

# Logging in the Swan Has Seen Change Through the Years

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Pathfinder

Logging in the Swan Valley has experienced changes throughout the years. Neil Meyer, a Swan Valley resident since 1955, spoke at the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society's USVHS) First Friday presentation "Logging" June 5 at the Swan Valley Museum.

More than 40 people gathered to hear Meyer speak about his life-long experiences working in the woods and local sawmills and the changes he has seen in the industry.

Raised in Ferndale, Mont., near Bigfork, Meyer worked in the woods with his dad, "Doc" Meyer. They used a two-man cross cut saw.

Meyer said that later on they came out with a two-man gas chain saw. After the saw went through a tank of gas, it would be so hot there was no way it would start. So he and his dad would go back to the two-man cross cut saw, eat lunch and then go through another tank of gas with the gas chain saw after it cooled.

Meyer told the story of Sam the horse who, according to Meyer, was "automatic." The horse, who needed no driver, was hooked to logs in the woods and would go to the landing, where the logs are limbed and cut to length, to be unhooked.

Meyer said, "If the guy on the landing didn't unhook him at noon or quitting time, Sam would take the logs to the barn with him. He was a neat old horse."

Dwayne Forder, a Swan Valley



Neil Meyer, Swan Valley resident, spoke to the group gathered at the First Friday presentation "Logging" June 5 at the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society (USVHS) Museum.

resident and former horse logger, said that not just cowboys were good with horses. Teamsters who drove the wagons and sleds loaded with many logs had limited brakes and had to guide the mules and horses on steep and icy roads.

"If one [horse] balked up you would have injured horses and a big wreck. Teamsters in those days didn't [fool] around with uncooperative horses," said Forder.

After Meyer moved to the Swan in 1955, he worked at local sawmills, the Wineglass Mill at the

Gordon Ranch and mills owned by Uno Strom and Ray Fenby.

Asked how many mills there were in the Swan at the time, Meyer said, "There was a mill on nearly every road. There were many." It was a way to make a living and be able to stay in the Swan Valley.

According to Steve Lamar, USVHS president, one of the oldest mills is up near Cooney Lookout near the late Doc Berner's place. It was owned by homesteader Rolf Brotham and was powered by a water wheel in Rumble Creek.

Meyer said that local mills used millponds, dug out on the mill site, to hold, clean and more easily move logs into the mill. Mill workers used pronged pike poles to move the logs to a moving conveyor belt that came up under the water to transport them to other belts that took them to the saw blades.



Photo provided by USVHS

Historically logs were removed from the woods with a team and skids or sled.



Photo provided by USVHS

A machine called a delimer, removes the limbs from the trees. Historically they were removed by a saw on the landing when the logs were skidded in.

Lamar said one of the largest timber sales ever was in 1914-1919 at the head of Swan Lake. More than 150 loggers were employed in the Craney logging operation which covered 9,000 acres. According to Lamar, many homesteaders worked at Craney's logging operation as there was not much work in the Swan at the time.

The logging camp was located near the present day village of Swan Lake. A small railroad was used up to Cilly Creek and unloaded on the lakeshore to be yarded up and taken across the lake with a boat similar to a tugboat. Lamar said they moved the train by taking the track behind the train and putting it in front all the way to the destination. They would then float the logs down the Swan River and into Flathead Lake to be floated to the mill in Somers.

When asked about the dangers working in the woods, Meyer recalled that a man working at Strom's mill broke his leg in the winter. They used slabs from the mill to splint his leg. The slabs were so cold; he nearly froze to death before they got him to town to the doctor.

Another time he had hired a sawyer, one who fells trees. Meyer made sure the sawyer had a pair of saw chaps, a leather apron that protects the legs.

"Somehow he got tangled up in a tree," said Meyer. "The chaps were destroyed but the sawyer didn't have a scratch. A good advertisement for the chap company."

Equipment for logging improved and made the job less time consuming. In the mid 1980s Meyer purchased a processor

which fells the tree, limbs it and cuts it to length. Rubber tired skidders replaced horses. Chokers (cable that was hooked to logs) were attached to the bull hook on the end of the skidder. The logs were drug by the skidder to the landing where they were piled in decks. The logs are then trucked to mills in nearby towns.

Meyer said that he has great respect and deep appreciation for trees. They made a living for him and his family.



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Neil Meyer displayed some "tools of the trade" at the "Logging" presentation June 5 at the Upper Swan Valley Historical Society Museum. Included in his display are cookies sawed from butts of trees that are more than 100 years old. Butts were not taken with the logs because of "wind shake" or small cracks. Meyer said they were also heavy, pūchy and would not float. Hanging from the truck are saw chaps, the cable is called a choker that is attached to logs to pull them to the landing. The bull hook and the slotted iron devise against the building are used to attach chokers to the skidder.