

American Forest Foundation.....An American Tree Farm Story

By Kari Klehm - 2020

Over 60 years ago, my parents purchased 160 acres of timbered land in Lincoln County, Montana. It was a huge investment for them financially, but my father was a professional forester with a *long eye* for the future management of this property. I believe the definition of a forester is “someone who plants trees that they will never see harvested”.

Over the course of my parents’ life, the land provided our family with recreational opportunities like camping, hiking, bottle hunts, grouse and big game hunting, as well as the winter activities of snow-cattling, snowshoeing, and x-country skiing.

The income aspects have been just as varied; My brother and I grew up dragging cut Christmas trees to the pickup truck. In this way, we earned our money to buy Christmas presents, and I’m sure it was how my folks generated money for bills. When our homes were heated with wood, this was the source of that wood. As my Dad’s forestry experience expanded, so did his management skills. He knew when log markets were good and scheduled selective logging on the property.

During our 60+ years at the helm, the Tree Farm was partially logged at least 6 times and most recently, in 2018. During his earliest explorations, my dad discovered an old logging camp and the remains of a cabin with corrals. He showed us evidence of 20 inch diameter trees used to construct that old cabin, which were likely the remains of the earliest logging on this location....estimated at around 1915. That’s over 100 years of being a timber producing property! Those remains have since returned to the ground that grew them. I’d bet the bottles and cans are still there for the searching, though.

Over the years, accessing the property has only improved slightly! It still takes about 2 hours to travel the 60 miles “door to door”, with the less pleasant parts near the Tree Farm end of the journey. Accessibility has been a curse and a blessing! It is not the place for an impromptu road-trip and would be a serious hindrance for anyone hoping for mischief.

When my brother and I were young teens, we helped Dad with constructing a 12’ x 16’ cabin. This was a game changer in the Christmas tree business. Now we could spend a couple nights and work a full day and a half. This was also when my mom decided she didn’t like facing down a packrat that was more fully invested in the cabin than she was. I really enjoyed the additional time we could spend as a family at the cabin and being able to work with a wood cook stove. What fun that was! Running to the outhouse, in the middle of the night, was the only drawback for me.

I have to admit that I am a “city girl” now and along with the outhouse issue, I really love the luxury of water on demand. Hauling water for anything besides consumption isn’t fun. At the Tree Farm, we had to schlop water from the spring, boil it on the stove, and use that for clean up.....just a brief taste of the days when laundry was done on a washboard and dishes were judiciously washed by hand. You certainly didn’t waste water that you had to carry.

On the Tree Farm, were a couple of springs that always enchanted me. Who doesn't love a wetland? We never developed them for fear of not doing it properly. Now this possibility falls to my son and his future management of the Tree Farm property.

The most recent logging of the property, in 2018, was a culmination of my coming into full stewardship of it, and my longing to see the contour of the land. I wanted to see what it looked like when I first saw it and the forest was more open following corporate logging. The timing for this couldn't have been better: Floyd Quiram, the logger from the previous selective logging job, and his protégé Shelby George (2019's Montana Tree Farm "Logger of the Year" recipient) tackled this project with new methods and a light touch. Their artistry was immediately evident and will grow more so as the ground heals. Holly McKenzie, our forestry consultant, had been a friend and associate of my father's. He had trusted and respected her for years. She helped guide us through an experience that I was concerned I would do disservice to. F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber provided the logging plan which was overseen by Cameron Wohlschlagel. The log and lumber markets were good!! The timing was right for a financially lucrative harvest and additional benefits included reducing the risk of wildfire as well as insect and disease outbreaks. Selectively logging the Tree Farm seemed like a no brainer to me. Nature has already stocked the new forest with a fine understory of saplings to replace the older forest one day. We will do weed treatments to take care of disturbed soils, however, since our loggers utilized low impact logging methods, this will be easier for us to do.

Starting in the 1990's I attended forest stewardship classes and workshops as they have been available. I listened, and learned what my father had to teach me about forest management. I also know where my limits are, so gathering good, honest and knowledgeable people to guide us through this endeavor was a huge blessing. This logging job was completed in November of 2018 and every visit I have made since then still makes my heart happy. My husband and son are scheduled to take the Montana Forestry Stewardship course this Summer. There are LOTS of opportunities to learn and network there!!

We have a small family memorial space on the Tree Farm property. It is my most sincere hope that I will be buried there when I die. To this end, I am hoping to develop a green cemetery there for people who wish to go back to the earth in the most natural way. There will be no embalming; simple coffins or shrouds only, and small organic markers. Life will continue on above. Animals will come and go. Recreation and agriculture will continue. This is life as it has always been.

As to that distant future, I hope that through the natural events that come, someone takes up stewardship of this place and maintains a kind and guiding hand. We'll do our part until then.