

Timber Wars

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The Secret History of Tree-Spiking—Part 1

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In May 1987, millworker George Alexander was nearly decapitated when a spike shattered his sawblade at the Cloverdale L-P mill. This grisly accident sent shock-waves through our community, and eventually led Northern California Earth First! to renounce tree-spiking. Southern Oregon EF! joined us, but that's all. The rest of Earth First! still endorses spiking, and many of them reacted to our no-spiking policy by denouncing us as traitors or dismissing us as wimps, without ever examining the reasons for our actions. Because of this, and because some of the new activists in our area have been talking about tree-spiking as if it may be a viable tactic, I think it's time to re-examine the issue. Recently, George Alexander and his wife, Laurie, agreed to talk about the 1987 tree-spiking. The following account of the incident is based on my conversations with them.

"I was the perfect victim," began George Alexander. "I was nobody." George, a lifetime Mendocino County resident and son of an old-time Willits logger, was 23 and just married, with his wife Laurie three-months pregnant at the time of the accident. George's job at the mill was called off-bearer. The off-bearer operates a huge band saw that makes the first rough-cut on the logs as they come into the mill, sectioning off slices of wood that will later be cut to stan-

dard lengths and planed for finished lumber.

Off-bearer is one of the most dangerous jobs in the mill. The saw that George Alexander worked on was sized for old-growth logs—52 feet around, with a 10-inch blade of high-tensile steel. "That saw was so powerful that when you turned it off you could make three more cuts through a 20-foot log before the saw stopped," George told me. One of the dangers of working as off-bearer is that, if the blade hits a hard knot or metal debris (from old fences, choker chains, nails, etc., embedded in the wood) the sawteeth can break off and can go flying. If it's bad enough, the sawblade can break. To protect against this, workers have to wear a heavy face mask and stay on the alert, checking each log as it goes through.

George knew the job was dangerous, but he was also confident of his skill. "I always figured that if that blade ever hit me, it would hit me on the run," he said. He knew every sound the saw made, and could tell by listening when something was going wrong. He also knew to look for the tell-tale black stains that usually show up on the smooth surface of the debarked logs if metal is present in the wood.

Although George Alexander was an L-P employee, he was no company man. L-P management had earned his disrespect long ago through the callous way it treats its employees. "We're not even people to them," he said. "All they care about is production." The perfect example of this L-P management attitude was Dick Edwards, the day-shift foreman. Edwards was always after everyone, but he seemed to go out of his way to harass George. In the months before the tree-spiking, Edwards would often stand on the cat-walk overlooking George's work station with L-P Western

Division head Joe Wheeler, just watching George work.

L-P has never been known to spend too much time maintaining equipment or worrying about worker safety. But in the weeks preceding the tree-spiking incident, conditions had gotten even worse than usual. Cracks had begun appearing in the band saw blade, and the blade was wobbling when it ran. But when George and other workers complained, foreman Dick Edwards shined them on, saying the new blades were not in yet, and they would have to make do. "That blade was getting so bad," said George, "that I almost didn't go to work that day."

Normally when a big tree is sawed, they start from the outside and square off the edges first. But the tree that George was sawing on May 8, 1987, was a 12-inch pecker pole, and because it was so small he took the first cut down the middle. Halfway through the 20-foot log, the saw hit a 60-penny nail. "That nail must have been recently placed and counter-sunk," George told me. He had checked the log when he started cutting it and had seen no sign of the metal. And, because the saw hit the nail square-on, there was also no warning sound. "Usually there's a high-pitched metal sound and you have time to get out of the way," explained George. "This time I didn't hear nothing but 'Boom!'"

The next thing he knew, George was lying on the floor covered with his own blood. "I knew I was dying. And all I could think about was Dick Edwards, and all the shit he gave me when I complained about the saw. I tried to get up but they pushed me back down. I tried to beckon to Edwards so he would come close enough for me to get my hands around his throat in a death grip. If I had to

die, I wanted to take that bastard with me."

A 12-foot section of the huge sawblade had broken off and hit George in the throat and face, ripping through his face mask and cutting into his jugular vein. His jaw was broken in five places and a dozen teeth were knocked out. The blade was wrapped around him, and his co-workers had to blowtorch it off while they tried to keep him from bleeding to death. "The saw hit me flat," said George. "If it had hit me with the teeth I'd be dead. I'm only here because my friend Rick Phillips held my veins together in the hour before the ambulance came."

L-P didn't call the press right away, but when they did they had a field day. "Tree Spiking Terrorism," screamed the headline in the Press-Democrat, while the Eureka Times-Standard proclaimed, "Earth First! Blamed For Workers' Injuries." Mendocino County's Sheriff Shea put out a widely quoted press release that was almost gleeful in its condemnation. "This heinous and vicious criminal act is a felony offense, punishable by imprisonment in State Prison for up to three years," he wrote. "Still undetermined in the investigation is the motive of the suspect or suspects, to deter logging and milling operations or inflict great bodily injury and death upon lumber processing personnel." Even L-P President Harry Merlo got into the fray, blaming "terrorism in the name of environmental goals" for George's injury.

Meanwhile, George and Laurie Alexander had a different take on the incident. "I'm against tree-spiking," said George from his hospital bed, "but I don't like clear-cutting either." Laurie also tried to include L-P in the list of culprits. "I hate L-P," she told me. "I

like trees.” But the press wouldn’t print a word that Laurie said, and George’s comments about mill safety and clearcutting were mentioned in only one news article, by Eric Brazil of the *San Francisco Examiner*.

Earth First! was much less generous in its reaction, displaying practically no sympathy for this innocent man who had just been through such a terrifying ordeal caused by a spiked tree. And after advocating the tactic for years, even putting out a manual on how to do it, when the shit came down EF! tried to disassociate. “This is probably the first time we’ve made international news, and we weren’t even involved in it,” was EF! co-founder Mike Roselle’s flippant statement to the press. “This raises the whole question of violence. Not just tree-spiking, the violence of cutting down ancient forests.” Dave Foreman was even less concerned about George Alexander. “I think it’s unfortunate that somebody got hurt, but you know I quite honestly am more concerned about old-growth forests, spotted owls and wolverines and salmon—and nobody is forcing people to cut those trees.”

This moral arrogance didn’t win Earth First! many supporters in our area. But did EF! spike that tree? The answer is probably no. Back in 1987 EF! was just getting started in Mendocino County, and the only issue at the time was old-growth. There was no consciousness yet about baby tree-logging, and the spiked tree was only 12-inches in diameter. There were also other signs that this may have been the work of a disturbed individual instead of an organized group. L-P traced the spiked tree to a cut on Cameron Ridge Road near Elk, where neighbors had been complaining about L-P liquidating the for-

est and threatening their water supply. One of the local residents was a strange man who drifted in and out of the area and mostly kept to himself. He was described by neighbors as a survivalist. Before the tree-spiking incident, loggers reported finding mutilated animals around the sight—a beheaded deer hanging from a tree, a skinned dog draped over a bulldozer—hardly Earth First! tactics, to say the least. But if this was the work of a lone crazy person, that still begs the question of where he even got the idea of spiking trees. The answer is probably Dave Foreman’s book, *Eco-Defense*.

There is also reason to believe that the tree was not spiked at Cameron Road at all, but rather was hit while lying on a log deck after it was cut. The saw hit the spike about nine feet up the tree. If you figure a foot for the stump, that means it would have to have been spiked 10 feet off the ground. Bruce Anderson described the technique like this in the May 27, 1987 *Anderson Valley Advertiser*: “One average-sized person teams up with a midget. The midget gets up on the shoulders of his partner to hammer in the spikes. L-P can nail those pesky terrorists before they nail the trees by arresting any stray midgets they spot roaming around Mendocino County.”

But it doesn’t really matter whether an EF!er, a lone survivalist, or Harry Merlo himself spiked that tree. The point is that if you advocate a tactic, you had better be prepared to take responsibility for the results. And I don’t want anything to do with causing the kind of injuries suffered by George Alexander. While George was convalescing from those injuries, he was contacted by someone from

the yellow-ribbon gang of pro-timber stooges. George doesn't remember her name, just that it was "some woman from Humboldt County." She asked him to go on tour with her denouncing Earth First! for the tree-spiking. And George refused.

No matter what you think of L-P's forest practices, this much should be clear. George Alexander is not the enemy. He has no say over his bosses' policies, either in or out of the mill. I have heard EFlers say that that doesn't matter, he shouldn't be working at an L-P mill. Well I shouldn't be driving a car either, but that doesn't make it okay to put a bomb in it.

After George refused to go on tour denouncing us, he was forced to return to work at L-P before his injuries were even healed. His and Laurie's baby was about to be born, he needed the money, and there are not many jobs in the Hopland where he and his family live. George got workers compensation for the time he was off work, but L-P didn't offer him a cent for the trauma and hardship he suffered. They made a big public show of putting up a \$20,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of the spiker. But George Alexander had to file a private lawsuit against L-P to get anything at all. And while the company was crying crocodile tears over his injuries in public, in private they were fighting him tooth and nail over his damage claim. He ended up with just \$9,000 and an involuntary transfer to night shift. "They used my name all over the country," George told me. "Then they laid me off when the mill closed down."

"L-P is just sorry I didn't die," said George Alexander. "Yeah, I know," I replied. "They're sorry I didn't die too."

The Secret History of Tree-Spiking—Part 2

AVA, March 8, 1993

Tree-spiking is a failed tactic by any standard. It has been practiced by Earth First! for 10 years now, and I think it's fair to say that the results are in. Here's Dave Foreman's description of tree-spiking from *Eco-Defense*:

Tree-spiking is an extremely effective method of deterring timber sales, which seems to be becoming more and more popular. If enough trees are spiked in roadless areas, eventually the corporate thugs in the timber company boardrooms, along with their corrupt lackeys who wear the uniform of the Forest Service, will realize that timber sales in wild areas are going to be prohibitively expensive.

Believing this to be so seems to be an article of faith for some EFlers. But a look at the actual history of Earth First! tree-spiking will show that it hasn't really worked out that way.

The most intensive spiking campaigns occurred in Oregon and Washington, although there have also been tree-spikings in California, Colorado, Montana, Idaho, New Mexico, Arizona, British Columbia, Southern Illinois, Kentucky, Maine and New Jersey, to name a few. And I'm not going to say that none of them saved any trees, because in a few cases they did, especially early on, or in areas without a timber-

based economy. But the successes have been few and far between. Even unabashed EF! apologist Chris Manes, writing in his well-researched book *Green Rage*, could only come up with two timber sales that were canceled because they were spiked, one in the George Washington National Forest in Virginia, and one in the Wenatchee Forest's Icicle River drainage in Washington state. I don't know about the trees in Virginia, but the Icicle River sale has since been cut. EF! activists from Shawnee in Southern Illinois also report that when the hard-fought Fairview sale was finally clearcut, the only trees that were left were a few oaks that had been spiked.

But there have been scores and scores of tree-spikings, and in the vast majority of cases, the Forest Service or timber company just sent people in with metal detectors and, often with great public fanfare, removed the spikes and cut the trees. Sometimes spikes were missed, and sometimes they hit the blades in sawmills. But the timber industry has made it quite clear that this is a price they are willing to pay.

The first known tree-spiking in EF! history occurred in the Siskiyou Mountains of Oregon in 1983, on the Woodrat timber sale on BLM land. Notice was given of the spiking, and some of the trees were marked with yellow ribbons to make them easy to find and verify. The BLM reacted by having the loggers cut the trees and leave them on the ground for firewood cutters to saw at their own risk.

In 1984, a group calling itself the Hardesty Avengers mailed a letter to the Oregon Register-Guard announcing that a 132-acre sale on Hardesty Mountain in the Willamette National Forest had

been spiked. The area was scheduled for helicopter logging by Columbia Helicopter. The Forest Service responded with a plan it called "Operation Nail," sending 20 Forest Service employees into the woods to remove the nails before they went ahead and cut the trees.

In 1985 in Southern Oregon, EF! was engaged in a high-profile direct action campaign to save Cathedral Forest in the Middle Santiam Wilderness. Demonstrators blockaded roads, staged the first tree-sits ever, and even occupied an area scheduled for blasting with dynamite, some of them actually sitting on the charges. In the midst of these actions, a few EF!ers took it on themselves to spike some of the trees at Pyramid Creek. And to read about it in Chris Manes' book, I can see where people get the false impression that tree-spiking is a drastic but effective last resort. "Despite continued opposition in the form of civil disobedience," writes Manes, "the road crept inexorably toward the sale. As a last ditch effort, (Mike) Roselle sneaked into the stand one night and spiked it. He sent a letter to the timber company announcing the spiking, and signed it 'the Bonnie Abzug Feminist Garden Party, a reference to the voluptuous ecoteur in *The Monkey-wrench Gang*. The authorities caught neither the allusion nor the tree-spiker."

What Chris Manes doesn't tell us is that the spiking didn't work. It caused a spate of negative publicity, and it caused Mary Beth Nearing, one of EF!'s most inspirational organizers, to publicly distance herself and the Cathedral Forest Action Group from the spiking and Earth First!. But it didn't save the trees. In fact, Mike Roselle himself, speaking in

Rik Scarce's book, *Eco Warriors*, admits that the spiking "barely slowed them down." The Forest Service sent rangers in to pull the nails, and the trees were cut.

Other areas in Oregon that were spiked and cut include the Hobson and the Deer Creek sales in the North Kalmiopsis, the Top and Skook sales in Hell's Canyon National Forest, Bull Run in the Mt. Hood area near Portland, and a Boise-Cascade sale in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. At this last site some of the spikes were missed by the loggers and made it into the mill, breaking teeth off of six sawblades. The saw teeth shot across the mill like bullets, injuring no one but terrifying and angering the millworkers.

In fact, the main effect that tree-spiking seemed to be having in Oregon was to piss people off. In June 1987, EF! was protesting the Lazy Bluff timber sale in the North Kalmiopsis roadless area. Tree-sitter Randy Prince was perched 80 feet up in an old-growth fir when a logger cutting in an adjacent area hit an 11-inch spike and damaged his chainsaw. The logger stormed over to Randy's tree, revved up a saw, and, screaming something about tree-spiking, began cutting down the tree with Randy in it. He cut out a notch 1/3 of the way through the tree before he was talked into stopping. Shaken, Randy denounced tree-spiking and publicly distanced himself from Earth First! And the Lazy Bluff timber sale was cut.

By this time it was becoming clear that something was going wrong with the tree-spiking strategy. It seemed that all this publicity was backfiring, putting the timber industry in a position of having

to cut the trees or lose face. So when Holcomb Peak in the Siskiyou Mountains was extensively spiked in June 1987 the spikers tried to correct past mistakes and do it "right." No notification was sent to the press. Instead, the BLM, the logging contractor, and the millowner were quietly notified, in order to give them an opportunity to quietly back out and cancel the sale. No luck. Instead, they called the press and made the incident into a media circus, with BLM rangers posing for photos in the woods with tree spikes, and the timber industry rallying to raise a \$13,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the spikers. And the trees were cut.

The ultimate media manipulation in the tree-spike wars, however, came in 1988 when Senator Mark Hatfield and Congressman Bob Smith (known to jaded Oregonians as the Representatives from Timber) were on a tour of the Gregory Forest Products sawmill near Glendale, Oregon. In an amazing display of synchronicity, at the very minute when the congressional delegation was watching the operation of a band saw, that very band saw just happened to hit a spike and explode. The delegation had just been shown spikes found in logs from the Silver Fire in the North Kalmiopsis. None of the dignitaries was hurt by the flying sawblade, but they were predictably impressed. "Tree-spiking is a radical environmentalist's version of razor blades in halloween candy," was Congressman Bob Smith's comment.

Meanwhile, some of the Oregon EF! activists were getting tired of answering for this ineffective and marginalizing tactic. "Personally I don't think it works," EF!er Steve Marsden told the *Seattle Times* when asked about tree-spiking in June 1988. Fellow

EF!er Bobcat expressed the same frustration, complaining that it makes them have to talk about “tree-spiking pro or con instead of old growth pro or con.” But pressure was great within Earth First! to refrain from criticizing a tactic that others still engaged in. And tree-spiking was certainly going on outside of Oregon.

Spiking in Washington state was just as extensive as Oregon, and its results no better. Starting with the temporarily successful Icicle River spiking in 1986, sale after sale was spiked and cut, including the Lake Creek and Naches areas of the Wenatchee National Forest, Green Mountain and Granite Falls in Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, and Storm King Mountain and Karamip in the Colville National Forest. The only spiked sales that I could verify as “probably still standing” are the Spoon sale and Olston Quirkendale in Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, and they were set aside in the spotted owl ruling, not due to the spiking. In 1989 the Sugar Bear sale was spiked in the Cedar River area near Seattle. Although the cut in the watershed was eventually halved due to a public campaign by EF! and others, the spiked area was cut.

Spiking was not saving many trees in Washington, but it was certainly raising the ire of the timber industry. Band saw blades were broken by tree spikes in four different Washington sawmills between 1987 and 1989, resulting in the standard cries of “terrorism.” Finally in September 1989, the timber industry and corporate press mounted an all-out assault on Washington Earth First! A four-part series was printed in the Bellingham Herald listing acts of sabotage in the area, quotes from *Eco-Defense*, and the names, addresses, places of

employment and photos of key Earth First!ers. No proof was given to show that these public EF!ers were actually responsible for any of the sabotage listed, but the atmosphere was so hostile that no proof was needed. The Earth First!ers had to leave town for their own safety.

The classic example of tree-spiking, regularly cited by EF!ers as proof that the tactic works, occurred on Meare’s Island in British Columbia in 1985, where the Society to Protect Intact Kinetic Ecosystems (SPIKE) drove 26,000 helix nails into old growth cedar trees. What the tree-spike advocates don’t tell you is that there was a whole campaign going on over Meare’s Island, and the spiking was only part of it. The issue on Meare’s Island is native land rights, as the Claquet people who lived there have never ceded the land or signed any treaties. When the Canadian government attempted to sell timber rights on the island to MacMillan Bloedell, a coalition of natives and whites fought back with a lawsuit and a five-month occupation. When MacMillan Bloedell tried to come in and cut before the court could grant a restraining order, hundreds of people massed on the beach to prevent their helicopters from landing. The court finally halted the logging until the final ruling. That ruling is expected soon, and the Canadian government has stated that if M-B wins in court they will take the timber, spikes or no spikes.

Closer to home, California has had far fewer spikings than our northern neighbors, with many of them occurring in 1987, the same year George Alexander was hurt by the spike at the Cloverdale L-P mill. Just one month after that accident in

Mendocino County, Trout Creek was spiked in a last-ditch attempt to save it from being cut by its owner, Pacific Gas & Electric. Friends of Trout Creek had been negotiating for a compromise, but when the spikes were discovered PG&E angrily broke off negotiations. Things looked bad until EFler Sequoia came up with a plan. She organized a protest in which people were asked to withhold \$1 from their PG&E bill and mail in a green card to show public support for saving Trout Creek. PG&E received so many green cards that it backed down and agreed to save the whole grove with no compromise.

There were also a few tree-spikings in California's National Forests. A minor uproar occurred in June 1987 right after the Trout Creek spiking when it was discovered that a spiked sale in Mendocino National Forest had been cut anyway and sent on to the mill, despite injuries to George Alexander one month earlier. A 202-acre sale in Tahoe National Forest was spiked and cut, as was a 240-acre sale at Running Springs in the San Bernardino National Forest, sold to L-P at Inyokern. One of the strangest tree-spiking incidents in California was again on L-P land, this time near Guerneville in Sonoma County. The newspapers received a notice that the Sonoma County Coalition to Stop L-P had spiked trees at the Silver Estate. No spikes were found, but nonetheless L-P said it had a suspect. He was described as "a black man with a bone through his nose who rides a bicycle and carries bows and arrows," obviously a better example of L-P's racism than its investigative capacities.

As tree-spiking continued across the US, the government increasingly tried to crack down on it.

Although no spiker has ever been caught, laws were passed to make spiking a felony in California, Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana. In 1989 the federal government passed its own laws, and that brought the FBI into the picture. When the Post Office timber sale in Clearwater Forest, Idaho, was spiked, the FBI responded by rounding up University of Montana professor Ron Erikson and several of his Earth First! students. They were forced to give hair samples and fingerprints, write "Stumps Suck" 25 times, and submit to a federal grand jury investigation. No evidence was found to link them to the spiking, and no charges were brought. But this intimidation served to separate Missoula EFl from its support in academia. And the trees were cut.

With this kind of history, you have to wonder why some EFlers cling so tenaciously to the myth that tree-spiking works. One of the explanations commonly given is that, regardless of whether it saves individual trees, spiking is an economic constraint on the industry. "The idea could have come straight from the Chicago Business School," says Chris Manes in *Green Rage*. "If the cost of removing spikes is high enough, the cut will not be made, or at least the decreased profit margin will discourage logging in [controversial] areas." With this logic, Chris Manes would have flunked Econ 101. There are several flaws in this theory. The strategy of tree-spiking was designed for federal lands, where most remaining old growth in the US is located. In these cases it is the Forest Service, not the timber company, which bears the cost, both of removing the spikes and of charging lower rates for the timber to

make up for the risk of broken saws. The Forest Service is not required to make a profit, since it is financed by tax money, and one of the scandals of the looting of our national forests is that the Forest Service subsidizes big timber by paying for log road construction and selling timber below cost. Between 1982 and 1987, the Forest Service received \$800 million a year in federal timber sales, but spent \$1.2 billion a year making the timber ready for sale. That's a loss of \$400 million a year. There aren't enough tree spikes in the world to make a dent in this agency.

And even in the case of tree-spiking on private lands, this economic theory assumes that the price of lumber is fixed, so that any increase in production costs will result in a decrease in profits. But old-growth timber is so valuable, and there is so little of it left, that the timber industry could charge anything it wanted and still sell every stick. Any increase in production costs due to tree-spiking would simply be passed on to the consumers.

Nor are the timber companies put off by the threat of injury to employees, as we have already seen in real life. Dave Foreman tells us in *EcoDefense* that tree-spiking is "unlikely to cause anyone physical injury even should a blade shatter upon striking a spike, which is an unlikely event." But Foreman also admitted to the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1987 that he had never seen the inside of a sawmill. And it is clear that he doesn't understand the depths of depravity of the timber companies. The routine maiming and killing of timber workers is coldly calculated into the cost of the lumber, and a few more injuries are not going to stop

them. L-P made this clear after George Alexander was hurt.... "L-P will not let tree-spiking be a deterrent," said spokeswoman Glennis Simmons. And she meant it. L-P kept running the logs from that same spiked sale through the mill, even though workers encountered two more spikes and broke another saw blade. Other timber companies were just as emphatic. After the Buse Company in Everett, Washington broke four saw blades on tree spikes in 1987, manager Ron Smith commented: "I assume they think if they do things like this the timber industry will get discouraged and will just quit cutting trees. But I don't think that's going to happen."

And it hasn't happened. Yet just because Dave Foreman told us 10 years ago that it would, most of EF! continues to ignore reality, no matter how much experience we have. The forests that EF! had been instrumental in saving in this area (Trout Creek, Cahto Wilderness, Headwaters Forest, Albion and Owl Creek) have all been saved through blockades and public organizing campaigns, often combined with lawsuits. And it's time we faced the truth about tree-spiking. It is unquestionably dangerous to workers. It needlessly endangers EF! activists on the front lines. And it doesn't save trees.

Ironically, most of the early advocates of tree-spiking—including Dave Foreman—have left EF! for safer harbors after suppressing debate by treating any questioning of their tactics as heresy. And, although most of them have refused to make any public statements about it, the EF! groups that most strongly advocated tree-spiking in the early days have quietly abandoned the tactic. Yet the

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myth lives on.

Last month in Maine, a letter was sent to the local press stating that the trees at Mt. Blue had been spiked by EF! I don't know if the letter was real or fake, but a group of EF!ers blockading Mt. Blue were subsequently arrested, dragged through hot coals from their campfire, and roughed up in jail. And I wondered if a new generation of activists is going to repeat the mistakes of the last 10 years. Those of use who are out on the front lines putting our bodies in front of the bulldozers and chainsaws can't afford to be isolated and discredited by something as ineffective and incendiary as tree-spiking. If we are serious about putting the Earth first, we need to choose tactics because they work, not because they are macho or romantic. That's what no compromise really means.