

## BRUCE WILLEY

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COURTESY THE ARTIST

## TIM CLANCY

### Hoedad Life

Planting trees in the majestic West and Pacific Northwest backcountry

**F**or most of the winter of 1976–77, I worked as a tree planter in the Coast Range of southern Oregon. During that time, I lived in a tent, at a primitive campground called Park Creek, twenty winding miles from the nearest phone, gas station, or grocery store. My approximately twenty-five coworkers were members of Cougar Mountain crew, one of ten such crews that formed Hoedads Co-op Incorporated, a worker-owned reforestation company based in Eugene, Oregon. Under contract to the Coos Bay District of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), we had sixty days to plant approximately nine hundred acres.

In the predawn darkness of my first morning as a Hoedad, I crawled from my sleeping bag and was promptly showered with frost, the result of a cold night's worth of breath that had condensed and frozen on the ceiling of my pup tent. I groped about, shivering and cursing, trying to remember where I had stashed my flashlight. Maybe quitting college and moving across the country to work in the Oregon woods had not been such a fine idea.

I heard the approaching crunch of footsteps and then a voice: "Hey, you awake?" I poked my head out of the tent and saw someone holding a lantern. He had a full black beard and his weathered canvas pants, held up by suspenders and cut off above the ankle, were unmistakably those of a tree planter. It was John Ivey, a fellow Hoedad. He invited me over to his tent for tea.

The Hoedads—named after the tool of their trade—had found a way to earn a living that, while physically demanding, offered the chance to work close to the earth in the majestic backcountry of the West and Pacific Northwest, with a large group of self-employed and like-minded coworkers. Such jobs were scarce for the mostly college-age—and educated—men and women from all over the country who had come to Eugene in the 1970s, looking for an alternative way to live and to earn a living. In fact, in each of the three years I worked with Cougar Mountain, which happened to be the peak earning years in the twenty-two-year history of the co-op, the Hoedads secured contracts worth more than two million dollars—the equivalent of nearly seven million dollars today. And of course the karmic value of planting trees was no small perk.

Every morning that first week at Park Creek, I ate hot oatmeal and drank gingerroot tea over at John Ivey's

tent—a spacious, homey place, warm with the radiant heat of a small tin woodstove. A rustic bench provided a place to sit, and a thick layer of straw covered the floor. From the ridgepole hung a glowing gas lamp, enticing me each of those cold, pitch-black mornings to leave my cramped, frozen quarters and face the day ahead. Were it not for John’s hospitality on those early days of the Coos Bay contract, I very likely would have returned to Eugene and looked for warmer, drier work, confirming what I had heard from one ex-tree planter: “You’ll hate it. You bust your ass in the freezing rain and you don’t make shit for money.” He was wrong about the freezing rain. That winter had been the driest the Coast Range had seen in thirty years. He had the bust-your-ass part right, though. As for the money, I averaged about sixty dollars a day on that contract, which was almost as good as the veterans on the crew. But the real money—the mythical hundred-dollar days that I’d heard about—would come with the spring contracts. This was winter, and I was just getting started.

Strapped to each planter’s waist was a sturdy neoprene bag, loaded with about two hundred Douglas fir seedlings. In addition to those thirty or forty pounds of seedlings, he or she (a quarter of the crew was women) carried a ten-pound planting tool, the hoedad: an axe handle, joined at a right angle to a thick steel blade, fifteen inches long and four inches wide. Thus encumbered, a tree planter scrambled across clear-cuts—called units—many of which were so steep the hoedad doubled as an anchor to keep the planter from slipping downslope. If someone kicked loose a rock or a log, and it started rolling, it was that person’s responsibility to immediately shout, “Rock!” or “Log!” One of the crews was, in fact, called the Log Rollers. Though many planters wore hard hats, many did not. And, anyway, a hard hat wasn’t much good against a log or a boulder that had picked up a head of steam on a seventy-degree slope.

While simply getting around on the slopes, weighed down by trees and a tool, was exhausting by itself, the act of planting each tree proved equally exhausting: raise the hoedad, slam it sideways to the ground to clear a spot, raise it again, slam the blade into the ground, pull up on the handle to open a hole, bend low and gently place a seedling in the hole, tamp the hole shut with the tip of the blade, then, finally, give a boot-heel stomp next to the

tree to assure an airtight fit. No matter the weather or the condition of the unit, if you wanted to earn a decent day’s pay, you had to complete that sequence as fast as you were able, hundreds of times a day.

Since I was a rookie and had not yet acquired the skill of planting with accuracy and speed, I volunteered to be a tree runner each of my first five days of the contract. As a tree runner I carried triple the weight that a planter carried, ferrying bundles of seedlings from the top of the unit, down and across the slope, to people who were running low on trees. With three full bags strapped to my shoulders and hips, I hobbled along like a pack mule, up and over logs, tripping repeatedly on vine maple, constantly shifting my burden to lessen the painful blistering of my shoulders and hips. At the end of the week I took a hundred-dollar advance on my pay and left camp. I found out later that bets had been placed on whether or not I would return. But in three days I was back—refreshed and motivated—with a bigger tent and a bale of hay for a bed.

While I was gone, several more crew members had arrived, bringing with them a menagerie of vehicles and living quarters as varied as the people who owned them. Among others, they included Larry Weinberg’s battered green ’53 International Travelall; Gale Houlihan’s mini-yurt; a tar paper-covered A-frame that sheltered Jerry Scoggins and his mysterious friend, Colt 45; The Ritz, a shake-sided house, complete with windows, a door, back porch, and gable roof, built on a 1948 International flatbed truck and owned by a Civil War scholar named Smitty; Viki’s high-tech nylon dome tent; a 1955 Volkswagen van, the home of another Larry—Weinerman; a huge World War II blackout tent that housed Greg, Annette, Nick, and Jean; John Bingle’s four-man tent with the red Opel station wagon parked in front; Bonnie and Judah’s Chevy flatbed, a half-size version of The Ritz—and the crew bus.

The crew bus was an old orange school bus, originally used to move everybody and their gear from contract to contract. Now it was home for Dirk, Bruce, Leonard, Buck, Ray, and Lars. If you lived on the crew bus it was because you were new and hadn’t yet scratched together a decent camp scene of your own, which was the case with Ray, Dirk, and Lars—or you were one of three veterans on the crew who drank a lot. In that case, a clean and comfortable camp scene was just not one of your priorities.

Other Hoedad crews, like the Logrollers, Mudsharks, or Natural Wonders, would not have tolerated the likes of Buck, Leonard, and Bruce, but these guys were founding members of Cougar Mountain—the original Hoedad crew. And, despite the fact that they had seen more productive days on the slopes, they had taught many of the current crew, myself included, how to plant trees. In fact, their willingness to give just about anyone a shot at being on the crew had helped to cement Cougar Mountain’s reputation for both tolerance and a somewhat high turnover. By my third year with Cougar Mountain, new members had replaced two-thirds of the crew.

It’s 5:00 a.m., the fourth week of the contract. Park Creek camp is dark and still but charged with potential energy. I am burrowed into my sleeping bag. A voice cuts through the frosty morning air, drifts with a slight echo over the sleeping and now waking planters: “Hot cakes! Maaapple syrup! Bacon and eggs! Home fries! Fresh orange juice! Hot coffeee!” It’s John Sundquist. In an effort to drum up support for the crew’s latest experiment in cooperation, he is walking slowly from one end of camp to the other, reciting this morning’s breakfast offerings. For those on the newly instituted meal plan, breakfast, like all other crew gatherings, will be in the crew yurt: a portable living space, twenty-four feet in diameter. The floor of the yurt is covered with straw, and in the center sits a cast-iron woodstove. Above and around the stove hang an assortment of rancid socks, long johns, and mud-spattered pants and shirts, dried to cardboard stiffness, awaiting another day of abuse.

Around camp, lanterns, candles, and flashlights flick to life, as planters are roused from their slumbers by Sundquist’s seductive menu. The person in charge of breakfast is a woman named Sandra, an experienced camp cook who previously worked for an oil pipeline crew in the Alaskan outback. We are paying her a mere thirty dollars a day, which, for her, starts at 3:00 a.m. Sundquist, the brainchild behind the new meal plan, is convinced that such a plan will boost crew morale by providing an affordable, high-quality alternative to the time-consuming tedium of individual meal planning, preparation, and cleanup. By the end of the contract, the crew food plan would be phased out, but this was its grand beginning—and Sundquist was looking like a genius.

After breakfast, getting to work is the next order of the day. But today there is a problem—the orange crummy won’t start. A crummy is a large passenger vehicle, seating anywhere from eight to eighteen people. Cougar Mountain’s crummies are both mid-1960s, nine-passenger Chevy panel trucks, previously used to transport logging crews. Steve Berger, a recent recruit who doubles as the crew mechanic, is bent over the engine while people mill around in various stages of being ready for work—sipping coffee, brushing teeth, braiding hair, tying bootlaces, complaining about somebody’s dog again: “That damn cur ripped me off for two pounds of cheese.” Bob Marley pulses from Judah’s boom box: “Get up, stand up. Stand up for your rights.” Judah, whose given name is Robert, was raised in Harlem. He’s also a “high roller,” one of the half-dozen or so crew members who consistently plant the most trees. Anxious to hit the slopes, he’s fired up the yellow crummy, drawing the immediate attention of others who would prefer to get started. The not-so-anxious are perfectly willing to hang out and wait for Steve Berger to fix the orange crummy. Bruce, who had no intention of going to work today, volunteers to cook some rocks for tonight’s sweat bath. Leonard agrees to help. I jump on board the yellow crummy, joining Nick, Jean, Vicki, Jesse, Joe, John Bingle, John Sundquist, John Ivey, and the two Larrys.

With two inspectors in a BLM truck leading the way, the crummy pulls out of Park Creek Camp, snaking its way up and around hairpin turns and dodging fully loaded log trucks as they barrel down through the mountains, in the other direction, to the saw mills in Coos Bay. The crummy is aptly named. Seating is cramped. The floor is littered with small chunks of dried mud, old lunch bags, the odd decayed glove, bits of newspaper, marijuana seeds, and the ubiquitous stray pages of previous planting contracts. A small sign just above the windshield reads NO FARTING. Planting bags are stuffed behind the rear seat, and a homemade wooden rack on the roof secures each person’s hoedad. Impaled on the tip of the crummy’s antenna is a petrified potato, wrapped in aluminum foil, somebody’s solution to poor reception on the radio.

After an hour-long, gut-jarring ride, we arrive at today’s work site. This particular unit is a fifty-acre “clean burn,” an effort to thoroughly scarify the ground so that new trees will have plenty of space to grow. All that remains of the



logging operation is blackened stumps and the occasional charred vestige of a tree limb or trunk left behind, unfit for the mill. Today's unit will be a refreshing change from the last one: a sixty-six-acre, seventy-degree, north-facing slope, covered in clothes-ripping, shin-busting piles of tree limbs and brush, otherwise known as "slash." In between the slash piles grew tall, dense patches of vine maple and the dreaded devil's club—you bump it, you get stabbed. Bisecting this unit from top to bottom ran a steep narrow canyon, flanked by slabs of loose shale. Moving ten feet in any direction required careful calculation. Since it was often impossible to see other planters, you had to use voice contact to keep your bearings and to make sure that no area got missed. That would have been a violation of the contract, and no crew wanted to risk tarnishing the Hoedad name. So if there was a plantable spot on the face of one of those canyon walls, and you had to crawl to get to it, then that's what you did. Compared to that hellish unit, today's is a cakewalk.

We fill our tree bags with seedlings, then engage in a brief strategy session, deciding which edge of the unit to follow, which direction the planted rows should run, who will run trees, and who will represent the crew when dealing with the BLM inspectors. The inspectors follow behind the planters and, from time to time, survey a plot of trees to check for accurate spacing and planting quality. Like most BLM and U.S. Forest Service contracts, this one requires that trees be planted eight feet apart, tightly, and with the roots pointing straight down. Since everybody's pay was affected by the inspectors' reports, there was constant pressure to do high-quality work. An important, basic lesson I learned my first week of planting was one that Buck, a Vietnam veteran and expert conga player, had taught me: "It takes just as long to plant a tree the wrong way as it does the right way."

Joe Earp, small and wiry, with a red goatee and silver hard hat, is the first person on the unit. Joe is a distant relative of the famous gunslinger Wyatt Earp. He is also the highest of the high rollers on the crew. As "lead" planter, he will plant a line of trees along the edge of the unit. If you want to follow Joe, you can't waste any time. Otherwise, you'll have to drop back and let a faster planter take your place. Today, determined to keep up with him, I follow close behind, using each of his planted trees as

benchmarks for the placement of mine. I move with a controlled, flowing rhythm, expending the least amount of energy possible, pacing myself so that Joe remains only a few trees ahead of me. In turn, he responds to my enthusiasm by pushing himself just a bit harder. Likewise, Jesse Garrett follows my trees, Judah is pushing him, and so on down the line—all the way back to the last planter on the unit.

An hour later I am sweating and thirsty. With each step and each swing of my hoedad, soot that covers the ground puffs into a cloud around my feet and blackens my legs. By the end of the day, I'm spitting black, and my feet and back are aching, but I've managed to keep up with Joe the whole day. And that feels good.

With only a quarter of the unit finished, we pile into the crummy and head back to camp—dirty, reeking, and starving. On the way, we smoke Oregon bud and discuss the progress of the contract and the latest prospects for spring work. The road is dark. We huddle and shiver and grow quieter as the miles twist by. When we finally pull into Park Creek camp, a couple of dogs run up to greet us. Dinner is waiting in the yurt—it is Mexican night.

I walk to my tent, grab a flashlight, and make my way to Park Creek, where I wash my face and hands in painfully cold water. A few minutes later, I'm in the yurt wolfing down tacos and heaps of just-made salsa. Dessert is Oregon blueberries and whipped cream.

After dinner I head for the sweat lodge. Park Creek camp is situated in a grove of two-hundred-year-old myrtlewood trees. Sometimes called bay myrtle, or bay laurel, they are known for their beautiful hardwood and aromatic leaves. Long strands of gray-green moss hang from their gnarly branches, like an image from a Tolkien landscape. With crowns that sprawl seventy feet across, their leaves block all light from the moon and stars.

The sweat lodge sits on a broad, flat gravel bar on a bend in the creek. I arrive just in time. Bruce, who built and tended the fire all day, is shoveling red-hot rocks the size of grapefruits into a small depression in the center of a twelve-foot diameter dome-shaped structure made of bent alder poles and covered with old sleeping bags, blankets, and canvas tarps.

Buck's raspy voice: "There's room for one more in here."

Bruce: "Person—or rock?"

Several voices: "Both!"

I quickly strip down, hang my clothes and towel on a myrtlewood branch, and crawl through the small V-shaped flap of the doorway. Nick's flashlight directs me to the last open spot in a circle of eight seated bodies. I sit down on a thick layer of moss. The light flicks off, leaving only the faint orange-red glow of the rocks. We sit, silent and motionless, for a few minutes as the dry heat builds.

"Ready for steam?" asks Larry Weinerman.

Again, several voices: "Yes, go for it. Just a little at first. Don't fry us."

"Sounds like a consensus," says Weinerman, as he ladles a cup of creek water onto the rocks. An angry hiss cuts the air, sending up an unseen cloud, which, seconds later, settles on us unmercifully. I squirm a bit, as if moving will somehow decrease the heat. The discomfort, though, is short-lived. In a few minutes my body is covered with a mingling of sweat and steam, bathing me in an exquisite, penetrating warmth. Weinerman tosses more water on the rocks, pushing the heat to just shy of unbearable. Buck proclaims what we are all feeling: "Oh, yeah. It hurts so good."

While I still have the strength, I scrub myself with a loofah sponge and splash a handful of creek water in my face. Leonard waves a myrtlewood branch through the steam, releasing the pungent vapor of bay leaves. We breathe deep. After ten minutes I am feeling light-headed. Buck begins to chant, a low droning *ohm*. The circle joins in. Briefly, we transcend the heat.

Outside, Bruce has added huge chunks of fir bark to the fire in preparation for our exit. Then, one-by-one, like slow-moving beasts emerging from a long sleep, we crawl from our steamy cave onto the fire-lit gravel bar. Buck plunges into the frigid creek and lets loose a heart-stopping scream that echoes eerily through the air. I stand by the fire, lost in the hypnotic leaping of the flames.

A light rain begins to fall, nudging me from my trance. I dry off quickly and get dressed. While the others crawl back into the sweat lodge, I walk back to the yurt, stopping at my tent to pick up a ten-cent copy of Joseph Conrad's *Victory*.

In the yurt, Joe and Ray are playing chess, John Bingle is reading a novel by Paul Bowles, and Smitty is writing in his journal. I read a few pages of *Victory* but struggle to keep my eyes open, so I say good night and trudge wearily to my tent. Nestled in my bed of hay, I listen for a while to

the pit-pat of the rain, savoring my comfort, the warmth, the sweet sleep that pulls at me like a pain-killing drug.

The Coos Bay contract lasted for five more weeks. During that time we threw a yurt-rocking birthday party for John Sundquist, fought with the BLM over contract violations, and took a few more sweat baths. We drove to the nearby town of Sumner (pop. 51) for pickup volleyball with the locals on Saturday nights, entertained some visitors from Eugene, saw a few people quit and a few new people join. But mostly, we got up before sunrise, took long winding crummy rides past logging trucks and herds of elk to charred or slash-covered clear-cuts, where we labored on the slopes, planting trees.

**Tim Clancy** is a former English teacher who grew up in a huge family in metro Detroit and now resides in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He's married to Patti and has two daughters, Nora and Tess, who live in New York City.

## THOMAS CHRISTENSEN

# Interview with Tim Clancy

Catamaran editor Thomas Christensen had the opportunity to talk with Tim Clancy about his work as a tree planter with Hoedads Cooperative Inc., a worker-owned tree planting and forestry labor cooperative based in Eugene, Oregon. Hoedads was active throughout the American West from 1971 to 1994. For several years they were the country's largest worker-owned cooperative. They were noted for their success in applying the cooperative model to tree planting. To begin, we asked how his Hoedads work affected him in his subsequent life.

**Tim Clancy:** The work I did during my years as a tree planter was one of the formative experiences of my life. Eugene, Oregon, in the 1970s was a center of progressive politics and alternative lifestyles. It was here that Hoedads Inc. emerged and prospered as part of a community that embraced entrepreneurship, sustainability, and respect for democratic consensus. I am fortunate to have lived in that place and era. The experience has continued to shape my values and outlook to this day.

**Thomas Christensen:** It sounds like hard work.

**Tim Clancy:** For the first few weeks, the actual work of planting trees was so physically demanding that, at the end of each day, food, rest, and companionship were glorious balms, producing the kind of simple contentment that only comes with such labor. Week in and week out, my strength improved and my daily tree totals mounted. I felt a growing sense of satisfaction for the value of my efforts. After all—I had to remind myself of this—I was not there for the scene, for the rustic wilderness setting, the crew parties, the exotic vibe. I was actually trying to earn a living and save some money. Tree planting tested my physical limits, and I passed the test. Ever since then, things like digging a ditch, fixing a roof, or moving a piano have all seemed easy compared to tree planting. I no longer shy away from a physical challenge, though I did learn the important corollary that hard labor takes a toll on one's body. It's best if your occupation doesn't lead to permanent back problems or arthritic hands or knees. At the end of the third year, along with a new appreciation for those who work the land with hand tools, I also had a new appreciation for the value of a college degree, for alternative ways of earning a living.

**Thomas Christensen:** Tell us a little about how the business worked. I guess there were regular meetings of the staff?

**Tim Clancy:** Along with what I learned about forest ecology and the value of a hard day's work, I learned the basics of running a business: how to acquire and complete a legal contract; how to accurately and legally account for daily earnings and expenses; how to efficiently and

equitably share the responsibilities of maintaining jointly owned property; how, in the end, to maintain a legally profitable, self-sustaining, and dignified enterprise.

Learning to get along with the twenty-or-so partners on my crew—each with his or her own unique personality and style—taught me the value of flexibility, empathy, and not sweating the small stuff when it comes to just simply getting along. The meetings, which often involved long discussions of work-related issues and the inevitable interpersonal (or inter-crew) conflicts, were a revelation, not so much for their occasional drama as because they were run by democratically elected officers, using *Robert's Rules of Order* to keep things efficient, transparent, and fair. Such meetings were completely new to me then, but I've since found *efficient, transparent, and fair* to be a pretty good organizing template for just about any group that wants to succeed. The meetings were sometimes fraught. Tempers could flare. But, more often than not, especially after a long day of deliberations at a big co-op-wide meeting, a satisfying conclusion would result. And then two to three hundred people would have a huge feast and a huge party, featuring a really hot band and hours of unbridled indulgence in beer, pot, and dancing. This highly successful process reinforced a simple principal that has guided my adult life, and it's one that I've tried to model and instill in my own kids and my students: work now, play later.

**Thomas Christensen:** So in laying the foundations for new forest communities you developed an appreciation of the value of human community.

**Tim Clancy:** My coworkers gave me a chance. They supported me in the early days and, in the following years, trusted me to be the crew rep in the field and the bidding rep at meetings back in Eugene. I have an indelible memory of my crewmates and I piling into cars and traveling to the state capital in Salem to lobby our representatives to vote against a law—supported by our competition in the private reforestation industry—that threatened our survival. We also campaigned for a ban on the U.S. Forest Service's use of carcinogenic herbicides. While I was with Hoedads, we lent money to nascent businesses in Eugene—an auto repair shop, restaurant, and credit union, all co-ops—and frequently joined forces

with other organizations to promote sustainable land-use policies and progressive candidates for public office. Sure, most of my time was spent simply trying to make a living planting trees, but I was also often engaged in working cooperatively with others for a righteous cause. This type of community and political action set the stage for a life in which I would continue to pursue that same ideal.

Following my first year as a Hoedad, I continued working with Cougar Mountain Crew on contracts that took us to the Olympic Peninsula in Washington, Eastern Oregon, the Idaho panhandle, and central and southwest Colorado. Besides finding gainful and satisfying employment that kept me afloat and afforded me enough savings to start a home in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, my legacy as a tree planter, like that of every other person who has tried this line of work—whether as a Hoedad or not—is the work we did and what it produced. With our backs bent toward the earth and a bag of seedlings at our sides, we used our bare hands to create new forests throughout the West.

**Thomas Christensen** has published more than twenty books as author, editor, or translator including the best seller *Like Water for Chocolate* (cotranslated with Carol Christensen). His translation of selected poems of José Ángel Valente, *Landscape with Yellow Birds*, was nominated for a 2014 Northern California Book Award. In 2012 he released a hard-back nonfiction book, *1616: The World in Motion*, to much acclaim. His writing has also been published in many magazines and newspapers including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Playboy*, *Omni*, and *Harper's Magazine*, as well as in reviews and journals. He is a former member of the National Book Critics Circle.