the IWW began organizing the Northwest loggers. Early organizing attempts focused on issues ranging from the decline of skilled labor to lengthy work hours. But nothing stuck until organizers focused on loggers’ broken, diseased bodies, which became the core issue by 1912. IWW organizers used rhetoric about men transforming nature for themselves rather than for employers. The IWW demonstrated how mobilizing around the indignities in workers’ lives could build collective power. In doing so, it gave a voice to workers desperate to keep themselves safe, clean, and healthy. A June 1913 strike list of demands in the *Industrial Worker* included not only the eight-hour workday and \$3 daily wage, but also towels and soap for bathing, “clean sanitary bunkhouses” with mattresses and blankets, and safety equipment around dangerous machinery in the mills. In publicizing the strike, the IWW asked, “Are you dissatisfied with living . . . in miserable bunkhouses?” If so, “refuse to work under bad conditions, demand better camp conditions and pure food.” Fifty camps shut down during this brief strike. These actions slowly built IWW membership over the next two years. By 1917, the IWW had become the single organization fighting for loggers in the camps to live dignified lives.

To build the union, IWW propagandists idealized a working-class manhood based upon toiling with other men in the healthy forests. Drawing stark comparisons between the degrading conditions of work and the healthful forests around the camps, organizers and polemicists urged loggers to use their own masculine spaces as organizing tools. They tied ideas of labor, manhood, and nature together to help workers reclaim their dignity. For example, Ralph Chaplin, composer of the lyrics to the famed worker anthem “Solidarity Forever” and editor of the *Industrial Worker*, wrote in depth on the logging strikes. Chaplin (1920, 35) described loggers as the “husky and unconquerable workers of the Northwest” who would not submit to capitalist authority. Loggers walked, lived, worked, and ate together, creating a culture of masculine solidarity

against not only their bosses but also those workers toiling away as industrial slaves in urban factories. Through living with other men and in the forests, the logger “resents industrial slavery as an insult” (19). Reflecting struggles to organize the mill workers, where the IWW had less success, Chaplin contrasted the masculine resistance of the logger with what he saw as the feminized mill worker, subjected to wage slavery. Loggers had the “physical strength, cleanliness, and mental alertness” (17) from working in the inherently healthy forests that mill workers did not. Loggers worked hard, moving on when they no longer cared to work for a particular boss because they were the “perfect proletarian type—possessionless, homeless, rebellious” (16).

IWW propagandists claimed that loggers faced challenges to proletarian manhood not only from employers, but also from women. They split women into two groups—wives and prostitutes—constructing a paradigm of imperiled masculinity around stereotypes of these women. For propagandist W. F. Dunn (1920), prostitutes were parasites who “fattened on the worker in industry” and destroyed workers’ bodies through venereal disease (Kennedy 1922, 57). But if a logger avoided prostitutes and married, his manhood was equally at peril, for the married worker was easier to control and “less apt to exhibit those admirable—but to the bosses undesirable—qualities of independence and rebellion than the unencumbered migratory worker” (Chaplin 1920, 14; Rowan 1919, 7–8). IWW organizers’ reports frequently complained about married mill workers refusing to go on strike because of the fear of not being able to take care of their families. If the mill worker “subordinates his manhood and sacrifices his independence to the will of the company, he is rewarded by a life of grinding poverty, hopeless drudgery, and a condition of economic dependence and insecurity.” But if he stands up for himself, “he faces discharge and the blacklist, which, if he is a married man, means the breaking up of his home, and separation from wife and children” (Rowan 1920, 9). This combination of environmental justice and appeal to masculinity helped lead loggers to their first successful strike actions by 1915. Strikes in 1917 and 1918 led to federal intervention in the forests; the military banned the IWW so it could get needed wood during World War I, in exchange for granting the loggers nearly all their demands about sanitary and clean camps. Loggers won, even if the union lost.

Reaction

Yet the sheer existence of the IWW outraged conservative elements in the Pacific Northwest. Vigilante attacks grew by 1916, including the massacre of several IWW members in Everett, Washington that year as they attempted to mobilize that mill town. Attacks grew during and after World War I. On 11 November 1919, during an Armistice Day memorial parade, the American Legion in Centralia, Washington, a logging town in the southwestern part of the state, decided to raid the IWW hall to eliminate it from their city. But hearing of their pending attack, the IWW decided to defend their hall. When the Legion attacked, IWW members shot back, killing four. That evening, local men took IWW organizer Wesley Everest from his jail cell and hanged him from a bridge. Trials quickly ensued for a dozen other IWW members. A jury found eight guilty of second-degree murder, and they received life sentences at the Washington State Prison. In defending the Centralia prisoners, the IWW built upon its prewar constructions of loggers as a masculine proletariat. Wesley Everest became a proletarian superhero. IWW publications described him as a “muscular and sun-burned young man with a rough, honest face and a pair of clear hazel eyes in which a smile was always twinkling” (Smith 1922, 47). According to one document, his closest friends claimed “he was never afraid of anything in all his life” (64–65). When he had no choice but to face the mob after failing to cross a river to escape, he turned and, in a loud voice, proclaimed his unwillingness to surrender to any legal authority, which the savage mob ignored. When the crowd captured Everest, they beat him and put a rope around his neck in a prelude to what they would do to him that night. IWW reports said that Everest simply responded: “You haven’t got the guts to lynch a man in the daytime” (38). But martyrdom made Wesley Everest more than a man. An IWW Songbook contains IWW songs that compared Wesley Everest to who they considered the ultimate masculine figure: Jesus Christ. The song “Wesley Everest” began, “Torn and defiant as a wind-lashed reed, Wounded he faced you as he stood at bay; you dared not lynch him in the light of day” and ended, “A rebel unto Caesar—then as now—Alone, thorn-crowned, a spear wound in His side.” By fighting and dying for changes in working and living conditions for loggers, Wesley Everest became the personified idea of proletarian manhood.

The IWW collapsed nationwide after 1918 because of violent repression like the Centralia Massacre. It would not successfully unionize the loggers—but future genera-

tions of organizers would, and they also used ideas of masculinity based upon working in the forests to do so. The International Woodworkers of America (IWA) would construct its own ideas of proletarian masculinity in the 1930s and 1940s, attacking the timber industry for deforestation by proclaiming the need for a man to support his family through forest labor and the desire to pass that work down to his boys. In the 1960s and 1970s, the IWA used its members' desire for pristine forests for hunting and other outdoor sports to fight for wilderness areas. In the 1970s, countercultural reforestation workers deployed new ways of proving manhood through nature as part of their communal work culture. And in the 1980s, with jobs disappearing, loggers used connections between masculinity and work to fight against environmentalists and to save their jobs, with previous traditions of supporting conservation fading in workers' desperation for employment.

These examples demonstrate that natural resource workers have understood masculinity and nature in a variety of ways, with each category informing the other. Understanding these histories can help environmental activists develop more sophisticated strategies for creating coalitions with natural resource workers, whether fishermen struggling against fishing bans in New England, or West Virginia miners decrying President Obama's so-called "war on coal." Ending forms of working in nature also ends traditions of proletarian masculinity. Sustainable economies need to integrate working-class ideas around these issues if workers are to receive the dignity and justice they deserve.

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