

ForeTalk

RESOURCE MAGAZINE

SPRING 1983

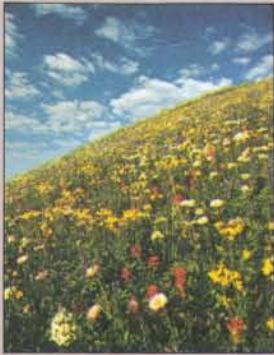


ForeSTalk

Volume 7 Number 1 SPRING 1983

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Cover: Kimberley freelance photographer Pat Morrow did a lot of recreational mountain climbing in the Kootenays before he became the second Canadian to scale Mt. Everest, which is how he came to be on Idaho peak in the Selkirks one sunny day when the wildflowers were in full bloom.

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Many B.C. communities could not exist without the forest industry, and over the past year these forestry-based communities have faced tough economic times because of declining world markets for lumber and pulp. But there's been a change in the wind. Last year the talk in the industry was about sawmills or pulp mills on the verge of closing; this year the rumours are about the mills opening again. And as we emerge from this recession, we'll be a leaner, more productive, more competitive forest industry than we've been for a long time.

Hon. Tom Waterland,
Minister of Forests

ForeSTalk Resource Magazine is published by the Province of British Columbia, Ministry of Forests, Information Services Branch, 1450 Government Street, Victoria, B.C. V8W 3E7. Telephone: (604) 387-5985.

Designed to encourage interest, discussion and understanding of British Columbia's forest, range and recreational resources, ForeSTalk is available free on request. Second class mailing registration No. 3863. International Standard Serial Number ISSN 0700-1770. ForeSTalk welcomes submissions from professional writers and photographers on themes related to the B.C. forests and their uses. Address enquiries to the editor.



Province of
British Columbia

Ministry of
Forests

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No part of B.C. has escaped the impact of the world's sagging forest economy. In northwestern B.C., Terrace, a victim of both its setting and history, is facing an uncertain future. Smithers, whose young forest industry is part of a broadly-based economy, is definitely struggling. But in both towns, and in all the villages in between, the people are determined to weather. . .

HARD TIMES IN THE NORTHWEST

by Peter Grant



Clouds and mountains hang over Terrace on an early spring afternoon, sleet washes the Prince Rupert highway. The nearby railway tracks carry the weight of history as well as freight.

In the first years of the century these tracks, under the name of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, wound down from the Coast Mountains. They linked the northwest with eastern points, rang the death knell for a colourful steamboat commerce plying the Skeena as far upstream as Hazelton, and gave birth to the town of Terrace. Today the railway is called the Canadian National, and the area's 25,000 people spread far into valleyland radiating in four directions. Several suburbs, begun before the railway arrived, maintain their independence from the city.

The first loggers in the area stacked cordwood near the Kitsumgallum and Old Remo steamboat landings. The boats' boilers needed lots of fuel for the slow trip upriver. When the railroad came, stump ranchers cut wood for ties. Later, the interest was in old-

growth Sitka spruce, shipped east to make small fighter planes. During the 1920s Terrace was the "pole capital of North America," as cedar trees stripped and cut to length rolled onto flatcars bound for exotic places like New York City.

Terrace has continued to grow in bursts of industrial development. Today many residents work in the Alcan aluminum plant or the Eurocan pulp mill-sawmill complex in Kitimat, only a 40 minute drive away. With government services, heavy machinery servicing and other industries, Terrace is now a trade, service and transportation hub for a large area that includes the upper Skeena and remote Nass River headwaters.

Even with this broad economic base, however, Terrace's main employer is still its mills. When they're doing well (and they've enjoyed prolonged booms in the past 30 years), Terrace rides high. But when the forest industry hits hard times, Terrace hurts.

For almost two years now both the Skeena valley's lumber and pulp industry have suffered from the world-

wide slump in demand for these products. By last fall, over 35 percent of Terrace's work force was unemployed, with over of 200 people a month going on income assistance as their unemployment insurance benefits ran out.

In September, a soup kitchen feeding as many as 100 people a day was started by an unemployed people's committee. Comments Paul Johnston, a construction worker involved with the committee: "It's sad. Increases in marriage break-ups, domestic violence and crime are attributable to the economic downturn."

In mid-October, B.C. Timber Ltd. shut down all its northwestern logging operations until markets could improve. A month later the company was forced to shut down its Prince Rupert pulp facility. This in turn led to the closure of two more sawmills in Terrace and one in Hazelton that supplied wood fibre for the pulp mill.

Behind the current picture of depressed lumber and pulp markets is a change that has taken place in the local forest industry itself.

PHOTO: PETER GRANT



In recent years Terrace's mills and logging operators have been drawn into the orbit of B.C. Timber's large pulp manufacturing concern near Prince Rupert. In addition to Terrace, other centres on the Skeena, like Kitwanga and the three Hazeltons, are now in the pulp chip business, running logs unfit for lumber through special chipper and shipping the chips to Prince Rupert on the railway. Sawmill operators have stayed in business because they sell chips as well.

Why this difficulty in making ends meet — even at the best of times? As an economic study of the northwest pointed out about its pulp mills ten years ago, the forest economy is boxed in by the high costs of trying to make a profit from poorer-quality forests growing on hard-to-get-at terrain.

The repeated cycle of good and bad times has been hard on businessmen too. Most of the sawmills on the Skeena have passed out of local hands and now belong to B.C. Timber. In coping with a two-year slowdown that has thrown more than 2500 workers in the forest industry out of work, people in Terrace are feeling what it's like to be part of a large pulp manufacturing enterprise.

Just what kind of economic development would the people of Terrace ideally prefer? A survey conducted by the Terrace-Kitimat labour council (when plans to build a local steel mill were under discussion) showed that a majority of the area's residents favour slow growth over big projects. They want to preserve the quality of life the local environment offers. No wonder: according to a study by UBC sociologist Patricia Marchak, both Terrace and Hazelton have a larger proportion of long-time residents than do most other comparable northern towns relying on resource-based industries. People who have moved there have stayed, as have many of their children after them. The result is an unusually stable population — "if," Marchak comments, "there's a viable industry."

One Terrace native who has fought unsuccessfully for slower overall development is George Kofoed. After working as a logger for 25 years, Kofoed is now a federal fisheries warden. "We should be hollering and screaming for more secondary industry," he maintains. Kofoed's home, a short distance from town, is ringed by a

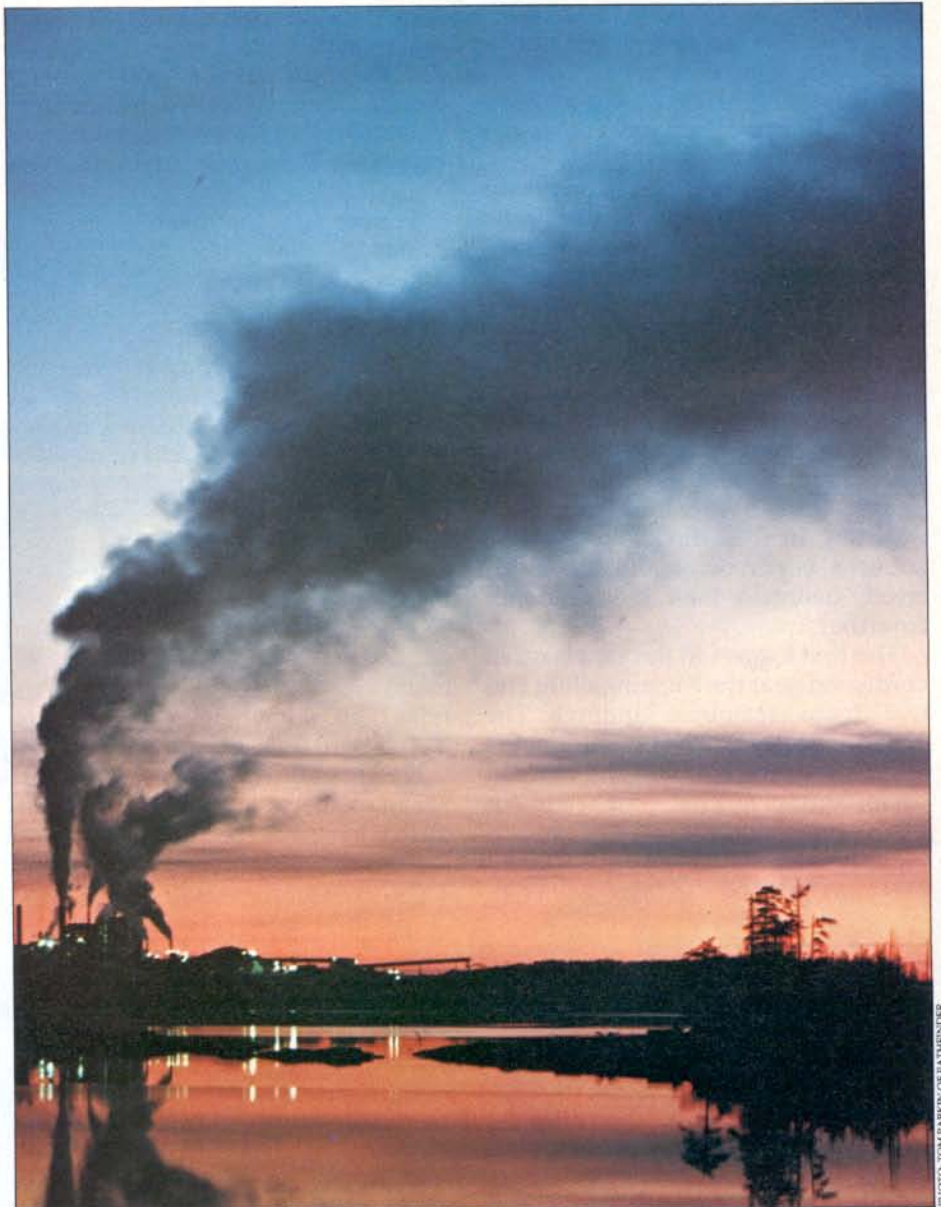


PHOTO: TOM FARGEN OF FAITHINDER



PHOTO: TOM FARGEN OF FAITHINDER

50-year-old forest. "We still have the illusion of living in semi-wilderness."

Given that Terrace has always been dependent on its forests, it would seem logical that everyone in town would want to be in on how forestry decisions are made. But, like the forest economy itself, public involvement in forestry is cyclical. Today it is on the rise again. Members of the Skeena Protection Coalition, an environmental group, sit on a newly-formed Terrace public advisory committee in Terrace along with representatives from the forest industry, the IWA, and others with a stake in forest management.

Reforestation is of more than idle interest to people involved in the future of the forest industry. Even in the near future, shortages of quality timber loom. Until young growth matures in the valley bottoms, the local mills will have to get their wood from distant sources. While there are large reserves of timber to the north, much of it is low-quality, overmature hemlock and balsam, good only for pulping — and then only when low-cost transportation makes it economic to harvest the wood at all.

With this problem-strewn landscape in view, B.C. Timber is reorganizing its northern operation. "We're recognizing these forests for what they are — a pulp log resource," explains Rod Arnold, B.C. Timber's northern division forestry manager. "It's only about 40 percent sawlog material." This shift in thinking will have an affect on Terrace's economy — perhaps a big one. At the top of B.C. Timber's fix-it list is more efficient handling of wood between the forest and the pulp mills, with more chipping of pulplugs before the wood is shipped to the Prince Rupert mills. One of Terrace's largest sawmills will even become a huge chipping plant. Later, new plants may be built closer to the forests and away from the town. Observes mayor Helmut Giesbrecht: "Some see this as the end of the forest industry's domination of the economy of Terrace."

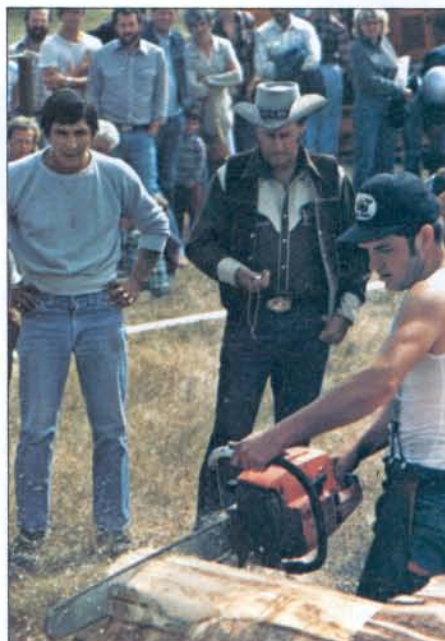
To some people, the difficulties facing Terrace are the result of forces beyond local control: world economics, regional geography, and so on. To others, it's been more a case of "economic suicide," to use northwest resource consultant Bill Horswill's frank condemnation of past resource use.

But whatever the causes of today's tough economic climate, the people of Terrace have every intention of riding out the storm.

Not far upstream from Terrace, the Skeena River valley narrows almost to a canyon. There's less of a gorge here than with another river that slices through the Coast Mountains, the Fraser, but the mountains on either side of the Skeena are just as impressive. Nestled here and there on the landscape are some

holdouts against the changing trends in the forest economy.

In Kitwanga, where brothers Richard, Clifford and Elmsley Morgan operate Kitwanga Native Development Incorporated (KNDI), the idea is to establish a self-sufficient forestry operation. "We want to keep the economy going in the area," says Clifford Morgan. The local band already provides the bulk of the B.C. Timber sawmill's labour force, having negotiated for a training program, updated facilities and even the mill's con-



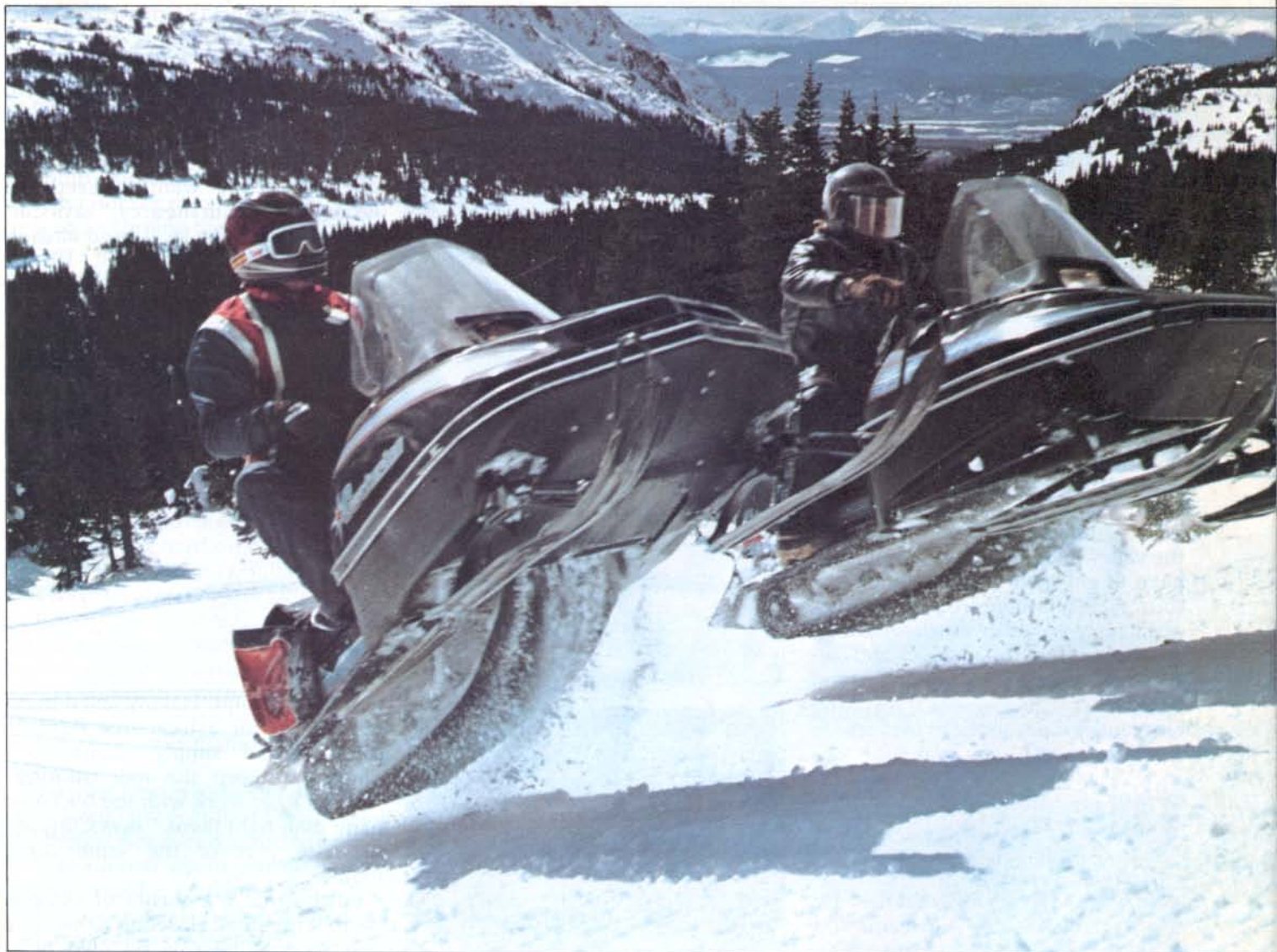
(Above) Logging is a way of life in the northwest, and loggers' competitions are a popular part of the Bulkley Valley fall fair. (Bottom, left) Members of Kitwanga Native Development Incorporated are trying to keep the local economy alive with their logging operations, but it's a hard struggle. B.C. Timber's Skeena sawmill in Terrace (previous page) will stay closed until the company's Prince Rupert pulp mill (top left), which gets wood chips from the Terrace mill, can re-open.

tinued operation. Having failed in its application for a local tree farm licence, KNDI simply wants B.C. Timber to keep the mill running. "We'd rather work with the big company than fight them," says Clifford. "They're part of the same community."

Further on is a cluster of villages bearing the same Hazelton name, but they have stubbornly retained their separate identities. Near South Hazelton is Irwin Stege's small sawmill, which he has kept running steadily through the recession. Stege digs up sales for specialty lumber products from as far away as Ireland and Saudi Arabia. He gets much of his wood from local timber sales.

"Sometimes I have 30 different cuts of timber in my yard," Stege says, while exercising his prize Trakehner stallion in a field adjoining the lumber yard. Stege wants to modernize his mill by adding a small log line and a chipper and by eliminating the sea of mud the loaders in the yard have to wade through every fall and spring. The trouble is, he has to borrow the money for these improvements and, he says: "The first question a banker asks is: 'What's your timber supply?'"

Stege is in luck. One of the few independent mill owners left in the Skeena Valley, he was recently awarded a timber allotment by the Ministry of Forests.



It's only a short drive up the Bulkley River to Smithers from Hazelton, but Smithers seems like another world. For one, the valley opens out into spacious, flat farmland. In town there's a touch of Switzerland about the buildings, a reminder of the Swiss farmers who moved to the Bulkley Valley en masse early in the century. Although Smithers hasn't completely escaped the effects of the current economic downturn, there's been no need for soup kitchens here. "We've been more protected from the recession than other communities," notes Bulkley forest district manager John Wenger. Much of the credit for this, he adds, must go to the local forest industry.

"We're a company like any other," says sawmill owner Dick Groot. Well, not quite. Groot's mill, and Pacific Inland Resources (PIR), which are Smithers' two main forest operations, have kept running while other towns suffer 30 to 40 percent unemployment.

How do they do it? Partly it's a matter of good fortune. Don Burton, Groot's woods manager, points out that local lumber is always in demand because of its superior strength and quality. (The forests of the Bulkley Valley are interior rather than coastal types — mostly balsam, pine and spruce. They grow slowly, so they produce tightly-grained lumber.) Geography is also on the side of the Smithers' forest industry; roadbuilding has been relatively easy, so development costs have stayed low. And good marketing has a lot to do with the industry's stability. Groot has cultivated a growing market for lumber in Alaska, and in a Richmond, B.C. box factory.

Smithers is the opposite of a boom town, having grown slowly into a community of 5000 with a healthy mix of industries — beef and dairy cattle farming, mineral prospecting, big-game hunting, the railway, and government services.

The forest industry may be the biggest single employer, but it accounts for less than one-fifth of the town's wealth. By staying relatively small the forest industry has banked a 'savings account' of the limited timber available in the valley. The timber harvest has grown only modestly in recent years, and company expansions have been based more on good wood utilization, like the particleboard plant Groot recently built to make use of planer shavings.

Bulkley Valley's residents have to be forgiven if they seem a little smug about the good life most of them still enjoy — including one of the best downhill ski slopes in the province on nearby Hudson Bay Mountain. But they are also quick to spot any threats looming on the horizon. A number of forest-watchers have served since 1976 as watch dogs on the Smithers public advisory committee (the first such committee organized by



the Ministry of Forests). They've consistently pressed for a go-slow approach to harvesting the region's limited wood supply.

Comments Richard Overstall, who lives in nearby Telkwa and works for the Gitskan Tribal Council: "If the ministry over-estimates the allowable annual cut, the industry will log the old growth too fast, and the eventual result will be a falldown — an overall

(Below) Irwin Stege of South Hazelton, whose small sawmill produces speciality lumber products for an international market, takes a moment to exercise his prize Trakehner stallion. (Bottom) By keeping his Smithers sawmill operating, Dick Groot has made a major contribution to the town's economic stability. (Opposite page) Good forest management means managing for various uses, a fact appreciated by snowmobilers enjoying the trails on the Babine Integrated Management Unit near Smithers.



reduction in the timber supply. In 10, 20 or 40 years, when the crunch comes, the loggers will start looking around at areas set aside for wildlife or aesthetics and say: 'Either we log those areas or lay off 100 people at the mill.' The whole idea of planning is to avoid these situations."

Making sure all available forestland is harvested as efficiently as possible is, of course, a key concern of forest manager Wenger. Admitting that in the

past "we have been overcutting in our spruce and pine timber types at the expense of the lower-quality balsam types," he has taken steps to tackle the problem. Last winter his staff conducted volume and decay studies in low quality stands to determine how much timber was suitable for sawlogs and how much for pulpwood. Wenger wants the companies to get over 40 percent of their sawlog timber from these balsam stands. Moreover, a sale of pulpwood from forests that were never considered part of the valley's timber supply is in the offing. "This is the kind of proposal we only dreamed of a few years back," enthuses Wenger.

"Under normal circumstances we would be cutting balsam stands already," Dick Groot says, but a freak of weather and a beetle invasion have shelved normal logging plans in the valley. Just as the loggers finished salvaging three years' worth of logs from a huge blowdown in 1978, an outbreak of mountain pine beetles has forced them into another clean-up operation.

These salvage operations were planned by a committee with representatives from the Ministry of Forests and the companies involved. The same cooperative spirit is well-established in a standing committee planning forest management for the valley. "In other parts of B.C." says John Wenger, "these committees are just starting."

And it's precisely this kind of community spirit that will carry the people of the northwest through today's hard times. **Q**