

# Peeling the Tanoak



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I was introduced to the tanoak world.

by Warren Ormsby

My family moved from Middletown [California] to Westport, a small town on the Mendocino Coast some twenty miles north of Fort Bragg, in 1891. There were four of us children: twin sisters four years older than I, and a half-brother two years younger. I was seven years old at the time. [Mr. Ormsby was born January 7, 1884.] Mother was a widow in rather poor health and was having a hard time keeping a roof over our heads and a little food on the table. Not to mention clothes and other items. Due to this, we three older children were working away from home most of the time.

When I was eleven years old [1895], I was introduced to the tanoak world. The gathering of this bark was quite an industry along the [Mendocino] coast and offered welcome employment to a number of men during the summer months. The going wage was forty dollars per month and board, and forty-five dollars per month was offered to a few who layed out the sled roads and trails over which the bark was conveyed to the wagon roads. [At age 14, Mr. Ormsby began drawing this premium wage for laying out trails.]

The tanoak, so far as I know, grew only in the Coast Range belt of redwoods, and I have noted it from Santa Cruz to Humboldt County. These tanoak trees were not to be found along streams or on the lower levels of the hills, but grew in heavy numbers towards the tops of the ridges. In texture the tanoak is much like the white oak common in the valleys east of the Coast Range in California. Unlike the white oak, however, it is an evergreen and grows as a rule in one straight body [trunk], whereas the white oak, black oak, and mush oak may branch out into two or three growths a few feet above the ground and shed their leaves each season, as do most broadleaf trees.

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*Mr. Ormsby's recollections in manuscript form were complemented by a field trip to the scenes of his boyhood in June 1971, in the company of his son-in-law, W. H. Hutchinson. Mr. Hutchinson has arranged the manuscript and oral recollections for their appearance here, occasionally adding explanatory or supplemental material in brackets. He is professor of history at Chico State College, Chico, California and has published many books and articles on California history. Photos courtesy of Mrs. Nannie Escola, Mendocino, California.*

The bark of this tree was much in demand in those days, as it was used in the tanning of leather. I am not familiar with how the tanneries extracted the juice from the bark, or how it was used, never having the opportunity to visit such a plant. Having nothing to do with clerical work, there was no way I could have found out what prices were paid for this bark except by asking questions. And if I had asked, I would have been told that it was none of my business.

The tanoak in average growth measured from about eighteen inches to three feet in diameter, and in height about the same as other oaks, say thirty to fifty feet. Occasionally we might find an old tree four feet in diameter but this was the exception.

The bark of this tree, of course, was rough with ridges, and measured in thickness from about three inches to very thin bark near the top. In peeling the bark from the tree, one-half inch thickness was the thinnest we would take, as thinner bark than this would not stand the rough handling necessary to get it to its destination.

My introduction to this world came, as I have said, when I was eleven. My future brother-in-law and a man named Enlow, I think, were given a contract by George Stevenson, who ran a livery stable and feed store in Westport. We were to peel and stack 500 cords of tan bark on a wagon road along a ridge top where it could be loaded into wagons. They received five dollars per cord for this and they paid all expenses, such as hired help, food, tools used, and the hire of mules to pack the bark to the wagon road. Mules were used whenever possible, in preference to horses, as they were dainty eaters and not so apt to founder themselves and were more surefooted on the trails.

There were eight of us in this first crew I was in — an old gent who did the cooking and seven working in the woods. It was the custom for men to work in pairs in peeling this bark, so there would be one man on each side of the tree when it was down. I, being young and small, did not rate a partner but felled and peeled my trees by myself. A three-and-one-half pound poleaxe was the only instrument used in this operation, no crosscut saws being employed. We began peeling about mid-May, 7



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as by then the sap had risen enough to make it easy. The first four-foot section of bark was removed while the tree was standing, and we took off the bark as far down along the spreading roots as possible, because this was the richest in tannin. Then the tree was felled and rings were notched with the axe around the trunk at four-foot intervals. The top was split between these rings and the bark peeled off in four-foot lengths.

Once removed, the bark was placed inside-up facing the sky, and then left until it was dry enough to stand being transported out to the wagon road. Generally the first bark peeled would be dry enough

for this by mid-July. It was considered a day's work if a team could peel two cords of bark per day. Thus, two men who could peel four cords a day were considered good woodsmen. In those days we worked six days a week, from six o'clock in the morning — and this meant you were in the woods ready to go to work at six o'clock — and we quit work in the woods at six o'clock in the evening. Most contractors expected you to take but a half-hour for lunch, so unless you were working very near the cook house, one had to take his lunch with him when he started out in the morning.

After the bark was peeled, it was stacked handy to the trails that had been laid out. When this had been all done, Mr. Enlow and I were left in the camp. We had two pack mules each on which the bark was loaded and taken to the wagon road. An ordinary wooden packsaddle was used. Hooked over the crosses of the saddle, hanging down on each side, was a pair of iron hooks. Eyes had been fashioned in the curled-up end of each hook in which straps were attached; the straps on one side having eyelets, the other set buckles. These straps were drawn tight to hold the load in place. The only trick in loading and unloading was to see that the load was kept balanced; otherwise, one would perhaps cause a mule to fall or the load would slip to the heavy side.

Mr. Enlow and I finished packing the bark late in September and it soon was in Westport ready to be loaded on shipboard. There were five of these landings north of Fort Bragg that I remember — Westport, Hardy Creek, Rockport, Usal, and Shelter Cove. I worked at all these landings and Shelter Cove was fifty miles north of Westport. I know because I walked from Westport there in one day later on.

I was paid fifteen dollars per month on this, my first job — a lot of money for an eleven-year old and a great help to the family. We were paid once a month, on Saturdays as I remember, and after supper in camp I would walk into Westport, getting there about midnight. After Sunday supper at home, I would walk back to camp to be ready to go to work at six o'clock Monday morning. The winter I was twelve [1895-96], this same Mr. Enlow and a Mr. Lee were hired by Mr. Dunn, a businessman of Westport, to build a road into a stand of tanoak timber. Mr. Enlow managed to get me a place to work with them, again at fifteen dollars per month. This road ran along a small stream about three miles north of Rockport. There was no sawmill running at Rockport then, the last one having shut down, I was told, in 1892 because they had run out of timber they could reach. Nothing but tie camps and tan-bark camps, maybe forty of them all told, and about a hundred people in and around Rockport.

Many men lived alone in these tie camps, spending the winter making redwood ties for the rail-



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roads. [During the month of May, 1896, Mendocino County sent 58,098 ties to San Francisco.] These were split out and shaped with a broadaxe to proper size, 6 x 8 x 8 feet. [These brought the "tie-whack" ten cents each.] When I was a little older and out of work in the tanoak, I was often hired by these men to help fell their trees. Often I would spend two weeks or more helping fell enough redwoods to last them through the winter for tie-making. I was paid one dollar per day and board and I wonder that we have any redwoods left when I look back at the tremendous waste. At the first limb, the tree was considered of no further value and the balance was left to decay in the forest. We did the same thing with the tanoak trunks, leaving them to rot in the woods. [In later years, some

tanoak lumber was used in railroad cars.]

The year I was twelve was the last time I worked for fifteen dollars per month. The next year I went to work for Chris Hansen, a tan-bark contractor, and I worked for him for five years [1897-1901]. He always had two or more camps going each year; each camp taking tan bark from quarter-section claims and then moving to another if the season permitted. [Whether these were Homestead or Timber and Stone Act claims is not known to Mr. Ormsby.] He was very kind to me as an employer, and I would get sent out late in March or early in April to assist in locating a campsite and erecting buildings to accommodate the crew. Usually there were four of us in this first crew and we often had to build a short section of road to the

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campsite. We would build the road first, then erect the cookhouse and a bunkhouse. The usual crew for peeling tan bark was six men, sometimes eight if it was a late season, so the houses were small buildings. We would endeavor to have the cookhouse a bit lower than the source of water, so gravity could be used. An oak whiskey barrel with the top cut out was placed on a platform near the kitchen door and the water conveyed to it via a trough made from the bark of a small tree.

We constructed the buildings from materials at hand on the site. We would select a redwood we knew to have a straight grain, which an experienced woodsman can tell by noting the bark, and fell it, saw off an eight-foot section and split this into eight- to ten-inch squares. Then we used a frow to split these squares into boards about an inch thick, and if the tree was true grain, the boards would be about the same thickness at both ends. These houses were built for summer use and only had to be fairly rain-proof and we did not have to be careful as to fittings [joints and laps]. Mr. Hansen, as I have mentioned, often had two or more camps, so when we finished preparing one camp site, we moved to the other and did the same there. Generally we were through building camps by late April or early May. Then the crews would be moved in and I would start laying out trails to the nearest wagon road. Often I was left alone to finish packing out the bark, cooking for myself, and taking care of the mules, while the crew went to another camp, or were let go for the winter.

The men I worked with in these camps were predominantly bachelors, drifting from place to place wherever the work was to be found. So each year one saw new faces in the camps. As a whole, they were good workers, men who took pride in doing a good day's work, as with most men of this type. Men who work hard and play hard. There were among them those who liked their liquor, so there was quite a bit of drinking going on in the camps. But not one of these men offered me a drink, nor in any way encouraged me to do so, though there were at times some pretty rough characters among them. The advice they gave me had a great deal to do with shaping my attitude towards my fellow man.

From the time I went to work for Chris Hansen until I left Westport, I built a small shack of my own to sleep in as I did not care for the type of conversation being carried on most of the time in the bunkhouse by the older men. They being, as I have mentioned, mostly bachelors, their main topic was women and their early conquests of the same. Not very interesting conversation for me and I also was very fond of reading and could usually manage

to find a book of some kind to read until it got too dark to see. Candles and kerosene lamps were not very common in these camps.

The food, as a rule, was wholesome and good, though fresh meat was seldom had. Salt pork and corned beef were used mostly. You received a day's pay if you fetched a deer into camp and I was successful in doing this several times hunting on Sundays. We mostly had women cooks in Hansen's camps; the husband worked in the woods and the wife did the cooking.

Two of the men who always went out early to select the sites and build these camps for Mr. Hansen lived in Westport and were the foremen of Hansen's camps. These men worked the same as the other men, and I do not know what they were paid. They kept our time, directed the men to where they were to work, and of course they could hire and fire who they wished. One of these men was rather a rugged character and his conversation was spiced with words one was not supposed to use in polite society. He had for a wife an Indian woman. After my mother moved to Healdsburg, I had to stay in a hotel whenever I was in Westport. On two occasions, this man invited me to stay at his home overnight. I thought his wife was a very fine person; she was gentle, kind, and very nice to me.

Rockport had a short, narrow-gauge railroad running back into the woods. A little locomotive took the cars, we called them "trucks," of ties and tan bark out to the landing, a big rock offshore that had been levelled off, whenever a ship came in, which was once or twice a month. Generally no ships at all called between about mid-November and late February, which was the worst of the winter season along the coast. The Dollar Steamship Company operated most of these small vessels that operated along the coast while I was there. They no doubt were shallow draft, as they had to come quite close to shore to load. Sailors did all the work on the ship, and longshoremen were used only to handle the cargo on shore. I helped several times in loading these ships when I was out of work in the tan bark camps.

The last year I worked in the tanoak [1901] was at Hardy Creek, a landing north of Westport. When we were through work that fall, I had saved up about 125 dollars and boarded a small ship loaded with tan bark from the camp where I had worked and sailed for San Francisco. We did not put in at any of the docks about the Bay but sailed direct to Benicia where the bark was to be unloaded. I did not wait to see this but caught the first train for San Francisco to go to business school and that ended my days in the tanoak. □