

FIFTH IN A SERIES OF REMINISCENCES BY VENOSTA'S TOM MCLAUGHLIN ON HIS DAYS IN A LOGGING CAMP BACK IN THE 1930S.

(This week finds Tom spending a lot of time talking to Topsy the horse and the camp pig.)

In my haste to become a man at the grand age of fourteen, and to join my older brothers in the logging camp, I overlooked a few areas that could have done with more study. I hadn't foreseen the loneliness that my absence from home would engender. Nor the rule that, once you got foused up, you stayed that way until a clean-up warranted the painfully embarrassing process of delousing.

The isolation and the resulting loneliness drew Topsy, the sow and I into an ever-closer relationship. Don't try to tell me that one cannot converse with a pig or a horse. I learned my pig latin and horse latin well that winter. I often felt that, when we were breaking a new trail, Topsy would look at me as if to say, "What a dough head, I would have gone that way".

The sow was of a different personality. She usually just grunted, and let it go at that. But I often felt that when it proved out that we could have taken a better trail, they got their heads together and discussed the situation when they thought that I was out of earshot.

Topsy was one smart, independent-minded horse. Often dangerously so. Once, when she felt that grabhook devour the chain, and before I managed to get the reins in my hands, she took off



Tom McLaughlin

like a bolt of lightning, I had to be quick to jump out of the way of a bouncing, rolling log. She usually arrived at the skidway well ahead of me, and stopped at exactly the right place. I seldom had to manoeuvre a log to line it up with the others. The instant I released the chain from the log, and before I could roll it onto the skidway, she was off up the trail, where she stood waiting at the next log, her mischievous eyes twinkling.

On one of these occasions, when I was endeavoring to turn her in the deep snow to hook the chain, she managed to get a front foot on one of my feet, and her hind foot on the other. The deep snow cushioned her feet, and saved mine from serious injury. I deftly dove under her as she fell on the log that I had, an instant before, been leaning on. My feet came free, and I managed to scramble out of the way of her flailing, corked hooves, as she struggled to regain her feet.

Most of the time, the pair humoured me and let me think that they were accepting their place in the scheme of things. Nevertheless, I found their company more stimulating and wholesome than that

of some human I've met. I often wonder.

My fellow workmen spent Sundays resting. I spent the day, pig in tow, walking the skidding trails, and meditating at the barns with my animals. There was something exhilarating about being out there, and not having to work. I turned Topsy loose to wander at will. But she wasn't interested in joining us on these jaunts.

I usually started out on these walks alone, the sow staying behind to tease Topsy, trying to get her to play. I seldom had gone far when the pig joined me, having given up on Topsy's taciturnity, or when the mare had tired of her nonsense and nipped her. On one such occasion, she came squealing up the trail and zipped past me, without her usual stop for sympathy, and disappeared around a bend in the trail. In an instant she was back, still squealing, followed closely by a wolf. I let a bellow out of me that would have done justice to a mastodon. When the wolf's leap (that was supposed to land him on the sow's back) ended, he was turned the other way and churning up snow, as he headed into the bush.

The sow and I were quite shaken by the encounter with the wolf. As a matter of fact, we were downright terrified. We didn't stop until we got to the barn. I was all shaking inside and out, and I didn't want those in the cabin to know how chicken I was. Of course, I expected the pig to honour that tacit agreement. I secured the sow in the barn, and hung around to regain my composure. After I had steadied up a bit, I made my way to the cabin, and silently flopped on my bunk. I felt sure that my terror had escaped notice.