

Summer adventure in B.C. well worth the problems

By GARRY J. MURCOCK
The Herald

On August 11, the Herald published a story on two Georgetown teenagers, Mark Duke and Scott Peterson, who travelled to British Columbia to take jobs as tree planters.

Their story was not one of success, the trip having been described as "disappointing" at best, although the two were glad they had the chance to drive across Canada.

However, two other Georgetown teenagers, Greg Fisher and Chris Thompson, who also headed to B.C. this summer to take on the same challenges, felt that their story needed to be told as well. Theirs is also one of hardship and tribulations, but both felt their summer spent as tree planters was a great success.

Greg and Chris arrived in Prince George, British Columbia in the middle of July by train. The two had found out before they left that the tree planting season wouldn't begin until July 20, but that there might be work in the form of burning the excess brush, although there were no guarantees.

The two headed west anyway and although they never got the job as burning, the company that hired them (Seneca Silviculture Limited) supplied them with a vehicle (the company paid for gas), a "ton of food" (which they weren't expected to pay for) and a place to stay at a cabin.

The cabin, the same which houses Mark Duke and Scott Peterson, had no electricity, no running water nor a phone, but according to Greg, did have a barbecue, propane stove and a wood burning stove. As the sun did not set until 10:30 at night, not having any electrical lights posed no problem.

"We got more than we were promised," Greg said. "We thought (when they told us there wasn't any immediate work) that we'd have to pay, pay, pay. They gave us a cabin, canoe, vehicle, gas money and food. It was like a vacation."

When the two finally did start their jobs as tree planters (at Fort St. James), the vacation came to an abrupt halt with the hard work.

The work site was anything from dirt hills to six-foot tall grass. In fact, both consider it to be probably one of the worst jobs they'll ever have.

"Everyone quit at some point or another," Greg said. "Even I did. For half a day, I was all packed and ready to leave. But I stayed."

Chris actually left the camp, having quit one night with several other tree-planters who decided to head home. He returned the next morning.

The job was very demanding. They awoke at 3 a.m. to a prepared breakfast. After making their own lunch from the food provided, they were then bused to the worksite where they then loaded up with saplings.

For the next eight hours or more (with breaks and lunch decided by the individual planter) the planting would go on. Usually the work day ended in mid-afternoon because it would get too hot to plant.

"Nobody (at Seneca) forced you to do anything," Chris said. "They were all really nice. They welcomed you in."

"Everybody (at Seneca) would help you," Greg said. "If you wanted to work with the veterans for a day, to see how they did it, you could."

The surprising thing about their experience was some of the areas in which they had to plant.

One area in particular (at Fort St. John) had been logged in 1980, planted and prepped (which means the area had been burned and cleared with new trees planted) in 1986. Most of these trees died that same year. The company had the planters replant the trees this summer without first having the area sprayed with herbicide to destroy the tall grass and weeds. Greg speculates that this is because the company had a quota to meet, even though the trees they planted will probably die.

"Beautiful scenery and abundant forms of wildlife," according to both Greg and Chris, were found at the various locations in which the camps were set up. There were even a couple of social functions arranged by the local residents. However, Greg notes that there is quite a difference in opinion of tree-planters in Ontario than there is in B.C.

"Out here, if you tell them you went tree planting in B.C., they're all like 'Good job!' But to them (the residents of B.C.), you are the lowest form of life. You're lucky if they'll even talk to you."

The two of them believe this is because companies in British Columbia are really hurting for tree planters. Almost anyone will get hired. According to Greg, even some illegal aliens have joined the crews.

Time off from work was usually spent "dancing, clubbing and ... continuing to party in a planters (motel) room into the wee hours of the morning." The result was they usually headed back to camp more tired than when they left, following the tree planters motto of "working hard and playing hard."

The two found that they made between \$75.00-\$125.00 a day when they got good at it. Greg is still in debt from the trip although Chris made a small profit. The two feel that it takes time to become good at tree planting, at least three



Chris Thompson, 17, and Greg Fisher, 19, display some of the tree planting garb they wore this summer in British Columbia. The two worked as tree planters for Seneca Silviculture Limited in Prince George, having returned last week. (Herald photo)

weeks, and that one cannot judge the merits or demerits of such a job without spending time at it.

"I felt I came away (from the experience) more mature," Chris said. "I feel I know myself better."

"I had the best time," Greg said. "The people you meet are the best. I've made contacts all over the world. I've made friends from Australia, Sweden and all parts of Canada."

"It was these people," according to Chris, "who were there for you

when you needed them, who you spent the best and worst times with, and who will always remain close to you. In the bush there was no room for falsehood, and anything that was said or done came straight from the heart."

"It was the most physically and mentally demanding job I've ever had," Greg said. "If I don't have a job next spring, I'll go back to tree planting. It's the most individual trying job (a person can have). The personal satisfaction I got out of it was incredible."

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