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Idaho Statesman

Idaho lumberjack clings to family business as jobs fade

America once had half a million loggers. By 2022, the government estimates it will have 3,800.

BY TOM MORONEY

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Lewis Green likes his \$45-an-hour job as a sawyer, or logger, in the mountains of west-central Idaho. "Doing it right is hard work," he says.

Lewis Green stands toe-to-toe with the trickiest tree he'll cut all day. It's a monster.

The 17-ton Ponderosa pine reaches 130 feet into the sky. It hugs a 45-degree slope where it took root before the American Civil War. Making it fall downhill? A cinch if not for a rocky bluff that would smash it into kindling, pieces everywhere. To get the behemoth to the sawmill in profitable shape, Green must make the tree fall up.

Defying gravity is the least of Green's worries. He's a timber faller. He falls the mighty Pacific Northwest softwoods - the Douglas fir, grand fir and Engelmann spruce that become the two-by-fours and two-by-sixes that build the world. At 24, he is a proud third-generation logger holding fast to a dying trade.



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When he shows up each morning at first light, he comes packing history. His grandfather worked these same mountains in the days when loggers were called lumberjacks. His father operated his own logging company along with his uncle, who still cuts trees with a verve and finesse that grabbed Green's imagination as a boy and never let go.

Some never find meaning in earning their daily bread. Some come to it late. Green was 9, following Uncle Craig around the woods with a gas can to keep his uncle's saw fueled, when he found what made him happy.

Watching Green work today - his chain saw buzzing like an angry bee - brings to mind a gifted pool player. He dances around the forest floor the way Fast Eddie Felson marches around a felt-topped table: confident, quick, not one move ahead, but four or five.

"I could have done anything," Green said. "I'm no slouch, I'm smart. But I belong here."

A VANISHING PROFESSION

The question is, for how much longer? Now the woods are full of machines that do much of the cutting. There's fierce competition overseas from places such as Brazil and restrictive harvest policies in federal forests. Those pressures make Green's the fastest-disappearing job in the United States.

It is also the most dangerous occupation the government tracks.

The number of U.S. loggers will have dropped 43 percent in 10 years by 2022, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts. Once logging camps housed armies of the brawny if not Bunyanesque. By the latest count in 2013, there are 5,030. Idaho, with the nation's highest concentration, has 320.

Green lives where he grew up, in Council, population 816. It is a place of big hot afternoon skies, cool nights and no future. At the peak, workers in the region counted on six sawmills. Now there is one. In 1999, Council's sawmill closed, and a slow death took over.

The tiny city and New Meadows make up most of Adams County, which has led Idaho in unemployment with double-digit numbers since 2011. Seventy percent of Council's students - their mascot is a red-capped lumberjack - are poor enough for school meal subsidies. There were 30 in Green's graduating class in 2008. This year, 10 got their diplomas.

Downtown, the long sidewalks are quiet. A third of the storefronts are empty. The city's main thoroughfare, U.S. 95, will be rerouted in 2015 to speed up travel, but it will bypass the downtown and make things quieter still.



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AN OUTDOOR LIFE

Green is undaunted. The youngest of seven children, he scored a 4.06 grade-point average that placed him fifth among a competitive bunch in high school. He was named an all-state linebacker. In the end, none of the few calls from recruiters ever turned into a scholarship. So he didn't go to college, figuring he'd only end up back in Council, in debt and doing what he loves anyway.

He married his school sweetheart, Mickinna, in 2009. They have a boy and girl, ages 3 and 1.

He said he didn't venture beyond Council because cutting trees fit his talents so well, because the money's good and because an office job, any job without a front-row seat to the outdoors, would turn ugly fast.

"I don't handle confinement," said Green, who in his spare time hunts bull elk with a bow and stocks his home freezer with Chinook salmon.

He's employed by family-owned Tom Mahon Logging Inc. as one of two fallers - or sawyers or "saws." They go where the mechanical feller bunchers that do most of the cutting can't go, such as the steep slope he's on this morning.

While the Mahons have been able to keep Green busy, finding new timber contracts grows difficult, said Joe Mahon, who, along with his brother, Mark, run the operation their father began in 1969.

Green's mentor, Uncle Craig, has gone off to Oregon, where there's more work.

MAKING A TREE FALL UP

Now Green moves in on the tricky pine. Sweat beads on his forehead like raindrops. He is 6-foot-1, 180 pounds and muscle-lean. He wears a silver hardhat and boots with 31 spikes or caulks on each sole for traction. Nylon chaps cover his jeans to prevent amputation by chain saw. A two-way radio tucks into a chest pouch.

He has a broad nose, a sharp chin covered by a neat goatee, and baby-face complexion that makes him look even younger than he is. The notion that one Stihl 660 chain saw and an ax a Boy Scout might lug could win this man-versus-tree seems ludicrous. He's a speck.

Fallers are taught to make three precise and strategic cuts. His first two are on the "face," or the direction the tree is meant to fall. These cuts carve a wedge from the trunk. Green rips it out. Then he makes a third cut directly around back called the back cut. By inserting a plastic wedge into the back cut, the tree should go down or, in this case, up.

He looks to the treetop.



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"Lots of people get hurt by not looking," he said. "A limb gets hung up and you don't see it until it falls. We call them widow makers."

DEATH AND INJURY THREATEN LOGGERS

Logging has a fatal injury rate of 129.9 per 100,000 full-time workers. That puts it just ahead of commercial fishing as the deadliest job, according to government data. The Mahons' other faller, Sean Ogden, 31, ripped open his left foot with his chain saw earlier this season, took 25 stitches and was out for two and a half weeks.

Green pounds the first wedge into the back cut with his ax. The tree doesn't move. Most branches grew facing downhill where the sun hits. That's where the weight is and where the tree wants to go.

His second wedge gets stuck inside the back cut. He drops an F-bomb, loosens the stuck wedge, pulls it out and resorts to a rare move. Doubling up the second wedge with a third, he drives both into the back cut. Twice the thickness, twice the leverage.

The giant pine sways with a loud crack and thud! It's down.

"Some people would have taken the easy way out and launched it down the hill and broke it into pieces," he said.

With the work comes the specter of injury and death or of one day waking up to no work at all.

Still, Lewis Green wouldn't have it any other way. He thinks of his early days in the woods when he picked up more than the physics of a falling tree. He learned he was connected to the family business in a way that made him responsible for it.

"I doubt I can bring it back to what it was," he said. "But maybe I can help keep it going."

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