

SPAR POLE

My friend Wally Shattuck was telling me about a redwood spar pole he discovered while falling timber in the Jackson State forest. He was going to climb the pole he said and retrieve a pass block left in the top by the old time climber. Now Wally asked if I'd go along with him and take some pictures. It sounded like a great adventure. So I told him I would. It was January, 1989.

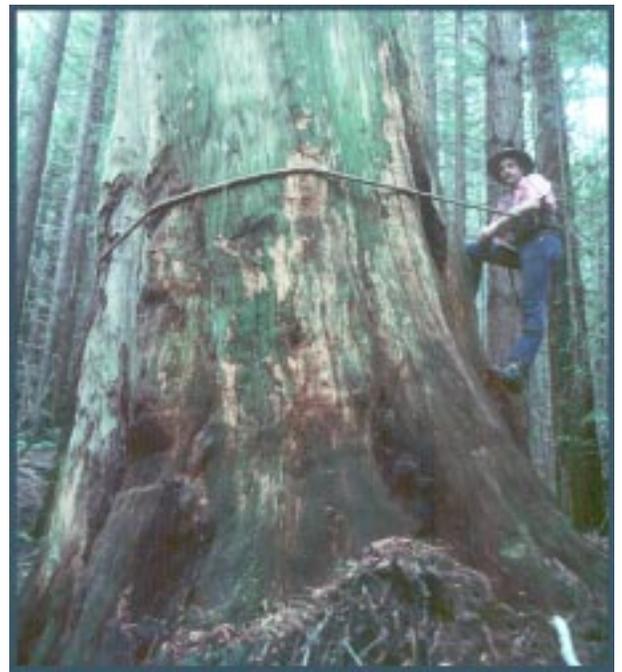
As Wally told me the story, he seen this high pole poking above the second growth timber across the gulch from where he was working. Though it was some distance away he thought he could see a block at the top. His curiosity egged him to take a closer look. So he set his saw down and hiked across the gulch. And yes! There was a block in it alright. He decided right then he was going to come back and get it. The state highway was just up the mountain from the pole and Wally hiked up to it to mark out his location for coming back later.

So we had a plan and the following weekend Wally and I drove out highway 20 and parked the truck at the location he made note of. We slung the ropes and gear over our shoulders and began our hike down slope towards this pole.

The second growth timber on the hillside was about eighty years old and it grew just as thick as hair on a dogs back. It was very dark under the trees, but I could make out the silhouette of this big pole ahead of us. Eight foot in diameter by 160 feet tall. There's some big gouges on the uphill side of it that show where logs had shot down the mountain and hit it real hard. You can only imagine how exciting it must have been when all that was going on.

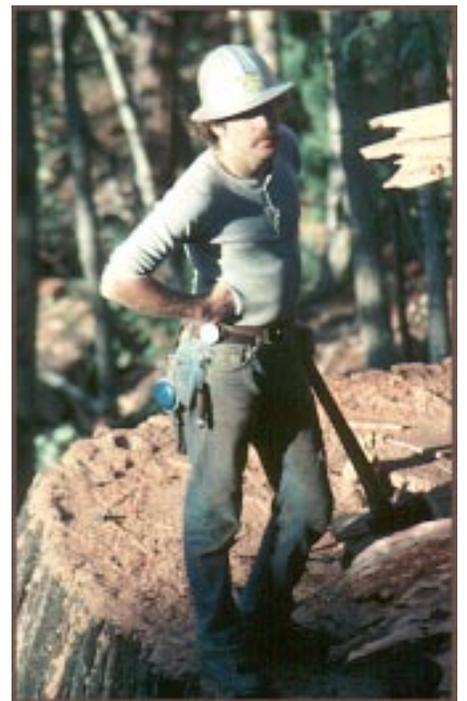


Wally was anxious to get started. So while he was putting on his belt and spurs I run a flip line around the pole for him. Then I set my camera on the tripod to get a picture of him on the pole. Light was scarce under the forest canopy, but I managed to get this one shot of Wally before he started up. Then I went over to a small Douglas fir. I was going to climb it and take a few pictures of Wally as climbed up the pole.



We figured the last person to climb the pole was around the turn of the century, and they took an axe and crosscut saw with them to cut all the limbs and top off of it. Now just cutting the limbs and top off a redwood wont always kill it. More times than not they'll sprout back new limbs and tops and keep right on growing. Though, it didn't happen with this tree. In fact, it didn't even sprout from the stump or roots. And that got me to thinking the old timers might of poisoned the stump too! To have it all sprouted would surely complicate their logging operations. We may never know all of what they did back then. Anyway, the bark is all gone off the pole and the sapwood has rotted and weathered away. Today it's a straight tapered gun barrel of pure heartwood and just about as smooth of a pole as you'll ever get. And such elements of any pole can be very unforgiving. Kicking out means a long fast fall if you don't clinch that flip-line quick enough to stop it! The thought of which was beginning to grow in the back of Wally's mind.

He's a witty and fun guy to be around. Always cracking jokes and laughing and making lite of things. Well, the higher Wally climbed up this pole the funnier he was being. But his antics on the pole were more of a safety valve to ease his fears than anything else. At about a hundred feet Wally stopped to rest and looked down. Then he looked over at me and said, "Boy, I don't know if that block is worth all this trouble, Jer." Oh, oh! Wally was having second thoughts. He picked off some rotten sapwood and uncovered a scor-



pions nest. He grimaced, “Oh, scorpions! I hate these things.” He knocked them off the pole and looked to the top and paused. That block looked farther away than ever now. Wally looked at me again and said, “Damn it! I made it this far, Jer. To hell with fear and loathing. I’m going to get that block.” With that said and done Wally started climbing without reservation. I know what he was going through. Because I’ve been there a few times myself in this high climbing business. Wally was already mulling over the dreadful thought of kicking out and falling down the pole. And when he found the scorpions nest that clinched it. He was ready to give it all up, but a bigger part of him wanted to conquer the pole and get the prize at the top. It was either go up, or give up. At times like that the decision you make will stick in your mind for the rest of your life. So Wally cast his fears aside and did what a man has to do!



I climbed just as high as I dare in the little fir and topped it out with my handsaw. That opened the view for me to get these pictures of Wally up there. The pole had no cross arm or limbs to keep from flipping your line over the top of it. Which brings to mind the story of a famous high pole climber flipping his rope over the top of a high pole once. His name was Danny Sailor, and that was the last high pole he ever climbed.

Wally reached over the top of the pole and unwrap the steel strap holding the block there. Just in case it was rusted he took an axe with him to chop through it. But he didn’t need to. He yelled down to me, “Hey, Jer, the sheave, shackle and everything else on this block is all free and working. Can you believe it?” He held the block out and told me he was going to drop it to the ground. It surprised me, and I reminded Wally to toss it out far enough so it didn’t hit the base of the pole. With a flip of the wrist he let it go.



About four seconds later we could hear and even feel the solid thump of that block hitting the ground. “I wonder if I’d sound like that if I fell from here,” Wally said. “I don’t think you’d ever hear or feel a thing Wally. Least I didn’t when I fell out of the Montgomery Giant in ’81.” “Oh, yeah? Hmm...

“Enough of that kind of talk. Let’s get out of here,” he said. So Wally started hiking on down the pole. I had my climb line and tied-in to rappel out of the fir. Thinking about it now I suppose Wally could have rigged up a false crotch on the pole. Then he could’ve traversed into the fir to come down it. But neither one of us thought a thing about that before going up pole or tree that morning.

I made it down first and began looking for the block. I found a dent in the hillside where I figured it hit the ground, but heck if I could find it anywhere around there. When Wally made it down he joined in the search and for a while we both thought the block took a tumble down the hill. So we begin rustling through the sticks and leaves on the hillside below the pole. But it wasn’t there! “It’s got to be up there,” Wally said. So we went back to that dent in the hillside and Wally began digging. Oh, he was nearly frantic too, and up past his elbows in the earth. Then his eyes opened wide. “I got it, Jer! I think.” Wally dug deeper and pulled, and tugged and jerked and out of the ground popped that block. He let out such a big sigh of relief and said, “Man! After what I went through to get this thing, I could never live with myself for losing it.”

Wallys’ prize is a fine example of old blacksmiths art. Each piece is hand forged and fitted perfectly together. It’s in remarkable condition too. I don’t think you can buy a block off the shelf today and have it last as long as that one did in the weather for nearly a hundred years, and still work!

Wally and I packed up to the truck and then went to the Golden West saloon to celebrate. Once there we proceeded to swill beer, tell this tall tale and show off the proof of Wally’s exciting story. He was telling all of us that he should’ve taken the strap off the pole while he was up there too. “I guess I’ll have to climb it again,” he said jokingly. Well, the pole is still there for anyone that’s brave enough to go up and get it.

