

The Land Collector

by David Ackley

I remember when F__ told about walking by an auction and, hearing the bidding, stepped inside to put a closing bid of two hundred dollars on fifty acres of bare land. In his day, he says, land-- there being so much of it—had little more value than the air above it. He said he didn't particularly know what he was bidding on: it could easily have been 50 acres of vertical, or a bog under 3 inches of standing water. He hadn't exactly wanted the land, but on the spur of the moment it had become something personal; he couldn't stand being beat out of 50 acres at that price. It offended his private sense of worth.

Back then, a ten acre woodlot was just a container for so many board feet on the stump until the trees could be logged-off, hauled to the mill and sliced. The owner would sell the lot, land and all, for the stumpage, the estimated worth of the trees alone. The owner essentially threw in the land for nothing. Loggers like F__ made their money on the price at the millyard where the cut logs would be scaled and priced right on the truck. The land itself was almost of negative value since, without lumber on the stump it was most likely unsaleable for the foreseeable future(to the extent that any future is “foreseeable”), and the owner still had to pay the real estate taxes.

The thing was, F__ said, he never had any idea of making money on it either, he just accumulated land with never a thought of selling it. The transactions and land ownership were all incidental to his logging and later to the sawmill he started. He liked driving around and looking at these lots and acres of Southern New Hampshire scrub he'd picked up, or sometimes hiking across a piece to see if any new trees were coming in. I suppose he just enjoyed the feeling of ownership, without taking it or himself as landowner too seriously.

Sometimes, he'd get a tax bill for some lot a few towns over and not even be able to remember how or when he'd come by it, laughing at himself as he made out the check to the tax collector. It

never occurred to him that accepting land in these woodlot transactions, his willingness to pay taxes on worthless land, his casual purchase of 50 or 60 acres at auction for a couple hundred bucks was anything other than, at worst, a bad habit, at best a kind of whimsical hobby.

Becoming a millionaire landowner was the furthest thing from his mind. Once he'd got his own sawmill he just wanted to make a decent living for his family and his employees. Later he sold some of his old acreage for several million, for the shopping mall not far from the small, cheaply furnished house --with the white caddy almost as long as the driveway, parked outside--where he'd lived with his wife for more than sixty years and where every day after her death he talked to her, well into his nineties. She was an attractive, calm-looking woman in the one picture of I saw of them; he was even then, not much taller than her, but lean, with a logger's long muscles that put you in mind of steel cable.

To run a sawmill in his day you had to be tough; rather than fire someone for careless ways or not hopping when he was told, you might have to take him back of a shed and beat some sense into him. He could do it, but I think an underlying gentleness came out when he got old and didn't have to run the show, and his daughter, who was actually tougher by nature, took over the mill. Still, even as frail as he became, with his diminished height, the thin white hair and stooped crablike inching walk, a good deal of that inner toughness was on tap.

When the mall developer wouldn't meet his price, he just hung on to the desirable piece of the millyard, which was used mostly to store graying stacks of unsold boards, and just happened to flank the main road in to a growing town. He didn't really need their money, but in the end he was nobody's fool and they needed to know that. Every few months, they'd swing by with a better offer, F__ would smile, shake his head and keep adding more boards to the tall stacks. Finally, when greed got the better of them and they met his price to the dollar, he smiled again and this time nodded.

I think he liked me, at least we got along well. He was my father-in-law's oldest friend, with thirty years on me. If he did like me it might have been partly because I was the only professor he knew who'd ever worked in a sawmill, although a part of him must have wondered what I'd want to go and do a fool thing like that for. He had that idea that anyone who'd come close to college teaching was automatically a 'professor,' and I never tried to disabuse him. He was the only rich man I've ever cared about.

