

TIMBERLINES

Richard Denner



TIMBERLINES

Richard Denner
with a forward by Bouvard Pécuchet

dPress 2004 Sebastopol



ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

FOREWARD by Bouvard Pécuchet

Heal your world. Plant a tree. Richard Denner ran a small, independent bookstore for twenty years in Ellensburg, Washington, and he subsidized it for fifteen of those years by planting trees every spring. During that time he worked for two companies, Eastern Washington Reforestation and T.G.T.B.T. Eastern Washington Reforestation was structured like a co-op, although legally it was a partnership, and they had to appoint someone on the crew to sign their contracts. Davy Simkins signed one contract as Galactic Emperor and another as Galloping Antelope. The name Eastern Washington Reforestation was a bit misleading since most of Eastern Washington is a desert.

T.G.T.B.T., Too Good To Be True, was a legal partnership run by Don Schroder and Doug Mitchell, and they picked up the pieces of Eastern Washington Reforestation after it dissolved. For the most part, the group contracted with the U.S. Forest Service, and most of their planting was in the state of Washington, in the districts of Ellensburg, Chelan, Okanogan, Entiat, Mt. Baker, and Wenatchee, but some treeplanters planted year round, going east to Utah and Montana and south to Oregon and California.

There is an art to treeplanting. First, a new planter is told that “the green side goes up.” Some never get it. It is a mystery, and like in a mystery novel, there is an inspector and a plot the inspector inspects. There are

scores for planting too high, too low, too close, too loose, for planting in duff, for how you make a scalp. And then there is the dreaded “J root.” The less said about J roots the better.

I know in the effort to save the planet, treeplanters are thought to be on the front lines, but actually, treeplanters are the lowliest vermin in God’s creation. Many a boss goes down to Skid Row to pick up a couple of drunks and takes them into the woods wearing their street shoes and gives them a bag and a dag and sends them into the slash to prove to the inspector that he has a full crew. Such a worker might complain: “Hell, this ain’t a forest, it’s a toilet paper farm.” True enough, there’s nothing really romantic about treeplanting.

Richard says, “I remember moving camp after planting all day and pitching my tent in an arroyo and waking up with a river running through my sleeping bag, getting up to a breakfast of whiskey and scrambled eggs, and then fishtailing it up a logging road at dawn with AC/DC blasting from the speakers to slam a few trees into some rocky slope in a downpour, or sitting in a hot springs among ancient cedars and coming back the next year to find a gurgling mudhole in a clearcut.”

For six years after a ferocious forest fire, Richard and his friends planted Silver Basin in the Entiat Valley. Then, after another eight years, they came back, and for a year they thinned the trees they had planted, and then, the following year, the valley burned again. Here is a true lesson in impermanence.

Richard says, “I figure, on an average, I planted 500 trees per day for 30 days per year for 15 years. I calculate that to be somewhere in the neighborhood of a quarter of a million trees. I guess I’ve helped the planet. I guess I’ve guaranteed there will be pulp to make paper to replace some of what the book industry uses every day. I suppose a forest planted in rows is better than no forest at all. I look at Mt. Rainier, as I fly over it, and I realize it would be hard to get lost in this so called wilderness. You would only have to walk a mile in any direction to find a logging road.” True enough, anyone on a vision quest is going to be checkmated before he or she even gets started.

Richard has set choker with loggers who want to see the last tree felled, and he has hugged trees with environmentalists who want zero cutting. He knows that a war between tree huggers and tree cutters serves no purpose. He estimates it will take a trillion trees to restore the forests, and he admonishes us, “If we are going to continue to cut, we need to catch up. On God’s green earth, only a human can plant a tree.”

STUBBORN LUMBER

Can there be emptiness without awareness?

Imagine a tree falling and no one hearing it.
Imagine, also, its twisted limbs.

The trees arrange themselves—I don't
have anything to do with this.

Sun and moon, day and night,
the trees follow me.

Imagine them growing.
Imagine no one hearing them.

If you open the door to knowledge—remember, the peanut butter is
on the shelf in the door.

TIMBERLINES

Should Anarchists have
Forest Service contracts?
Only if they can sign their names.

Davy signs *Galloping Antelope*,
Galactic Emperor, *Son of Earthworm*.

This contract is 67 acres,
a diamond on Big Hill.
We awake at 6, bag up at 7,
climb a mountain of burns & bramble.

Green fire—the image leaps out
as the ashes choke us. Who are

Don't plant too deep
No J roots
I only want to see asses and elbows

we plant ahead of progress rates
into full pay with laurels

we're paid to plant a tree,
and we'll come back
and back again until it grows

the trees—
out of their depth
with this logic,
driven around in vans,
debated about like dots on a map

Go Fir It Reforestation
in the Land of Many Abuses

we're trying to plant in a week
what destroyed in a day
took 1000 years to grow

GREEN FIRE

Green fire is the future.
The spike brambles and the mountain
of burns recede, and an oasis of trees
arises from the ashes.

There's no way into the future
but flight—take off
from the tallest Doug Fir
and spread your tail feathers.

Take a turn and look

at the next century—hope
for the next century—turn again.
Can this be easily managed?

BELIEVE ME, LAURA

while listening to children
singing and swinging in a tree, I think
a good treeplanter
can be comfortable even in Hell.

HEART'S TIMBER

I see you in profile in this moonlit rock
at the edge of the cut bank near Ardenvoir.
Lady of My Thoughts, honor and praise,
your image powers my work.

A dead forest is a strange place
to be in evening dress—beautiful
intensities—the field vibrating
with the spirits of young trees.

Two year old Ponderosa pine,
2-0's, there're trying, but it's hard.
Underground, the work gets done,
a whispered *OM* to go on.

WHERE ON THE PAPER CHAIN ARE YOU?

Flaky footing on the high unit
wind cold, cold snow at 4000 feet a bitch
but it packs well around the pine plugs
above Indian Creek in the rocky outcroppings
not a forest, a farm, slash and burn, a war

We're riding in a crummy
an orange International van beat to shit
the bad karma tipi that takes us to work
we've named it *L.A.*
so we can drive to work in L.A.

I want my forest cut into chips
so my grandchildren can have toilet paper

On the other hand, we need air
and the mountains need cover
and the animals need homes
no matter if they're in rows

Breathe into the pain
or step out of the way

WHEN YOU GET THERE

Tree planting on Mount Baker
this contract is 180 acres
long with diamond shapes
known as *Dragon Tail*

I fly high, I fly low
at Concrete Sauk Valley Road
one mile to orange bridge

turn left follow river
to Finney Cumberland Road
turn right single lane with turnouts
6 miles tall tree on left
with winding road sign
8 miles bridge with guard rails
9 miles small clearcut with twisted culverts
10 miles waterfall on right
mile 11 turn right up hill at white stop sign

When I arrive, I'm no longer lost
what I've lost I find everywhere

PLANTING THE BLAST

On the moonscape
of Mount Saint Helens
I've developed a new technique
I call the *pumice pump*

Place the tree roots on the ash
place the hoe on the roots
and push the roots straight down

Speed planting the last ash unit
trying to get the trees in straight
over-planting every plot
and praying the roots
find something to live on

Some trees I named for Bongnan
some for Lulu
some for the protectors
of this silicon mountain

Putting the right tree in the right hole
while picking rocks out of my nose
made of snot and volcanic ash

The inspector turns up
“Stop, stop, don’t throw those rocks
down the slope, you’re hurting the trees.”

Fantasy of tying the inspector
to the hood of the van
as a trophy

Lost in a pause
where should I be on the unit?
I should be on the line—
always a mystery

Outside the orbit of stars
lost and found inside
myself
creation arises and dis-
solves
in
a magical display

On to the next unit

PLANTING THE BLAST

Theodore Dylan Denner was a more reasonable name to give to a boy than Allen Ginsberg Denner. Hippies bestowed weird names. Cheri and I decided on *Theo* because we had an attachment to the name of the trawler that carried cargo between Ketchikan and Matanuska Island in Alaska.

Our experience with the trawler began after Cheri had gotten off work as a barmaid at the Frontier Bar. We walked down to the pier and cuddled on the deck of the *Theo* and drank from a bottle of wine. Then, we made love under

the stars. The waves lapped the hull. The deck smelled of fish. It was heaven.

Cheri had a great uncle named Theo. Theodore Palm was a poet in Stockholm, and there was a family legend that he walked off the end of a pier into the bay because he was engrossed in his reading of Shakespeare. He was the brother of August Palm, a revolutionary, who brought Socialism to Sweden in the 1880s.

Theodore in Greek means *Gift of God*. It is also composed of the article *the* and an *o*—The O—has a Zen “ring” to it. Dylan is, of course, the last name of the folksinger, Bob Dylan, as well as the first name of the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, whose name Bob expropriated. *Dylan* is Welsh for devil. A Gift of God Devil—Theodore Dylan is a mixture of light and darkness.

Today, Theo operates the Fourwinds Bookstore and Café in Ellensburg, Washington, which I sold to him before I left for Tara Mandala Retreat Center in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. Theo is a hardworking businessman and husband and father of four. He is respected in his community, but there was a time when he was the “terror of the town.”

One night, Theo showed up and asked if he could borrow some money. Said he had to leave town in a hurry. I didn’t ask why. Whereas my dad always came to my aid out of a sense of duty, I often helped my son out of a sense of guilt. My dad did not understand my behavior, but he felt a responsibility towards me. Theo was like me, and I could see he was having the same problems with the Law.

I was in the mood for an adventure, and I asked Theo if he would like some company—a father and son on the lam is the image I had. We took the orange *International* van I had been awarded in my divorce settlement with Alia. This vehicle is what the treeplanters call a “Crummy.” It had a strong engine and lots of room. I had lived in it and hauled crews of treeplanters around logging roads. It would get us to California.

We threw some belongings in the back and crept out of town, as the rosy finger of dawn tickled the sleeping town awake. Theo’s plan was to start a new life on the mean streets of an Oakland crack neighborhood. I expected he had a romantic notion of being a big-time dope dealer. I was raised in Oakland. I graduated from Oakland High School. Hell’s Angels, Black Panthers, the Raiders—a tough town. Berkeley was more my style, but I was just along for the ride.

I hoped Theo would see the light of reason once we arrived at our destination, but for the time being, I would smooth the way with the food and gas money. When we hit a pit stop, I phoned a friend to run my bookstore until I returned.

On this occasion, I didn’t stop to visit my folks in Santa Rosa. We drove

straight to Berkeley and hooked up with my old friend and mentor, Luis Garcia. Lu said he had a friend in Oakland who had a painting studio in the kind of neighborhood Theo was looking for. Eric's studio was in West Oakland, and when we got there, there was a full-scale gun battle in progress between the Oakland Police and an army of crack dealers. Welcome to the neighborhood.

Eric let us into his studio. His windows were barred and his door was an assemblage of locks and chains. We hung out for the day, and Eric showed us his paintings. We smoked some pot and drank a little wine, while the gun battle raged outside.

The wisdom of older heads prevailed, and Theo realized that in comparison to this ring of the Inferno, Ellensburg was not such a bad place to live, even if he needed to cool his heels for a while. When, the gunfire subsided, Theo and I pulled out of the war zone and pointed the *International* north.

We stopped to sleep in the back of the van at a rest stop, but a sheriff roused us and sent us on our way. Our plan was to join T.G.T.B.T. on the slopes of Mt. Saint Helens. We knew they were on the backside of the mountain pumping plugs into the volcanic ash.

Outside Roseburg, Oregon, the engine developed an ominous noise. I'm not sure how long the engine had been low on oil, but the dash light was flashing, and the rods began a persistent knock. Maybe I was tired of a truck that reminded me of my ex-wife. Maybe I was just tired.

Theo asked what the noise was, and I told him it was the sound of the engine about to blow. He asked if we should stop, but I told him I wanted him to have the experience of driving the truck into oblivion, to hear what it sounded like when a piston cracked the engine block. We drove with the banging and clanging getting louder. When the engine gave out, we coasted to a halt along the side of the road. It was a foggy night, and we were both exhausted. I gave Theo a blanket, and he curled up on the front seat, and I curled up with a blanket in the back.

We tried to sleep, but the passing trucks rocked us awake, and we dozed fitfully. When it became light, I sat up and looked out the window. There was a dense Oregon fog surrounding us. A few feet ahead, a road sign: Seattle, 262 miles, Curtins, 2 miles. Theo looked at me and said, "Well, it looks like Curtins for us."

It didn't take long to hitch a ride. We landed at a gas station and explained our situation to the attendant. He directed us to a garage mechanic who had a tow truck. When he got the *International* into his shop, the diagnosis was that the engine was totaled.

There was a Greyhound Bus Terminal down the road, but the last

northbound bus for the day had left. I saw a *For Sale* sign in the window of a battered *Fiat* by the side of the garage. The mechanic said he would take \$300 and the remains of my truck. We shook hands, exchanged pink slips, and we were on the road, again, headed toward Mt. Saint Helens.

Mt. Saint Helens erupted on May 18, 1980. The eruption sent a half-million tons of ash into the stratosphere, ash that was measured 900 miles to the east and 100 north in Ellensburg. That morning, I looked out the window and wondered why there was a sunrise in the south. Alia and I drove out into the country to get a better look at a very dark cloud advancing over Umptanum Ridge. The air was filled with electricity, and the cloud began to move with creeping fingers around the perimeter of the valley. Lightning bolts struck the ridgeline. Then, the ash began to drop, and it had the stink of sulfur.

We stopped at a friend's farmhouse. No one was home, so I helped myself to some water to wash off the windshield. When the water hit the windshield it caked into a sort of plaster, and that is when I really started to worry. A pickup passed, and ash billowed into the air. Thus far, there was only a film of dust on the car, but I had read that in Pompeii it got several feet deep. We drove on back roads to Ellensburg. I could barely see my hood ornament, let alone see if a car was coming. I did see a Highway Patrol car with lights flashing and siren blaring go by with a hose poked out from under the hood. When we reached town, the ash cloud thinned, and we crossed the avenue, parked and dashed inside our house.

Later, I walked across the street to a supermarket to get some supplies. It was quite a scene. People in different outfits—a man with a towel over his head, wearing swimming goggles with a case of beer, another man with a surgical mask carried an umbrella, a woman in a burnoose had a bundle which I assumed was a child.

We listened to a recording of Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* and let the pyroclastic debris settle on our town. The next morning, there was a gray pallor to everything, and we decided to flee the Burg. We got in the *International* and headed to Cle Elum to plant trees. When we were out of town and on the highway north, we looked back and saw a gray blanket where normally we would be able to see the fields and roads of Kittitas Valley.

So now, Theo and I were planting the backside of the volcano, where a forest had been cremated by hot gases. The trees were blown over and burnt to a crisp. There was two feet of volcanic pumice on the ground, and the landscape was a barren moonscape. An occasional wildflower was the flora; a single spider represented the fauna.

We joined the crew outside the village of Cougar and set up our tents at a Forest Service campground. Theo appointed himself cook. He got up early

and prepared a four-star breakfast with a side of *Jack Daniels*. Then, we fishtailed our way up the winding logging roads with AC/DC blasting from the car speakers.

Planting the blast, I developed a new planting technique I called the “pumice pump.” I placed the tree roots on the ash, placed the hoedag on the roots, and pushed the roots straight down, sinking the tree past the collar into the needles. After I removed my hoe, I pulled the tree up slightly to straighten the root ends. A hole dug in the ash filled up as fast as you dug it, so this method allowed us to put the trees into the ground with minimal damage to the tree and still pass inspection.

We were in camp when some people from Arkansas arrived. They said they were looking for a Mexican crew. There might have been a Mexican crew on the mountain, but I didn’t know where. We needed help, so they were hired. Two men, two women, a baby, and a pit bull. They were driving a black *Pontiac* fastback. It was obvious that they are newbies because they didn’t have the right gear.

To get them started they were given an advance against their wages. They drove to Cougar and returned with a tent, raingear, and a *Coleman* stove and lantern. I had a frustrating day training these guys. At one point, I was so deranged from showing them how to follow the line, that I climbed up on a stump and shouted that if they didn’t get it right, I would shove a hoedag up my ass.

Returning to camp, we passed through Cougar and spotted their *Pontiac* sitting by the road with the hood up. We stopped and were surprised to find the had engine burned. When we got back to camp, the women told us they had driven to town to get some diapers, and as they were pulling into the gas station, the car burst into flames. Apparently, one of the guys had unscrewed the gas line to drain some gas to prime a campfire, and he reattached the line insecurely. Gas had poured over the engine and caught fire, and the fire had burned up the wiring and melted everything that was made of plastic.

The next morning, Theo told me that both women had black eyes. Later, he found that his tape collection and a carton of cigarettes were missing. He had noticed several packs of his brand on the dashboard of their burned car, and he insisted something be done about this scene.

Doug and Don, the bosses, decided to cut their losses and let these guys go. However, without a car, it didn’t seem they could go far. I decided I’d sell the *Fiat*, cheap. They had a couple of hundred dollars in wages coming, after deducting their draws, and I took \$150 and a *Coleman* lantern for the car, considering it a good deal to get away from these walking soap operas.

The *Fiat* had been trouble from the start. The brake lights would go on when

you put on the blinkers, and the headlights blinked when you put on the brakes. This was ok in the daytime, but I didn't want to try driving at night. And then, there was the problem of the tires.

The roads around Mt. Saint Helens were covered with glass-like shards of volcanic rock. On one occasion, I had two flat tires at the same time. I had planted to the top of the unit and driven one of the cars to bottom, about three miles, and by the time I had gotten the *Fiat* in position to pick up some of the crew, I had a flat tire and no spare. I climbed back up the mountain and took a set of keys from a planter for his car and drove it down the mountain to find I had two flat tires and no spare. Fortunately, the tires on the *Fiat* fit the wheels of the second car, so I changed the flats, took a second tire for a spare, and all six planters piled into the *Fiat* to ride to camp.

One of the men fixed the *Fiat's* wiring. They loaded some gear on the roof and tied the rest to the top of the trunk. They fit the women, the baby and the pit bull into the cramped interior and drove away. They drove around the campground with the pit bull's head sticking out the window and both the guys flipping us the bird. Actually, their exit was really upbeat. We were glad they were going, and they were leaving in a clown car with a fine display of sentiment.

Next—what to do for transportation?