

# Friendly Fire - forest fires

Sierra, Jan, 2001 by Richard Manning

A forest sometimes needs a good burn, but it takes a daring person to ignite his own backyard.

A WALL OF FLAMES ROARS STRAIGHT UP THE HILL toward my house--with only a propane tank and a pile of firewood in its path. A yellow-shirted fires-prints out in front of the blaze carrying a drip torch, a sort of handheld napalm bomb, and lays a new line of fire exactly where I desperately want the burning to stop.

It is a blaze of my own making, lit in the hope of healing my 70 acres of mostly open, south-facing slope of ponderosa pine and native bunchgrass in the mountains near Missoula, Montana. I'm trying to understand environmental restoration on the most intimate of scales, on land where I can't blame loggers or federal bureaucrats for problems. The trees are too crowded for their own good--the result of fire suppression--and exotic weeds are pushing out the native wildflowers and grasses.

My faith has already been tested in a trial by logging. Before you can burn where fires have been suppressed, you have to cut down some trees. Fire is a pay-me-now-or-pay-me-more-later proposition. Fire suppression builds up an unnatural accumulation of fuel that creates conflagrations far more implacable and catastrophic than nature's fire. Controlled burns have come under criticism, mainly because of the media's huge attention to the 47,700-acre Los Alamos fire--a controlled burn that got out of control. But more than 2,500 wildfires in the Southwest alone covered an area ten times bigger than the Los Alamos blaze last year. Nationwide, an almost negligible percent of the wildfires on more than 7 million acres were deliberate fires that got away. Meanwhile, more than a million acres were restored in successful controlled burns.

If you have a reverence for life, your first experience with a chainsaw will jolt you. Even if you're intellectually persuaded it's for the good of the forest, you'll shudder when you first squeeze the trigger on a full-bore chainsaw and hear its whine and watch the chips fly, bite out a wedge, start a back cut, then look up as 100 years' worth of stacking living cell on cell teeters and crashes dead with a thump you feel through the soles of your feet.

Living among these trees, however, you learn that they need more than your reverence. I'd tinkered with half measures, cut a few for firewood or a bit of lumber. The spindly ponderosa pines began filling out, bulking up, setting needles a richer green where I'd done some cutting. The trimming seemed more an act of creation than destruction.

For my foray into real logging I summoned Matt Arno, 30, the son of Steve Arno, one of the West's most prominent fire ecologists. Matt Arno fills the narrowest of niches in an otherwise rapacious field. He is a restoration logger. He has a small four-wheel-drive John Deere tractor that goes lighter on the land than a conventional log skidder or

bulldozer. And he's designed a special grapple to lift log butts off the ground to snake them out instead of tearing up the forest floor by dragging them.

Walking the land in late February, a skiff of snow still on the ground, Matt and I stopped and talked at nearly every one of the hundreds of trees I'd marked for cutting. He agreed with most of my choices, and we decided to leave the largest of the ponderosa pine, the "pickles"--another departure from conventional logging. These are the high-dollar trees, the profit makers. In conventional logging, they become stumps.

The execution of the plan was Sean Steinebach's job, and as he walked up my hill with us, Stihl saw slung by the bar over his shoulder, hard hat, suspenders, tool belt, he looked like any other caulk-booted logger. But he's not. He's a student at the University of Montana School of Forestry and says he's lucky to work for Arno. "If I had to do forestry like they do for most large, private corporations, I wouldn't want to do it," he says.

We took the Douglas fir. Some of these were big, but most were sticks for pulping. We netted six truckloads of logs that I sent to the local mill, the very mill I often blasted in my career as a reporter. This caused a few friends to label me a sellout--which I expected: When one of my neighbors, Jon Roush, was head of the Wilderness Society, he took heavy heat from Nation columnist Alexander Cockburn in 1995 for doing essentially what I have done. We live in a bumper-sticker world that only understands simple formulae like "logging = bad."

The money from the log sale bankrolled the blaze now moving toward the house I built with my own hands. Matt Arno is back, with his four-man crew, a pump truck, Pulaskis, rakes, and drip torches. Part of his strategy was to fell the trees so that their limbs, the slash, lay like a blanket on the forest floor. Industrial loggers use bulldozers to scrape slash into enormous piles before burning, but we think burning it as a blanket can create the effect of a natural forest fire. The theory is that you haven't restored until it's black.