

# The Treeplanter Camp & Crew

## An Organizational Analysis



a treeplanter packing trees to the jobsite -- a burnt over clearcut in the Bowron Valley, c. 1986  
photo source: Glen Thielmann

Glen Thielmann  
SFU MEd 813  
April 5th, 2003

Treeplanting is about endurance, not physical but mental.  
It can mean solitude, thirst, blackened nails, and frustration.  
Or perhaps poor management, bad food, and complicated politics.  
But ultimately whether you fail or succeed is up to you.

(Karen Henrion in Cyr, 1998, p.56)

I find, over a month later, I'm still thinking about the pulpmill tour our education class conducted to demonstrate a mechanistic organization in context. The sulfur smell, nosebleeds, and phlegm balls are faded quickly, but the images are still with me. Water spurts out of fissures in the crusted metal, trickles down to someplace flat, joins other fingers of steaming water, piles up foam at the confluence of concrete-bedded streams, and finally drains to the underworld where the yellow river makes its way to regions unseen from the view on the metal catwalk above. Something beautiful, something sinister, something which shapes the workers. The combination of noise, machine, water, pipes, and concrete must bring troubled dreams to the millworkers, give them twitches as they sleep and try to forget the stimulus they must regard as endless and monotonous after twenty years at the mill.



a bush office for a low-level forestry worker, Whitesail Lake, 1994  
photo source: Glen Thielmann

It brought to mind my own experience in a job with repetitive sounds and actions -- planting trees in the clearcuts of northern BC. I planted and worked as a surveyor in the woods for seven "seasons" (May through August) and am surrounded with family and friends who have also planted (a common trait for someone who grew up in Prince George). I aim to explore the organization of treeplanting, focusing on the ties that bind crews together, keep them sane, some thoughts regarding gender, and the role of leaders in the culture and ethos of the crew. Treeplanting has left a mark on a generation of students and silvaculture workers, created a subculture in Prince George (among other Canadian cities),

and has served as an early and impactful organizational model in the experience of thousands of Canadian youth. Three interviews and a number of readings have given me a different perspective on planting, or perhaps one I did not recognize when I was a treeplanter, the idea of organizations offering (as a primary if unintended function of hardship) the opportunity for catharsis and transformation.



view from the block  
photo source: Shane Cooke

The work itself is simple to define: a treeplanter loads up seedlings in bags about their waists and digs them into the ground of a clearcut with a small shovel. Pace, pace, screef<sup>1</sup>, dig, reach, plant, stomp, check, and move on -- a thousand times a day for twenty-two days a month. The work has been called "gardening in hell" because of the constant barrage of mosquitoes and the abuse taken by the body as it "bashes [its] way through the slash and wreckage of a clearcut (Shane Cooke, personal interview, March 26/03). The typical treeplanter lives with other planters, a cook, a checker and a crew boss (called a foreman) at a bush camp near the planting site, getting in to the nearest town every second weekend. The culture that grows up around these camps is informed by the dirt, the bugs, the large volumes of food, the primitive living arrangements, the unpredictable quality of transportation and communication, the lack or loosening of social protocol, and the difficult physical work.

---

<sup>1</sup> screef: scrape the humus away from the mineral soil where a tree is to be planted. A selection of planting "vocabulary" can be found in Appendix C



treeplanter and checker (quality control)  
photo source: Charles Friesen

Treeplanting emerged as a high-volume employer in northern BC during the late 1970s. Trees had been planted intermittently on logged sites throughout the previous fifty years, but improvements in silvaculture, public pressure, and increased harvesting encouraged regular and widespread replanting of clearcut areas (A Short History, 2001). In the 1970s, treeplanting in northern BC was a small-scale affair. Hundreds of "gypo" outfits (usually 10-20 people, sometimes a family or commune) would bid on contracts to plant a particular logged area. The crew would drive close to the site, arrange for tree delivery to a shaded cache, and set up tents and campstoves for a two or three week adventure. The organizational style was similar to the working of a family or commune. Tasks were shared by the willing or suited, and the particular demands of the government contract (a certain number of trees in a certain piece of land) dictated the pace and length of the work experience. Crews were flexible as to their living arrangements and daily schedule (as they were not regulated by the Workers Compensation Board). Recreational drug use was common, if not widespread, and camp life emulated many of the back-to-the-land and intentional community movements of the 1970s.

In our camp near Gold River in 1974, we had 28 planters (14 men, 14 women), two cooks, and five children in diapers. Every day one person stayed in camp to be the babysitter and every other day someone stayed home to bake 28 loaves of whole-wheat bread in a woodstove (David Boehm in Cyr, 1998, p.103)

By the 1980s, many crews had consolidated into small companies run by ex-planters and camps featured paid cooks and hot showers for crews of twenty or more. The contracts were issued directly from the forest companies, with a new emphasis on speed and quality. Trees were stored in refrigerated trailers and a system was put in place employing checkers (quality control), foreman (crew bosses), and area supervisors (treeplanting company representatives overseeing a number of crews). The sheer volume of planting contracts (due to the corresponding increase in logging and replanting requirements) meant that almost anyone could get a job planting, particularly university students looking for work when school was out for summer. Students comprised 37% of the planting workforce, while 30% were over 30 years old (Cyr, 1998, p.83). Veteran planters refer to these days as the golden years -- high wages, good times, and consistent work.



a landing" or staging area in a clearcut chosen as a site for a bushcamp, c. 1992  
photo source: Shane Cooke

The 1990s saw treeplanting companies becoming bigger and diversifying into other silvicultural work such as brushing, spacing, and herbicide application. In 1997, there were over 300 silviculture companies in British Columbia employing 15,000 people (Cyr, 1998, p.43). The recent trend is for companies to merge and begin offering "forest management" services. Foremen throughout the 1980s and 90s (and forewomen, although the term is seldom used) were often veteran planters with organizational skills a good relationship with a silviculture company. At least for the first season, the only real qualifications was the ability to gather a crew of planters, a cook (unless the company contracted this out), and some of the equipment needed in a bush camp. Treeplanting pays,

with a few exceptions, by the tree. The first-year planter in the 1990s, putting in 700-1200 trees a day at 9-18¢ a tree (about \$100-\$180 a day) could expect to save \$8000 or more over a four-month season. A skilled veteran planter could double that income, as would a foreman (Friesen, personal interview, March 26/03). The lure of quick money (especially from the perspective of students) brought planters from across Canada to northern BC. International students or travelers (often African) became more frequent on BC crews in the 1990s, often requiring "creative" book-keeping when work-visas were absent or expired.

Many planters testify to treeplanting as a transformative experience (see Appendix B). First-time planters ("rookies") coming from sheltered backgrounds are exposed to drug-use, casual sex, and hard work. The uncertainty and physical stress of the job forces planters to let go of expectations and begin practicing self-reliance (Charles Friesen, personal interview, March 25/03). Inhibitions are dropped, and impactful experiences (injuries, conflicts, love interests, job status, intense conversations, revelations) which might normally take years are often compressed into a few months: "...a fascinating mixture of people, character, and culture. Probably the toughest mental and physical job one will ever do. Altogether a unique lifetime experience" (Martin Begin in Cyr, 1998, p.73).



the cooktent (with trailer attached)  
photo source: Shane Cooke

Gareth Morgan's work *Images of Organization* uses a series of developed metaphors to offer insight into the function and character of companies and industries. Many of Morgan's metaphors are appropriate in the characterization of a treeplanting organization. The figure following offers some ideas on how this fit could work:

Figure 1 Metaphor and the Treeplanting Organization

Metaphor	Examples of treeplanting which fit the metaphor
Machine	chain of command, uniform and repetitive nature of work, replaceability of workers, dependence on simple tools, military or automaton "attack" of the hillside by an army of workers
Organism	strong relationships between crew members, ability to compensate for or adapt to loss and hardship, job and culture take their cues from the natural environment
Brain	various tasks are carried out simultaneously and independently, yet are shaped by a purpose and set of clear instructions
Culture	the creation of micro-society at the level of a camp, the "trades" assumed by crew members (cobbler, baker, tailor, musician, fire-tender), use of rituals and creation of jargon
Political System	lobbying for better patches of plantable ground, damage control for poor trees or weekend hotel damage, organized system of lodging frequent complaints
Psychic Prison	denial of the realities of the "outside world," re-creation of an alternate society at the camp level, distortion of time and compression of experiences
Flux	unpredictable nature of tree supply, health, weather, planting conditions, food/water supply, and camp life; changing dynamics of crews from season to season
Instrument of Domination	pressure for drug-use and adoption of counter-culture values, introduction of first-time workers into politics of corporations, environmental activism, and suspicion of employer's greed

The idea of treeplanting as a culture, or the emulation of a culture, is perhaps the most appropriate metaphor if the organization is viewed from the perspective of the individual camp and crew. At a different scale, the dynamics have changed: the silvacultural company is (or has become) much more than a collection of crews; it is a corporate entity that respects the cultures developed by crews (e.g. turns a blind eye to drug use, places photos of camp life on their website), but places its focus on profit. If the crew is a culture, then it operates on both sides of the political spectrum: "we're motivated by competition and camaraderie" (Shane Cooke, personal interview, March 26/03). The profit-motive and daily reminders about production (from the foreman) and quality (from the checker) speak to the entrepreneurial ethic of most crews. Planters are very much familiar with fines and bonuses, special fees, and incentives (Goertz, 1996, p. 104). But the crew culture is also a utopian endeavor, an exercise in interdependence that requires individuals to give up freedom for the sake of the social experiment.

Other metaphors could offer insight into the treeplanting outfit: the dysfunctional relationship (love/hate relationship with the job, the people, the changes in oneself), the rock band (constantly on tour, drugs, sex, music), the escapist novel (withdraw from reality of university, parents, civilization), the grand adventure (experiences are larger than life), the family (with dominant father and mother roles often played by foremen), the therapy group (working out the problems of the winter months), or perhaps the tribal society. After a few weeks of bonding, treeplanting crews take on some of the characteristics of a tribe or primitive society; men and women are often in their own spaces (although sexual interaction is common) and the crew initiates rituals to occupy their evenings (Charles Friesen, personal interview, March 25/03). The simplicity of the living arrangements, the rigorous work, and the frequent nudity and displays of sexuality all contribute to this tendency.



centre of tribal life: the kitchen and food tent  
photo source: Shane Cooke

The names of treeplanting crews are indicative of the work and culture developed in the wilderness. Names became necessary in the 1980s when large silvicultural firms had dozens of crews, and were usually developed by a crew or foreman over their first season together, although sometimes rival crews offered labels that stuck. The names tended to change when crews merged, or an influx of new planters altered the "cultural" composition. They reflect the age of the workers, the nature of the work, the inclinations of the crew (usually the foreman), and often the "male" orientation of the crews. Consider the following crew names I've encountered or extracted from recent interviews:

Bareroot Hackers  
Wolverines  
Lost Puppy Crew  
J-Root Factory (a j-root is a poorly planted tree)  
Swinepigs  
Detergent  
Duff Muffins (duff is the humus that is removed when planting trees)  
Screef, Reef, and Chief (screefing is the act of removing humus)  
Mann Brothers  
Digger's Dozen  
Black Dog Label Project  
Voder Riders from Hell (inspired by the foreman's Toyota)  
Xerophytically Speaking  
Godsquad  
Terminal City  
Red Hot Cherry Bendover Gang

Of these crews, three were all-male, one was all-female, and the rest were co-ed. An examination of the last four names provides a sense of the direction (or extremes) taken in the cultural development of crews.

Xerophytically Speaking was a crew of eight males who moved from camp to camp doing "clean-up" for a large silvacultural company (finished off difficult contracts). They traveled (and slept in) three trucks, smoked an enormous amount of marijuana, and had a foreman named Spaceman. They wore dress-shirts and neck-ties when they planted (helped seal out the mosquitoes) and had developed a habit of referring to themselves in the third person. They were given their name when they continued working at a camp that had run out of food and water for four days, surviving mainly on dope and a crate of oranges (a xerophyte is a plant that survive arid conditions). They exemplified the "hardcore" planter, counter-culture males out to build legends, secure some snow-boarding money, and get blasted.

The Godsquad was group of friends (initially all male) who attended a Bible College in Saskatchewan. Clean-cut and committed Christians in 1990, they

started their first season with nightly bible studies and made church attendance a priority on weekends off. Their faith and values were certainly tested by the drug-culture and free-love attitudes of four seasons working with various crews. Some went to the "dark-side" (the term veterans use to denote those who have given themselves over to the treeplanting lifestyle), returning to their families across Canada to challenge traditions and beliefs. Others continued practicing their faith, and left the group to join other crews with Christian planters. Of interest is the fact that the crew members that survived to plant the 1993 season still used the name Godsquad even though they had abandoned all the signs and restraints of their Christian upbringing. The name became a metaphor for Christians who "lost their faith" or became cynical planting, as in "so, Janice, I see you've joined the Godsquad."

Terminal City fits the classic stereotype of a planting crew: fifteen men and six women, a mixture of bible-school drop-outs, thirtysomething snowboarders with drug dependencies, university students, and Gen Xers trying to figure out what to do next. The crew seemed to attract fatalistic people, intimate with hardship and expectant of more to come. One of the planters had survived an accident the previous year: four of his friends had died when their van plunged over a washed-out bridge at night returning from a planting contract. He thought one more season would help him make sense of the experience, but after twenty-three days of weeping through his shifts, he went home to Winnipeg, had a break down and became paranoid and reclusive. The Area Supervisor, responsible for Terminal City among other crews, became a quadriplegic the following year when he crashed his truck. The crew seemed to live up to its name wherever it went, getting stranded at camps without supplies, writing off six trucks in three seasons, having to walk ten kilometres out of the muskeg of the Peace Country to retrieve drinkable water, or being forced to replant days worth of trees when their quality was in question. Despite the adversity, the crew (which I worked with 1991) made lasting friendships which have resulted in two marriages and three business ventures. Selections from an interview with the foreman of this crew can be found in Appendix A.

The Red Hot Cherry Bendover Gang was an all-female crew of nine university students who took their name from the candy brand (Red Hots) and the action of planting (bending over to plant trees). The sexual innuendo was also deliberate and indicated attitudes held by the crew. They had a reputation for being outstanding planters, dressing in bikinis or less, and living it up on the days off. The foreman, Cynthia, apparently started each season by informing her crew that they would be "rock & roll chicks all summer, girls." (Kate Cooke, personal interview, March 26/03). The freedom to express sexuality and "cut loose," especially for planters from conservative backgrounds, was a common theme in many crews.



planting through thick duff near the treeline  
photo source: Shane Cooke

In the male-dominated demographics of planting, all-female crews were rare and provided male planters with their own version of the Amazon fantasy. Mixed crews were more common, with women often performing traditional tasks (in addition to planting) such as assisting the cook, organizing the camp, and mending gear: "it's like we created a new society where we hung on to all the values we thought we had left behind. We didn't see it though, with all the bugs and sweat and trees" (Kate Cooke, personal interview, March 26/03). Roles learned in family settings were initially transferred to crew life, although crews that had months to bond created unique roles as their culture was negotiated by the demands of the job and the personalities of the planters. Female planters (comprising 25% of BC crews) have a higher drop-out rate in the first season, but the ones that last to the second season "compete" with the men for tallies and endurance. Beyond competition and expressions of sexuality are notions of transformation accompanying many of the testimonies offered by women on treeplanter websites and in print:

It's strange to me that the many hardships I encountered have faded from my memory and when I reflect on my planting experience I do so with a smile. Treeplanting has left me a stronger woman, both physically and mentally, and I feel a sense of empowerment that has followed me out of the bush. (Katherine Barkley in Cyr, 1998, p.89)

The role of the foreman is a subject of contention among planters. For “rookies” the foreman is an authority figure, someone who has an answer for questions, someone to complain to, or sometimes a parent figure who can bridge the gap between an 18-year-old’s background and an unknown future. For veterans, the foreman can be their pal (someone who sets them up to make money), a hindrance (an unnecessary middle manager), or a representation of the political structure of the silvacultural organization (someone they need to work with to get what they want). The foreman is often a source of power for those who seek affirmation by authority figures: “they’ll ask me ‘where should we put the cook-tent?, can we take the truck to get water?, when will we go in to town?’” (Charles Friesen, personal interview, March 25/03).

Other leadership roles on the crew are assumed by veteran planters with strong personalities, cooks, and checkers. The veterans ability to lead by example is crucial to the success of a planting season: “if the vets buy in to the plan for the contract, the rookies will follow. If the vets resist or undermine the foreman’s perspective, the crew disintegrates” (Friesen). Cooks, with their connection to nourishment and the joy of food for a hungry crew, are naturally inclined to take on nurturing roles in a treeplanting camp. Planters congregate in the food tent (usually the hub of a camp), and the younger planters gravitate to the kitchen and offer help with cooking and cleaning chores (Kate Cooke, personal interview, March 26/03). The food preparation area either attached to the food tent (like a mess hall), or located in a bus which has been retrofitted with propane appliances. Many cooks (usually women) double as first-aid attendants, mother/big-sister figures, or wardens of the camp and its valuables. Just as rookie planters assume responsibility and venture towards adulthood, young cooks often learn to tend to the needs of others, become self-reliant (cooking for crews of fifty on a limited budget and sporadic food supply), and determined (fending off bears with a shotgun) (Cooke). Checkers have a difficult job as they are responsible for maintaining the quality of the planted trees. Their role as an arbiter of success among planters is limited by their uncertain status: are they a part of the crew, or are they just another company representative? Receiving as much pay as a hard-working planter, checkers can be the subject of ridicule when their workload is compared to that of a planter. As with any leadership role, the trusted checkers are the ones that find a way to encourage, teach, and correct while maintaining the dignity of the worker and involving themselves in camp life.

A key factor in the development of culture in a treeplanting camp is the role of story-telling. Planters weave their experiences into personal and group legends, exaggerating the stories of the day and making their trials seem epic and irreplaceable. The stories, told in the trucks on the way to the block, in the food-tent, around a firepit, or in bars and laundromats on weekends off, help the planters internalize the violent and chaotic work and contextualize their philosophies and belief systems. The rapid pace of experience-gathering and frequency of legend-making place planters in their own culture, one that is hard

to escape: “it’s no use telling the real stories to people who haven’t planted. You try to explain to your family and friends what you’ve gone through and they just don’t understand” (Shane Cooke, personal interview, March 26/03).



unloading the reefer  
photo source: Glen Thielmann

The impact of treeplanting organizations on a generation of planters will have a lasting effect. Concern for the environment, revival of communal ideals, and belief in the value of hard work (at least during the summer months) have been instilled in thousands of young Canadians who have made their way to BC to earn some money. The opportunity for reflection, the intense compression of time, relationships, and crazy adventures has provided an archetype for treeplanters; their views of organizations, places they’ll work for or deal with in the future, will always be seen through the lens of their experience with treeplanting. Few jobs available to youth offer access to personal, environmental, and societal change in such a short period. I suspect that becoming part of some kind of tribe or primitive society, even if only for a few months, fulfills a need that we don’t often recognize in our modern culture. It is perhaps this quality that corporations hope to achieve with weekend retreats or the military manufactures in boot camp; simplification of lifestyle, physical and mental challenge, and pressure to arrive at an outcome. With the treeplanters, the outcomes they are striving for are largely self-determined and self-evaluated, the challenges faced are centred on transformation.

## **Appendix A: Interview Notes**

Selected questions from an interview with Charles Friesen (March 25/03, Prince George)

Glen: What does a crew do (on the block or off) to make sense of the chaos of planting life?

Charles: Chaos? Yes -- violence, monotony, and unpredictability. Lots of teasing, storytelling, music, frisbee, hacky-sack. The planters give nicknames to each other, start heated discussions, play out their egos and insecurities and whoop it up when they're in town. Planters revert to a primitive kind of society, many of them regress -- planting tends to bring out the best and worst in people. Two guys that wanted to quit and get compensation agreed to whack each other with shovels and fake an injury. They had a fist-fight over who would go first and fell off an embankment, so they ended up getting the injuries they wanted.

Glen: What is the foreman's role in digesting the experience? Besides the duties related to trees, what else does a foreman do?

Charles: The foreman provides a focus for anger, tries to solve problems before they get out of hand, babysit sometimes. I had one father drop his two 18-year-old twin daughters off at the motel at the beginning of a shift. All he said was "you take care of my girls." Motivating planters was a big job with rookies, but not with vets [experienced planters]. People have to be self-motivated if they want to survive planting. Foreman had to win over the vets to get the respect of the rest of the crew. Good foreman usually had a combination of strong personalities and very structured organizational skills.

Glen: What is the role of story-telling? How do stories help deal with the pressures or chaos faced by planters?

Charles: I guess its like tribal life, everyone sits around and tells stories to get stuff off their chest. People are dealing with all kinds of things from school and home. The experiences on the block help you forget or make sense of it. Everyone drops their inhibitions, people are naked all the time, there's drinking and fighting and drugs (especially on the coast), the work is very hard, so people tend to have pretty fantastic stories.

Glen: Are there significant differences between male and female foremen? How does gender affect camp/planting experience?

Charles: There is some role-playing if that's what you mean. Lots of big brothers, sisters, moms and dads out there. I think women who survive a few seasons make good foremen because they often have the loyalty of their crew. Men tend to be bosses, women can, too, but they maybe solve problems by working with the crew, like planting the difficult spot with the planter who is complaining. A man might make a decision or change the planter who was working on the tough piece. I don't think it makes much difference other than which roles are adopted, like men take "male" roles and women take "female" roles. They might take both, actually! I used to role-play for individual planters. I'd give advice to one planter that I wouldn't give to another.

Glen: Are there any metaphors you could use to describe the culture at a treeplanting camp?

Charles: Treeplanting made people revert to a primitive society, like a tribe or utopia

---

Selected questions from an interview with Shane Cooke (March 26/03, Prince George)

Glen: What were the attributes you appreciated in a treeplanting foreman?

Shane: The ability to encourage, to be organized and systematic, and to be able to motivate the crew. The work ethic and personality of a good foreman would be mirrored by the crew. The mood in camp was directly connected to the kind of foreman you had and if the mood went sour, planters would walk..

Glen: How did you get motivated as a planter?

Shane: It wasn't always about the money. Two things could get you going: we're motivated by competition and camaraderie. You'd think about how much you needed the money, and you kept at it with your tally<sup>2</sup> in your head and what you thought the highballer<sup>3</sup> was doing. You'd also kept at it because you were a part of something, you wanted a story to tell when you got back to camp.

---

<sup>2</sup> tally: tree count at the end of the day, the basis of pay and often reported by planters on the honour system

<sup>3</sup> highballer: top planter on the crew, a high-achiever

Glen: How important was story-telling in camp?

Shane: It was such a raw job, it got you to the bone every day and stories were important. They helped incorporate your experience into the bigger adventure the crew was having, it helped build a personal legend that you took with you when the season was over.

Glen: Is there a metaphor you could use to describe the experience of treeplanting?

Shane: A rock band on tour, or maybe a Hunter S. Thompson story. Crazy stuff happens in on the block, crazy stuff happens at camp, carzy stuff happens in town. By the end of the season, everyone has gone a bit crazy.

Glen: Is that a bad thing?

Shane: Absolutely not. For some planters, it probably saves their life.

---

## **Appendix B: Testimonies**

A lot of today's jobs are about taking and exploiting in one way or another. Treeplanting is about giving, combined with hardship. When you leave the field, you're also leaving a part of yourself behind. (Serge Gamache in Cyr, 1998, p. 41)

This morning while pondering life on the think tank I witnessed a strange phenomena. The sun was just starting to break over the northern Ontario horizon and the view, along with the smell, was breath-taking. The mosquitoes were sparse and I was wondering where they all were. Then I heard a low drone. It increased steadily and before my eyes I saw the entire lake lifting into flight. Needless to say it didn't take me long to finish my business. (Byron Goerz, 1996. p.114)

Sex wasn't that common on the crews I worked with. They would build plastic saunas out of plastic, get stoned and get naked and squeeze in together. Very sexual but people were too tired to actually have sex. The only time people really got it on was after bear attacks. Every time a bear messed up camp or chased a planter, people would pair up and hide in their tents. (Kate Cooke, personal interview, March 26/03)

Treeplanting is a social but, at the same time, solitary activity completely removed from the mainstream culture. It allows people from all over the country and of diverse backgrounds and experience to come together and participate in something unique: hard labor under adverse, stressful conditions in a devastated natural environment. The rewards are immense and more than simply monetary. Many aspects of the job require an inner revolution on the part of the planter. The possibility of personal development and the chance of a new and richer sense of fulfillment make the hard road traveled by planters a little more comforting. (Paul Raven in Cyr, 1998, p.107)

Finally, a longer testimony taken from an online essay called "Treeplanting: Head to the Hills" (Charles Austin, 1999)

My first season of treeplanting was in the spring of 1989. My sister told me it was a good way to pay for university. She had done it for two seasons and made lots of money. She used her planting connections to get me a job. I was told that I was lucky; that the contract I was to work on would earn me the dough to pay for school. I would make "\$200 a day if I worked hard".

I was hired as part of an all-rookie crew to work for a company

called Roots Reforestation. My foreman was a former "highballer" (someone who plants a lot of trees, so named because they don't drag their balls on the ground). He had selected a particularly odious band of unsuspecting college twerps as his crew (myself included). Perhaps the worst of them was an aspiring male model who kept his jaw constantly flexed. Accompanied by his new girlfriend, their relationship was doomed to end within the month.

After a day of rudimentary instruction, our first week or so was spent trying to figure out exactly what we were supposed to be doing. Our foreman was less than forthcoming, which in retrospect was probably the right course of action: sink or swim. Treeplanting involves a few repeated actions: carrying around between forty to sixty pounds of miniature seedlings, making holes for them in the ground with a shovel, putting the tree in the ground and properly sealing the hole. It sounds simple, but there are complications. You have to be efficient, and minimize wasted movement. Spacing of the trees and depth of the roots is also important. Any deviation from the regulations (which change according to tree-type and terrain) may cause a much-feared replant.

The land we worked on was unbelievably desolate: lunar, devastated clear-cuts that had been rolled over by machines of destruction and then burnt and sprayed with chemicals to prevent regrowth. The kind of damage wrought by the forestry industry on our country is obscene, but only a small percentage of Canadians will ever see it first hand. A clear-cut in central British Columbia is one of the only man-made phenomena visible from the moon, along with the Great Wall of China.

Often clearcuts would sit untended for several years, allowing weeds and bushes to sprout up in the place of trees. The entire eco-system was destroyed and replaced. A spiky plant called Devil's Claw thrived in the clear-cuts. It had a way of getting into your skin, causing a furious itch.

The burnt areas got hotter than most. You could drink five litres of water a day and still be dehydrated. But at night the temperature often went well below freezing, causing frost to form on the outside of your tent.

Freezing was good because it killed the bugs. Once the freezing stopped the bugs came back out. The bugs drove me insane on a number of occasions. Blackflies are worse than mosquitoes because they love the tender skin around the eyes where it's impossible to put repellent. And they are really small and insipid. These bugs and the extreme weather, combined with aching, bruised muscles made even the most Christ-like among us into a cranky asshole ready to snap at the slightest provocation.

It soon became apparent that the job wasn't all it had been cracked up to be. As we were rookies, we had no idea that we had been awarded the shittiest

contract in history. Most of our work was conducted on what could have been a ski-hill covered in overgrowth. We were paid seventeen cents a tree, the company sixty-five cents (normally the planter should get half). One of the inspectors from the Ministry of the Environment was kind enough to tell us we were getting the shaft.

As rookies we lacked the skills and determination to turn the contract into a moneymaking situation. Our foreman (who was getting a percentage of what we made) quickly lost heart and took to sleeping in the van. His uncharismatic, paranoid style of leadership did little to help the situation. Soon we were all humiliated, ill-trained, rapidly losing money, wasting our summer hanging off the side of a mountain. We worked 21 days straight. If anyone made more than sixty bucks a day it was cause for celebration. People starting quitting, to the undisguised contempt of those who chose to stay on. It became a matter of who could hold out the longest.

## **Appendix C: Treeplanter Vocabulary**

Selections from *The Treeplanter's Language* (2001).

Some of these words have been borrowed from logging terminology, others are unique to planting. I've selected terms which I feel represent the character and concerns of many treeplanters.

to bag out (v)-- to finish planting a load of trees

bare-root (n)-- trees which are large, sturdy and with long roots.

beach (n)-- sandy land near a road or skidder trail that makes for a few fast trees. Where the foreman plants when wanting to show off to the female rookies.

bogue (adj, n)-- bad, bad land (from "bogus")

cache (n)-- where trees or sleeping foremen are stored on the block under a tarp

cache slut (n)-- somebody who hangs out at the cache, not planting, waiting for others to hang out with

claw (n)-- pain and curled stiffness of fingers due to D-handle use. Avoid by using staff.

creamslut (n)-- somebody who will only plant in easy land

crummy (n)-- specifically, a 4WD truck cab and chassis with a large (10-15 person) passenger compartment instead of a truck bed, used in logging camps to move loggers and others to and from site. Also now refers to any planting vehicle that carries primarily people.

duff riders (n)-- 1. A crew that naps, goofs off, dog fucks and still manages to put in big numbers each day. (Then gets fired for stashing) 2. The hardcore drinking crew in camp.

fill plant (n,v)-- going in and planting among planted trees which have failed to grow properly. Mentally difficult for some but often very lucrative for those who can get the hang of it.

Franz Otto (N.)-- the B.C. legend, the highballer, the man. Probably the best planter in Canada, averaging over \$400/day anywhere. Record day: 3000 trees @ 23 cents. Owner of Puck Reforestation, serious boozier and a deity in the planting universe.

fuck (n,v,adj, adv, int)-- the most important word in the treeplanter's language. What you will say every five minutes when you get home from planting, especially in front of your parents, younger siblings and other relatives.

ghost line (n)-- a line of trees planted away from the filled section of a piece of land. Another planting faux-pas, esp. in somebody else's land.

gong show (n)-- a chaotic, disorganised, poorly run contract

gravy (n)-- see "cream"

highballer (n)-- somebody who consistently plants enormous #s of high-quality trees. What every foreman claims to have been before s/he took the regrettable step of running a crew...

hippie stick (n)-- a staff shovel

to L (v)-- to plant in along one side of land, plant across the back and plant back out, filling the land in an "L" shape. Method of choice; prevents deadwalking at close of land.

logging company (n)-- (1) an evil corporate entity that destroys the environment and (2) that pays for your University education or an enlightening trip to Thailand.

piece (n)-- a piece of land (a planter or planting pair's work area)

pie-eyes, --eyed (n, adj)-- somebody who cuts a piece of land which changes shape in order to grab more good land or to avoid bad land. This makes land shaped like a piece of pie (instead of the rectangles foremen love) and screws other people.

planter (n)-- "a dirty, pot-smoking alcoholic hippie or student freak, living ten to a hotel room, who votes N.D. f\*\*\*ing P., doesn't know how to drive on a logging road or use the right radio frequency, who can't tell his ass from a hole in the ground, who's killing forestry jobs and who's going to get the shit beaten out of him/her as soon as I finish my Coors Lite..."(see also LOGGER)

pound (v)-- to work hard and put in serious numbers

reefer (n)-- a refrigeration truck which brings trees to the site

rolagon, rolie (n)-- a massive wheeled machine which carries planters and trees to the cutblock. Used mainly in Alberta to deal with winter-access roads and swamps.

seven-oh-four/ 704 (n)-- the forms used in BC to note and calculate the quality of planting

shit tickets (n)-- toilet paper

show (n)-- planting contract. Variations: boatshow (access by water), helishow, quad/rollie show, shit show (no \$), cream-show (big \$\$), shaft-show, TV show (everybody sits around and watches each other do nothing), gong show (chaos)

shovel-tuck: the fine art of using the blade of your shovel to straighten out a tree so as not to destroy your hand. Illegal.

slash (n)-- fallen trees and large branches which create movement obstacles for the planter and which tend to be invisible to those bidding on blocks

snarb (n)-- slashpiles and dense brush difficult to plant in

sugar-coated duff shot (n): to plant a tree in duff and cover it with mineral soil

throw a plot (n)-- to use a plot cord to draw a circle on the ground and check the planting quality within that circle. What checkers do when not smoking pot or masturbating.

tree hauler, tree runner (n)-- somebody who gets paid \$150-200 to drive a quad or F-350, smoke cigarettes, gossip and try to wheel the female planters. The hardest working person on an Alberta contract.

trenches (n)-- long machine-made rips in the earth which expose mineral soil for the planter. Fast planting makes navigation and spacing easy but lowers per-tree pay.

visit the slash fairy (v) to get high

white flagging (n)-- toilet paper.

world (n)-- anywhere that does not involve planting. Where people, manufactured goods, artistic products and drugs come from. From Full Metal Jacket -- "When I rotate back to the world..."

## References

Cyr, Helene (1998). Handmade forests: the treeplanter's experience. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society.

Goerz, Byron (1996). To plant or not to plant: a treeplanter's guide. Fort St. James, BC: Little Cabin Books.

Morgan, Gareth (1997). Images of organization. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

### Websites

Austin, Charles (1999). Treeplanting: head for the hills.  
<http://silvaram.com/headforthehills.htm>  
retrieved April 5, 2003

A Short History of Treeplanting in Canada (2001)  
<http://web.radiant.net/harihari/tp1.html>  
retrieved April 5, 2003

The Treeplanter's Language: A Short Dictionary (2001)  
<http://web.radiant.net/harihari/tp12.html>  
retrieved April 5, 2003

### Personal Interviews (& where are they now)

Charles Friesen, March 25/03, Prince George. After 5 years as a foreman and 5 years as a foreman, Charles completed a Forestry degree, a Masters in Theology, and is now a supervising forester in Mackenzie, B.C.

Kate Cooke, March 26/03, Prince George. After 5 years planting and 4 years cooking, Kate completed a GIS diploma and splits her time between computer consulting and pottery.

Shane Cooke, March 26/03, Prince George. After a four year break from his first 12 years as a planter and checker, Shane is back at it again, planting on Vancouver Island.