

Natural Timber Country, a film by Ron Finne. 16 mm, color, 55 minutes. Available from Ron Finne, Route 1, Box 43, Springfield, Oregon 97477. Rental \$50; purchase \$600. Purchase includes a transcript of the sound track, glossary, and background notes.

by Jennifer Eastman

"Timber all around you, you just never figure you'd use it up . . ." Ron Finne's film Natural Timber Country, billed as "a documentary on old-time loggers, logging and the forests of the Pacific Northwest," begins in this reminiscent tone. The lumberman speaking lived to see the virgin timber of the final American frontier and to see its day pass. Complementing his words are the film's first visual images, a field of stumps and a virgin timber stand of trees ten feet or more in diameter. The effect, more didactic than documentary, is a film with an environmental message.

That message is demonstrated through Finne's camera work in the Northwestern forests of today, his field recordings of interviews with elderly loggers, and films and photographs from archives and personal collections depicting the oldtime logging practices that the loggers describe. The timber giants are felled and transported downhill; successively, we see trees cut, hauled and skidded, limbed and topped, and loaded aboard railway cars and hooked into rivers. The technique is primarily "sound-over," with but one segment of synchronous sound and action; excerpts of film and field tapes are meant to explain each other.

For the folklorist and the historian the historical photography and film footage is a prime interest. Here we are afforded an opportunity to view early twentieth century axe and saw work, for example. (The era is this reviewer's assumption, as Finne unfortunately does not date his materials.) On steep hillsides loggers set springboards in axed notches, using the boards as a foundation while they trade blows at a deep cut; the process is called "stump-rigging." A significant problem for the early logging operations was transporting logs after this cut was completed and the tree was felled. Archival footage shows the greased skid road and the necessary means of handling oxen and horses on them. (A good bull driver developed the art of cussing.) The steam spool donkey with its technique of ground rigging was among the earliest mechanical improvements. Sometimes moving only 100 feet in one day, the donkey had to be supplemented with human perseverance: "They used to say they could talk him in . . . Timber is traditionally referred to in the masculine."

This human dimension of the occupation is evident throughout the film in the loggers' narration, and it comprises an additional feature of interest to the folklorist. Pranks, numerous and dangerous, are especially remembered. "You're crazy to do it," one man comments, but nevertheless he had occasion to stand on top of trees after he limbed and topped them. Other stunts grew out of the skills essential to logging: riding logs down a skid road, moving six feet at a jump down a topped tree. Specialized as the skills were, any one logger could master many: the processes of climbing trees with spurs and rope, hooking logs with dogs and manipulating them into rivers, trucks, or railway cars, and river driving the peaveys.

The loggers' life at camp was little compensation for these everyday risks. One narrator's classic description of camp life runs, "two moonlight rides every day and a picnic lunch; what else would you want?" Other reminiscences reveal particularly memorable details. Felling a tree is, in retrospect, an event with environmental implications to men who have seen radical changes in the land within their lifetimes. "I hated to see a tree fell . . . a certain excitement, but there's also a certain sadness." They remember, too, the early political tensions, the "high ball" camps and the Wobbly disputes. The western bunkhouse is humorously recalled: "double deckers . . . one stove," with laundry steaming on the rafters.

To what degree, then, is Natural Timber Country a documentary? Its documentation lies within the visual medium, supplemented only with field recordings that are generally appropriate to the corresponding film splices. These field recordings comprise the sole narration, and nothing is added to tie one man's comments to the next. This assumes a well informed audience. Occupational jargon and procedures, such as the terms "peavey," "caulk," "donkey," confusing to the uninitiated, are defined from their visual context. No dates and places are mentioned; these derive from conjecture. Commendably, Finne recognizes his informants in the film's conclusion, but the accompanying credits give us town names only. It is a sign of provincialism that nowhere within the film is the region--the Pacific Northwest--stated explicitly. This is documentation as eclectic and variable in quality as any partially edited field collection.

This is not to condemn Natural Timber Country, but rather to qualify its value to academe. Oral history is not bad history; its methods are as careful of documentation and bias as any reportive history. Finne's film cannot be considered a thorough oral history; it is worthy of review as a visual and aural experience of the West in evolution.