Remembering My Dad, by Eric Johnson, from *The Northern Logger* magazine
[Dave Johnson died on 10/20/2011, and a memorial service was held in December at Prairie.]

Remembering My Dad

My dad was an engineer who spent most of his career starting up power plants around the world. Back in 1968 we were planning to move to Rutland, Vermont to work on the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant, but there was a delay and my dad took a job starting up a plant in what was then East Pakistan. By the time we left, some two years later, it was embroiled in a war and in the process of becoming Bangladesh.

This presented a big problem, as we had to leave the country rather suddenly, and we really didn't have a place to live back in the States. It was about this time that my mother inherited a tree farm in central Wisconsin from her dad, who had bought the place for back taxes right after World War II and, after discovering that nothing much would grow on the farmed out, sandy soil, he decided to plant pine trees. Every year he'd put in 20 or 30 acres, eventually filling all of the available space on about 300 acres. He planted trees, but other than the occasional Christmas tree, never cut any down. By the time we came on the scene, the earliest plantations were past due for a first thinning.

So our family—the four of us—moved out to the farm while my dad looked around for another overseas contract. This usually took a few months and then after he nailed something down, sometimes there were delays of several months before he was needed. We killed time on the farm clearing firelanes (my grandfather eventually ran out of plantable space and started planting young trees in the firelanes between the plantations). We cleared brush and, during one particularly agonizing summer, I pruned the lower limbs off the outside trees lining the firelanes—with a big shear—to clear the path. My elbows still hurt from that.

Eventually, of course, we faced the inevitable: Somebody better cut some pulpwood and thin these plantations out. At first, I think we hired some local guys with a mill pulp contract to do some of the most urgent thinning. But after seeing these guys and seeing how they worked, we figured (Dad and I) that we could probably do just as well with a little practice. I was about 14 at the time—interested in girls and motorcycles—but also game to cut some wood. It's gotta beat pruning trees, I figured, and the pay was $1/hour.

So, Dad went out and bought a used McCullough 10-10 chain saw, a couple pairs of steel-toed boots and we hit the woods. We found a stand needing thinning near a road and a woods trail. We cut 100-inch sticks and stacked them by hand. We found a trucker who was willing to back his rig into the woods, load the individual piles into his trailer and pup trailer, haul them to the mill and send us a check. We pretty much learned how to log from scratch, and we got better at it as we got stronger and smarter. Eventually we bought a Ford 8N tractor with a front end loader, which I would drive up the cut rows (every other one) and load the sticks onto the forks by hand, then drive them out to the landing and dump them on the pile.

Then, we'd head off overseas for a couple of years so Dad could make some real money. There wasn't much income potential in cutting pulpwood—at least not the way we were doing it—but it paid the bills and, more importantly, we knew that by thinning, we were helping create something of greater value down the road.

Eventually, I went off to college and a career as a forest products industry journalist, and Dad retired from engineering. He and my mom did a lot of interesting things in their "retirement," from a three-year stint in the Peace Corps in South America, a job setting up a school for poor kids in India (Mom's a teacher) and a

few months working at a resort in a very dangerous part of Mexico. But mainly what they did—the thing that really defined them and always brought then back down to earth—was cutting their own wood.

By this time, of course, all of the first thinnings had been done, and most of the weevil-infested white pine stands had been stripped of the ugliest trees. They settled into a routine of going out every day and cutting sawlogs and pulpwood. Mom would select the trees to be cut, and she'd help push them down as Dad made the fellling cut. She made the call on which trees stayed and which ones went.

They followed this routine for years—more than three decades—and in the process—built a beautiful pine forest with a red pine overstory and white pine filling in the understory. Dad always said, "Someday, when I'm old and feeble, I'll be able to make a living with a lot less effort—cutting a lot more valuable wood." I know he was proud of all the pulpwood they cut over the years, but he was dead-on about the value in cultivating a healthy, productive forest.

I got a couple of positive comments and questions about the photo on the cover of last month's magazine. It was taken last winter on the farm. One reader wanted to know if that was a shelterwood cut. I said, "It's more of a 'come back every couple of years when the crowns begin to touch and thin out some more logs' kind of management approach."

Dad died last October, at the age of 79, after a brief illness. He accomplished a lot in his life and made many friends, both in this industry and in his other spheres of interest and influence. But to me, his greatest legacy is the tree farm,which my mother continues to live on and manage. Hopefully someday I'll be lucky enough to do the same.

—E.A.J