



*Treeplanting with Jampa
Bouvard Pécuchet*



TREEPLANTING
with Jampa

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Homage to John Muir

Photos courtesy of Louaine Magnuson

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When, hereabouts, a single forest tree or a forest springs up naturally, where none of its kind grew before, I do not hesitate to say, though in some quarters still it seems paradoxical, that it came from a seed.

—Henry David Thoreau
"The Succession of Forest Trees"

The above statement is true enough, when we refer to Mother Nature—the wind, birds and other animals doing her handiwork. Today's forests still start from seeds, but much of the forest is planted with seedlings, grown by arborists. The vast forests on this continent have been diminished, since the time of the early settlers, and reforestation is accomplished on government and private lands by crews of treeplanters working for a wage.

In Vilhelm Moberg's *The Emigrants*, the reader cannot help but be impressed by how intimidating the darkness and denseness of the forest was to a farmer, new to this country, who was homesteading in Minnesota, in the mid-19th century. Letting in light by felling trees was essential for survival.



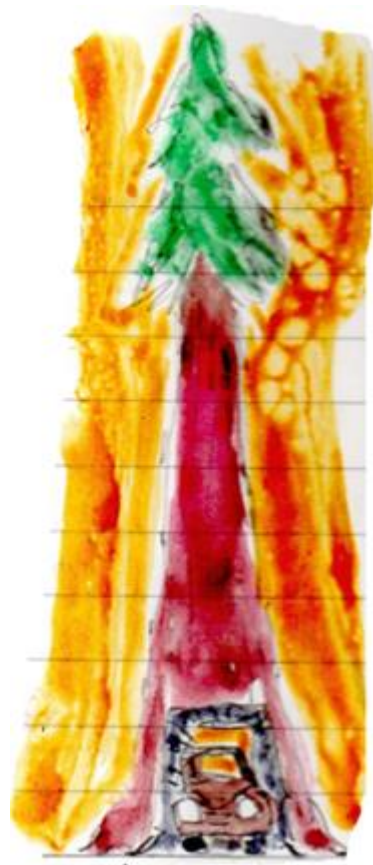
With the expansion of the settlements westward came the demand for more lumber. Railroads and mining operations require timber for their construction. Tracts of land replete with mature stands of timber were ceded to railroad companies to entice them to build. With the rails came trains with passengers who built homes. The “balloon-frame” house, so impervious to strong winds and earthquakes, is still the standard building structure of wooden homes today.

The forests once seemed infinite. The lumberjack—Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe—is the stuff of legends. His counterpart, John Chapman (1774-1845), better known as “Johnny Appleseed,” was a real-life nurseryman. By the end of the 19th century, naturalists, like John Muir (1838-1914), were becoming alarmed at the depletion of our natural resources and the degradation of the physical environment. (Check out the August, 1897, issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*.) Streams polluted, soil eroded, animal habitats disrupted. Earth’s household in disarray—not a pretty picture. During Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency (1901-09), lands were kept from commercial exploitation as National Parks, mainly for their scenic beauty. More forest lands were added on and conservation measures were enacted.

Now, the U.S. Forest Service is both a park service and an agribusiness. Trees are a crop,—so, it’s easy to be of two minds, when you plant trees for a living. A tree farm is not the same as a primeval forest. There are no straight lines in nature, and rows of trees create a different esthetic experience. A forest service contract spells out the exact spacing for the trees to be planted.

The Bodhi Tree beneath which Shakyamuni was enlightened and the English Oaks that the Druids worshiped (*Quercus robur*) are considered sacred trees. The groves enhanced the Druid’s power, or Julius Cæsar would not have ordered them to be cut down.

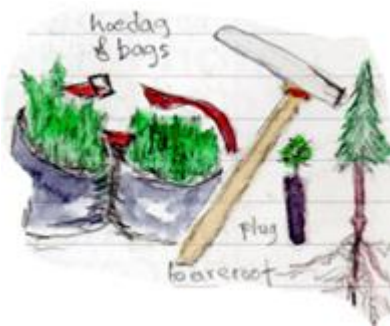
There are only a few groves of old-growth Redwoods still standing, and these are continually threatened, unless they are included inside a national monument. Even then, it is uncertain what one administration or the next will consider to be best for the public and whether trees should “have legal standing.” Mitt Romney, former Governor of Massachusetts, said that he did not understand the reason for having public lands. President Regan once said, “If you’ve seen one redwood tree, you’ve seen them all.” Meanwhile, Julia Butterfly Hill lived in a 180-foot-tall, roughly 1500-year-old redwood tree, known as Luna, for 738 days between December 10, 1997



and December 18, 1999, in order to prevent Pacific Lumber Co. loggers from whacking it down in their usual clear-cutting onslaught.

I can't stay objective;—I do not have Jampa's equanimity. I know how sensitive he is to this issue. He has lived in the woods and worked as both as a lumberjack and as a treeplanter,—and he has used forest products as a builder and a bookseller. Two of his books, *Timberlines* (D Press, 2004) and *Treeplanting in Tibet* (Kapala Press, 2007) reveal his thoughts, his feelings, and his wonder about these things we call trees.

If you have worked on a crew planting trees in the woods for corporations,—like Weyerhaeuser, Georgia Pacific, and Boise Cascade,—or for the U.S. Forest Service,—it's easy to become jaded about restoring the forest. You get an emotional dialectic going that manifests as a shift from the futility of the situation towards optimism in the endeavor;—a despondency leavened with humor noir.

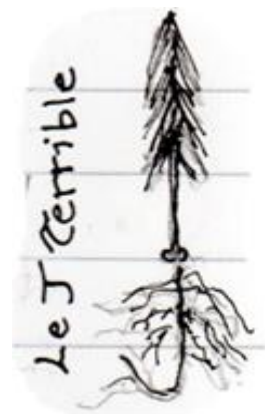


“It’s a mess” is an expression that treeplanters use to describe their first impression of a clear cut they are about to plant. An expanse of land that loggers have cleared of marketable trees, usually bounded by standing trees, the Forest Service designates a “unit,” and the unit will be covered with the debris from the logging,—limbs of trees and brush, called “slash.” The slash has, sometimes been burned in piles, but most often it is left on the ground where it fell or was pushed, and the

treeplanter must find a suitable place to plant the seedlings amid the slash piles:—a mess!

The ground being planted is going to be irregular in the mountains. Some units will have more slash than others, some more rocks. Where old trees have decayed on the ground, there will be a surface of duff that must be removed, if it is not too thick and matted, to find the plantable soil. In the higher altitudes, in spring, there may still be snow on the ground, or snow may begin to fall and cover the ground. Then, the unit will be declared to be “unusable” for planting.

The Forest Service inspects the unit for proper planting. Their trees should not be planted in duff or in shallow rocky soil; they must not be planted too high or too low but just with the root collar exposed; the ground around the planted tree must be cleared of grass (“scalping”); and above all—above all—NO J ROOTS! The bugaboo of bugaboos is a tree that has been planted in a shallow hole and whose tap root is turned upward.



Jampa remembers Dragon Tail, a unit on Mount Baker;—the units often have names, as well as numbers;— it was at the end of the contract, and there had been difficulties:—hard, clay soil to plant, too many inexperienced planters on the crew, and an inspector that went strictly by the book. All very frustrating,—and always a mystery. There is an “inspector” and a “plot,” and the inspector walks across the planted ground and throws his stick with a hook at the top to a



random spot. Then, he attaches his tape measure to the hook on the stick that he has stood upright and checks to see if there are the required number of trees planted within a given circumference. The number will vary according to the spacing specified in the contract (i.e. 10'x10') after taking into account unplantable spots and any good spots that were overlooked. Very tricky business and open to contention by both parties at work,—because there is money at stake, and if the “scores” fall, morale falls.

Returning to Dragon Tail. The unit was long and narrow, as the name suggests, and the line of planters extended nearly from border to

border with the faster planters in the lead, the less experienced planters following, trying to keep to the line, and a couple of hardened veterans at the rear pushing the stragglers, checking for gaps and filling-in. The veteran planters at the rear tied the line to the opposite border, planting zig-zag style. From a vantage point, at the rear, Jampa saw the line break, as an inexperienced planter went around a stump, and a wedge of unplanted space develop. He crossed planted ground to fill this space, and his movement drew the attention of the inspector, who made his next plot in the area Jampa had filled.

It is a strategy of inspectors to keep a crew at the 80% mark, if the quality of planting seems irregular to them. On Dragon Tail this was the case, and as the crew was close to finishing the unit, the crew's leader, Doug Mitchell, was concerned about the results of what might be the final plot. He hovered over the inspector as he dug up one tree to check for a J root. “Excavate” would be a more accurate term, like in archeology, the meticulous removal of dirt to expose the position of the roots.

The lateral roots are not really of concern, as long as they do not show signs of being brutally trimmed or ripped. It is the tap root that needs to be set in the soil with the tip going downward. (There are debates, but the accepted wisdom is that it requires more energy than the tree has to expend to right itself, if it has been J-ed.) Seconds ticked by, as the inspector flicked particles of dirt away, trying not to disturb the configuration of the roots. It was looking good, but Doug, unable to stand the suspense, tugged the tree free, and gave the inspector an intimidating look,

which implied, “If you contest this, we’ll mount your head on the hood of our *crummy*.” [NB: A beat-up car or van—Jampa’s crew named their orange Chevy crummy “L.A.,” so they could drive to work in L.A.]

Wenatchee National Forest, nearly two million acres along the eastern slopes of the Cascade Range, is advertised as “The Land of Many Uses” by the Forest Service, but the treeplanters have renamed it “The Land of Many Abuses.” In spite of their view, they work;—they bitch, but they work. Trees of different species are planted:— Douglas Fir, Ponderosa Pine, Cedar, and Western Larch (sometimes mistaken for Tamarack) are the most common,—Doug Fir being the mainstay. The trees are either “bare root” or “plugs.” Bare root trees are started indoors and then planted outdoors for a year or two (and designated 1-0s or 2-0s) to make them hardy. Pines are delicate and are started in tubes with a mixture of soil and a substance called Vermiculite that retains moisture. These plugs are removed from their tubes and are bagged in bundles with the soil still clinging to the roots. The survival rate for plugs is high, and they may be reserved for difficult terrain.

Jampa planted trees over a span of fifteen years, 1980-94, and he saw changes in arboriculture— in the raising of trees and in the planting methods. When he began, the survival rate of newly planted trees was 50% after a year, and when he retired, perhaps 80%, given optimum conditions. Optimum conditions include no pests, varmints or deer feeding on the trees,—good soil, moisture and sunlight,—and the willingness of the local protectors (*Dharmapalas*) to accept the offering. As to this last condition, Jampa feels it is wise to consider the spiritual dimension, as well as the scientific and financial aspects, if treeplanting is to be considered right livelihood.

When Jampa read *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves, he was fascinated by the Celtic poem, “The Battle of the Trees,” that revealed how integral trees were to Druid culture, each tree having a use as well as a place in their calendar of events. It was Ron Males who taught Jampa how to plant. Ron transmitted the things that treeplanters need to know, but he added a pith instruction which was not a standard practice. He transmitted Chenrezig’s mantra and instructed Jampa to chant as he planted every tree. Ron is Jampa’s “root” teacher when it comes to treeplanting, and Jampa kept his samaya. Over the years, Jampa estimates he planted a quarter of a million trees, while reciting OM MANI PADME HUM.

Planting trees in the woods sounds romantic;—instead, it is backbreaking work and rugged, camping and moving camp, going weeks without a bath, eating out of cans, planting in the rain, being cold and miserable, until you come through the misery with your comrades into sunshine. Still, there can be a romantic element;—on a crew with both sexes, the gods will play. Orpheus plays his lyre making the trees dance, and Cupid makes them do the shimmy-shimmy.



Jampa had his flirtations, his flings, and his follies;—like tall, redheaded Linda, having had enough of treeplanting (and of Jampa), catching a ride back to town with Lu Garcia and his film director friend, who showed up on a clearcut one day to visit and check out the scene. The film director thought it would make a perfect theme and location for one of her porno flicks. The titles started to emerge: *Planting It in the Bush*, *The Virgin and the J Root*, *Doing It in the Duff*, *Hot Hodags Go Fir It*. Linda fled to town before it really did get down to nothing but *asses and elbows*. [NB: An expression admonishing planters to bend over and plant trees,—coming from the boss, who yells at his crew, “I only want to see asses and elbows.”]

When the weather was warm, and they were comfortable with the men on the crew, the women might plant bare-breasted. Once, in the Entiat Valley, on two consecutive days, two jet fighters flew low beneath the ridgeline with a deafening roar and tipped their wings, so the pilots could get a better view. The whole crew was taken by surprise the first day, but on the second day, the women straightened up and jiggled their boobs in salute.



Timberline was Ron Male’s Co-op. It was Ron Male’s Co-op because he had his name on the contract. Co-ops are not legal business entities in Washington; sole proprietorships and limited partnerships are the only options for small enterprises. On one unit, when a treeplanter failed to properly put out a cigarette and the woods caught fire, Ron was billed \$50,000,—thus, ending Timberline as a business entity.

Timberline reformed (sans Ron Males) as Eastern Washington Reforestation. The name Eastern Washington Reforestation is a misnomer, because there is only a tad of forest in Eastern Washington. Most of it is desert and farmland. Outwardly, it was a limited partnership and required someone to sign the contracts. This responsibility was rotated because it made those individuals legally obligated. Davy Simpkins, a legendary figure in treeplanting circles, when it was his turn, signed “Galloping Antelope” or “Galactic Emperor” in his scrawl. When the Co-op dissolved, in 1988, remnants of the group joined Don Shroder and Doug Mitchel’s crew, T.G.T.B.T. The initials stand for Too Good To Be True. It was with T.G.T.B.T. that Jampa thinned the trees he had planted fourteen years earlier in Silver Basin,—a unit three miles up from the Entiat River.

Silver Basin is an area of approximately 600 acres in the shape of a basin, or a bomb crater, as some refer to it. There had been a fire that burned with such intensity all the trees were incinerated, leaving a few inches of ash that covered a deep deposit of soft soil with a strata of silver-colored volcanic ash residue that had drifted there in the remote past from an eruption of Mt. Saint Helens. It was ideal ground, and Eastern Washington Reforestation planted it all.

The trees had survived and had grown to be fourteen feet high and were densely packed, needing to be thinned for maximum growth by Forest Service standards. The trees had originally been

planted with 8'x8' spacing;—now, more “breathing room” was required to let in sunlight. A tree of good standing was chosen, and Jampa would then fell eight healthy trees around it with a chainsaw.

The felled trees were left where they lay, because the basin was without roads, except at a single location on the rim where the crew camped. The slash posed a fire hazard, and one year after completion of the thinning, Silver Basin again burned. Doug said he was going to drive up and look at the devastation and asked Jampa if he would like to ride along. Jampa declined the offer, saying, “I remember what it looked like the first time, when I planted it.” Mother Nature is the definitive schoolmarm of impermanence.



PLANTING THE BLAST:—Mount Saint Helens. On the morning of May 18, 1980, there was a forest on the mountain, and later that day there was an ash heap. Here is Jampa:

On the moonscape of Mt. Saint Helens—a new technique, the pumice pump—place the tree roots in the ash—place the hoe on the roots & push straight down—speed planting this ash unit—trying to get the roots in deep—over-planting every plot & praying the roots find something to live on—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 & found inside myself—Creation arises & dissolves in a magical display

Besides arriving at transcendental levels of consciousness, while planting trees on an active volcano, Jampa had his hands full supervising a couple of newbees. Jampa and his son, Theo, had arrived at camp, near the village of Cougar, in a dilapidated Renault. They had driven to California, in a GMC van, and on the return trip the van had run low on oil, north of Roseburg, Oregon. Theo was driving, and they heard a clackity engine noise and saw the oil light come on,—but, perversely, Jampa said to keep driving. The van had belonged to Jampa's ex;—it was his from the divorce;—and he was done with it. They slept along the side of the road, and in the morning the two of them hiked to the town of Curtains. It was "curtains" for the van, but the tow truck driver, who ran a repair shop, traded them the Renault straight across for their old crummy.

The roads in the forest were covered with volcanic debris from the blast. On one of his trips up the mountain, Jampa had two tires go flat at once and had to climb a mile up the face of a steep unit to get a set of keys for another car to bring his passengers to the worksite, and when he got back to the Renault, the car he was driving had a flat and no spare. The tires of the two cars were incompatible, so he had to climb the mountain again to get a third car.

The newbees had a car, a Pontiac fastback, but they left it with their wives, who stayed in camp. The two women drove into Cougar to buy some diapers and some dog food. The night before, one of the men had unscrewed the gas line from the carburetor to get gas to start a campfire and had not tightened the nut when he replaced the line. When the women pulled up to the general store, the engine burst into flames, caught the interior on fire, and destroyed their car. The car was still smoldering when the crew drove past on the way home from work. The husbands were not pleased, and come the next morning, both women had black eyes. Theo claimed they had stolen from him after he found the remains of some music tapes and a burnt carton of cigarettes, that he claimed were his, melted on the dashboard.

Jampa had enough of these guys, as well. They claimed they had planted trees before, but Jampa could see that this was untrue. This was one of those times, when he had to explain, "The green end goes up." At one point, he had gotten so flustered with the way these two were planting that he climbed up on a stump and, waving his hoedag in the air, shouted, "If you don't figure out how to plant trees pretty quick, I'm going to shove this hoedag up my ass," prompting Davy Simpkins to fall over, laughing.

Doug was not laughing;—he was mad,—and he fired them. The only problem was that they did not have transportation out of camp. Jampa said he would sell them the Renault, cheap. For some cash and a Coleman lantern, it was theirs. They got the screwy wiring fixed, so that the headlights did not go out when you put on the brakes; they loaded their gear, their wives, a baby and a pit bull into this tiny car,—and then they drove around the campsite giving everyone the middle finger with big smiles on their faces. They were gone in a cloud of ash.

Let me conclude with another Jampa poem:—

WHERE ARE YOU ON THE PAPER CHAIN?

Flakey footing on the high unit
Wind cold, cold snow at 4000 feet, numb fingers
But the snow packs well around the pine plugs
Above Indian Creek in rocky outcrops
Not a forest, a farm, slash & burn, a war

I want my forest cut into chips
So my grandchildren will have toilet paper

On the other hand, we need oxygen
And the mountains need cover
And the critters need homes
No matter they're in rows

Breathe into the pain
Or get out of the way

