

CHET DALBALSKY RETURNS TO WOODS AFTER YEARS SPENT ON LONG ISLAND 04/11/00

Awhile back I expounded on the several reasons I started and continue to write this column. As I began this one I realized there was one reason I left out. It's the several new and interesting people I have come to know in the process.

The latest came about as a lead from Rick Hunkins, local excavating and logging contractor. They met at one of our local watering holes and mutual interests in both businesses Rick pursues forged a friendship. Rick realized that because of the same reasons and our age, he was someone I should get to know.

He is Chet Dalbalsky, a young 77 year-old Boonville and Forestport native. The family home was a farm on the Kervin Road between the two communities. Chet epitomizes the old adage, "You can take the boy out of the country, but not the country out of the boy."

Chet left the North Country a few years after returning from the service in the 40s. After a few forays in the woods as a Cat skinner, he headed for Long Island where prospects were better. Marriage and economic prosperity held him there throughout his working years but his heart never left the North Country.

Now that he has retired he divides his time between the two areas. A cottage on Spruce Drive in Thendara allows him to pursue his interests in the old neighborhood.

After the war, Chet, like most servicemen, was languishing in the '52-20 Club', a government program providing \$20 a week for 52 weeks. It was meant to allow a stable transition back to civilian life and work. It was a good deal when you consider that draft beer was only a dime. He and a buddy soon tired of the inactivity and began to consider finding a job.

They heard of a logging operation in the backwoods north of Speculator and headed that way. The job was back in 18 miles from the main road and the lumberjacks stayed in camp during the workweek. Hank Rice, who was also a partner in the veneer mill in McKeever, was the operator. They hitched a ride to the camp and conned their way into jobs as Cat operators for which they had no experience.

Early Caterpillar dozers were used for skidding logs and building access roads, but were a far cry from their counterparts today. Significantly missing were roll bars or protective canopies around the operators, factors that made them extremely dangerous for inexperienced

operators. Luckily, both men survived and honed skills that stood them in good stead for the rest of their lives.

The job ended with an altercation in the Osborne Hotel over the proprietor's refusal to cash their paychecks. Rumors that the sheriff was looking for the participants caused them both to seek employment in a new locale.

Chet continued woods work on and off in the following years, meeting many of the people whose names are associated with woodsmen of that era. As we visited several mutual acquaintances surfaced, though our personal paths had not crossed until years later. We both enjoyed a good laugh over many who were legendary characters.

Cyril Courier was one in particular. Cyril was a loader operator who was famous for never wearing socks. No matter how cold the weather, he wore high leather boots, sans socks, in seeming comfort, a practice he continued even in his Army days.

Chet visited Gil Martin's logging operation with me. It was a nostalgic look at part of his early days in the woods. Gil demonstrated cutting logs with a modern-day slasher, a process that is so simply amazing to one who left the profession while chain saws were still a new innovation.

We ended our visit reminiscing about many of the familiar names and people we both knew in the area. Some of them were Larry Liddle, Guy Ritter, Art Jones, Harold Everett, and the Gallaghers – Floyd, Ed and Stub. Another Gallagher was Joe, Parker Snead's father's caretaker of the family camp on Honnedaga Lake.

Chet left the areas, as I stated earlier, for greener pastures on Long Island. He returns whenever he can to his old stomping grounds from his cottage in Thendara. If you run into him, say hello, or if you have not seen or heard from him in years, look him up. He's in the phone book and would be happy to talk over old times with you.