

Second in a series of reminiscences by Venosta's Tom McLaughlin on his days in a 1930 logging camp:

Fred, our head logger, had a habit of washing his false teeth in the potato water while the potatoes were still in the pot. This shouldn't have surprised me. His soul was bulging with sins against us.

Another colossal sin second in line, I'd say, was using another man's eating utensils. We didn't have the luxury of a cook or dishwasher, and the work day in the bush was exhausting. Sometimes the dishes got washed on Sundays, and sometimes not.

When we finished eating, we turned the plates upside down, with the cutlery underneath. This was done to keep the mice from them. As I look back now, I guess I would have to say that it was one rough camp. But we had our principles.

There was little that my brothers and I couldn't tolerate. But there was a limit. Foremost among our dislikes were the two aforementioned sins. Close behind, was lying in someone else's bed. Fred was guilty of all three, and others.

Fred never lost sight of the fact that he was the boss, and he never let the rest of us forget it. He was one mean logger. He reveled in telling outrageous lies about us. To hear him tell it, he was the only one who did any work. Our father believed most of it. Needless to say, our anger with both of them grew.

Whether it was to annoy us or because of his complete disregard for hygiene, Fred always took someone else's plate. If you got him in time, and you kicked up enough of a fuss, you could usually get your plate back. But if he had started to eat, the



*Tom
McLaughlin*

situation was hopeless. This dire situation left us scrambling for a brother's plate. It was better than eating off a stranger's. I, the youngest, was usually left to wash Fred's dishes before I could sit down to eat.

Fred was always the first away from the table. I have never known a man since, who could gulp food like he could. This happenstance complicated my life even further. Most of the camp had a nap after lunch, and my bed was the handiest. I could count on Fred flopping there, before I could finish eating. This utter gall left me fuming.

If lice there had to be, I would much rather bed down with my own bugs. Being in bed with vermin that one is used to somehow didn't seem so awesome. No matter how many lice I nourished myself, another's parasites always seemed dirtier.

The resentment that built up by Fred's unorthodox ways of life came to a head with the teeth-washing incident. The stunned disbelief on my brother's faces told me that I had discovered something of immense importance. As I related the tale, the feeling of being an equal partner was seeping through me. My second coming out. Up until that time, my brothers had all but ignored me. This new emergency brought us together and changed all

that. Temporarily. My brother Clifford's first words when he was able to straighten the reality in his mind, could have been put to music. "That's it! He's getting outta here." This statement made our good brother all-powerful. We were now openly backing him to the hilt.

Fred was pretty confident, by this time, that he had our father in the palm of his hand. He was due for a few surprises. We set off to confront this new menace to our way of life. We caught up with him at the stables, where he had stopped to sharpen his axe. Fred's roaring and the swinging of the axe began before Clifford had a chance to speak. "Get to the bush where you're supposed to be" bellowed Fred, sinking a large splat of tobacco spit in the snow at Clifford's feet. We waited tensely, fear beginning to set in for our brother's next move. I thought Clifford's response would never come.

It was obvious to even the most casual observer, that he had come to this arena ill-prepared. We could see that in the heat of the prebattle conference, he had totally forgotten to take his morning chew from the plug that we shared. We all had, and could offer no support. But Clifford, true fighter that he was, hawked up one of the dirtiest spits that I had ever seen and his aim was good. The spit landed on the toe of Fred's boot. Before he could recover from this unexpected impudence, Clifford followed the spit up with, "you're fired." My other brothers and I stood in shocked silence, not knowing what was coming next. Would Fred use his axe as an equalizer? The anger in his face was frightening.

I'll have to tell you about the outcome of this battle in another column. At that time, I'll also tell you how to rid yourself of your body lice.