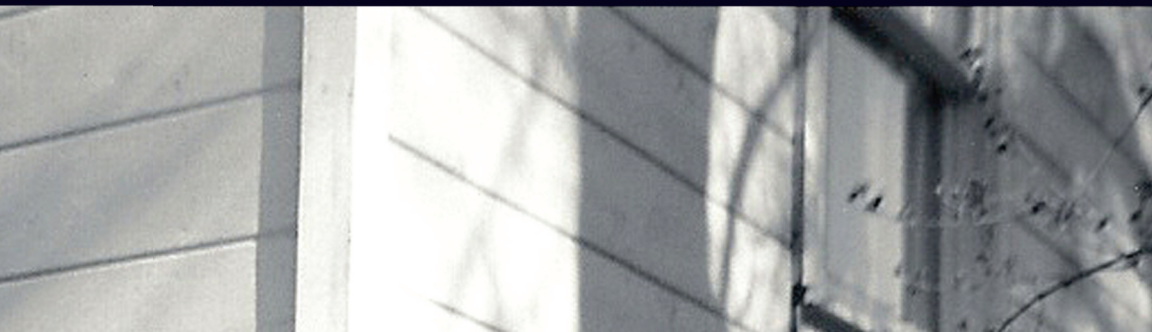




**Light on the Devils**

*Coming of Age on the Klamath*

LOUISE WAGENKNECHT



# Light on the Devils

COMING OF AGE ON THE KLAMATH

Louise Wagenknecht

**Oregon State University Press • Corvallis**

For more information or to order the book,  
visit <http://osupress.oregonstate.edu/book/light-on-devils>

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources and the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Wagenknecht, Louise, 1949-

Light on the devils : coming of age on the Klamath / Louise Wagenknecht.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-87071-611-9 (alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-0-87071-650-8 (ebook)

1. Wagenknecht, Louise, 1949---Childhood and youth. 2. Klamath River Valley (Or. and Calif.)--Biography. 3. Klamath National Forest (Calif. and Or.)--History. 4. Klamath National Forest (Agency : U.S.)--History. I. Title.

F868.K55W35 2011

979.4'21--dc23

2011020349

© 2011 Louise Wagenknecht

All rights reserved.

First published in 2011 by Oregon State University Press

Printed in the United States of America



Oregon State University Press

121 The Valley Library

Corvallis OR 97331-4501

541-737-3166 • fax 541-737-3170

<http://oregonstate.edu/dept/press>

# Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Where It Ended	1
Downriver	7
Putewans	18
Piss-Firs	27
Origins	35
Sandbagged	41
Into the Woods	55
Pleistocene, Ho!	62
Deep Waters	74
When It Changed	92
Light on the Devils	101
The River	113
On the Road in Middle Earth	128
Liz and Mark	139
The Girls of Springtime	147
Choices and Secrets	159
Fire on the Mountain	167
Seniors	182
November	188
Departures	206
Bibliography	216

# Where It Ended

IN A TOWN CALLED HAPPY CAMP, beside a river that he had known all his life, a man drove into the deserted parking lot of an abandoned lumber mill, sat for a while in the cab of his pickup truck, and then blew his brains out. I had known him for thirty years, and he had worked in that mill from 1965 until the mill closed. And when I heard the news, far away in Idaho, when I learned how he died and the circumstances of family and community that had led him down to the riverside that evening, I knew that the world in which we had both grown up, the world of logging and lumber that my family had also followed as long as they could, was really, really over.

The mill had closed in September of 1994; it had operated in that far northwestern corner of California for over forty years. For much of that time, it was just one of four or five mills within a twenty-mile radius. But by that year, the timber harvest on the Klamath National Forest had dropped to half of its peak in the 1980s, when 196 million board feet of timber had been dragged from the woods every year. The spotted owl, a drab and reclusive bird scarcely heard of two decades before, had at last been listed as a threatened species, and a new set of timber harvest guidelines now superseded all the old forest plans, wherever the owl lived. For many people in Happy Camp—and all over the Pacific Northwest—this sudden new reality was like hitting a wall at sixty miles an hour.

Over the next decade, even the lowered timber harvest target was seldom met. The last great surge of logging on the Klamath National Forest had, in fact, come years before, in the wake of the lightning-caused conflagrations of 1987. Those salvage timber sales would be the last big ones. After that, even though the early twenty-first century would bring huge and almost uncontrollable fires, the old days of logging and road-building were gone. The rules had changed. Having lost its greatest source of revenue, having lost its usefulness as a tool of the forest products industry, the U.S. Forest Service—the agency that

## Light on the Devils

manages the National Forests—was unable to compete for congressional appropriations. As the years passed and the foresters who knew how to “get out the cut” retired or moved, they were not replaced. The mill and the Forest Service had been two halves of the same whole, and with one gone, the other would never be the same.

The last eighty workers at the Happy Camp mill lost their jobs on the same day that workers at Oregon mills in Springfield and Albany, also owned by Stone Forest Industries, lost theirs. And despite the rather desperate optimism displayed in the local newspapers by economic development councils and other public servants, most of the region realized the game was over. Stone Forest Industries was headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, and people in Happy Camp, isolated on their stretch of the wild Klamath River, wondered if the men in the skyscrapers even knew about them. They knew, of course. They may even have cared. But this was, after all, just business.

I watched the drama unfold from another National Forest, central Idaho’s Salmon-Challis, where in 1993 the federal listing of various species of Pacific salmon as endangered and threatened had done to its timber cut what the spotted owl listing had done to the Klamath’s. The spotted owl was threatened by the loss of its old growth forest habitat. The salmon of the Snake and Salmon river basins had been nearly extirpated by erosion from roads, clear-cuts, and livestock grazing; by irrigation diversions; and by dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers. But like the mill in Happy Camp, the lumber mill in Salmon required millions of board feet of timber a year, and once the allowable cut in the surrounding area dropped to single digits, it also was doomed. What had happened to Happy Camp was happening all over the West.

After the Happy Camp mill closed, the men and women who had worked there moved on. Some left. Some went back to school at the nearest community college, three hours away. Some, whose wives had jobs in town, commuted weekly to Oregon lumber mills. The frenetic prosperity of the late 1990s, which enabled a few timber communities to start over, never came to isolated places like Happy Camp. I began to hear stories of loss and infidelity and desperation. And Gerald’s story haunts me still.

He had married Carrie right after she graduated from high school, in my class of ’67. All through our junior and senior years, whenever I

saw Gerald's tall form materialize in the hall to catch Carrie between classes—he must have zipped down the hill from the mill at every coffee break—I wondered what it would be like to want to be married and settled, to want to be a housewife or a millworker, forever. I didn't want what they wanted, but I envied them both their certainty about life.

When I came back home after college to take a job with the Forest Service, Carrie had a part-time job and two sons. Gerald was still thin and homely, his hairline square above an old scar. Carrie was slender as ever, her skin translucent under her flaming hair, and Gerald looked at her as though she were something rare and precious. The boys were the kind of quiet, well-behaved kids who made me think, now and then, "If I knew they'd all turn out like that ..."

Early in 1987, I transferred to another Forest halfway across the country and lost track of my classmate. Three years later, she phoned me out of the blue to tell me about her experiences with the forest fires that had begun on the first day of September in '87 and very nearly engulfed Happy Camp itself. I had gone back for those fires, too, but we were based in camps fifty miles apart during that months-long battle, and I never saw her.

Like many other locals, Carrie became a driver; she spent virtually every waking moment transporting an Idaho Forest Service crew involved in the then-new technology of fire-retardant foams. In the excitement of learning new skills, of meeting new people, of watching blowups light the night sky, Carrie looked at her life and felt that something was missing. And then she fell in love with her crew boss.

Gerald scarcely saw his wife until the rains of November ended her job. He never knew that Carrie had fallen in love with a firefighter, even though Carrie managed to keep in sporadic touch with Ken for a year. But they had never actually met again, and from what I knew of fire-camp romances, I suspected that the attachment born in the smoke of that fall was probably not reciprocated.

But Carrie could not forget, and now she hoped that in the small world of the Forest Service, I might have met Ken, might know something about him. I hadn't, but I looked him up for her in the Forest Service directory, gave her his address and phone number. After twenty years in the outfit, I knew the type. Fire guys like Ken moved around a lot, I told her, were seldom home, didn't have a lot of attachments. And a

## Light on the Devils

woman of forty-one with two kids was definitely an attachment. Forget him, I told her. But in her voice, along with denial, I heard the sound of someone who, her marriage ending, was looking for a way out. We agreed to keep in touch, but listening to her brought back memories of my own unrequited love affairs, still painful to the touch. I had no idea what to say to a broken heart, and in the end I didn't call Carrie back.

Four years later, with the mill closed forever, Gerald commuted to a sawmill job in Oregon. One weekend in Happy Camp, he drove up to visit the district ranger, and as they sat on the porch and sipped iced tea, he blurted out the reason for his unaccustomed visit. "I need you to talk to one of your engineers," he said, "and tell him to stay away from my wife."

They had been meeting, the engineer and Carrie, on a logging road above town, where Carrie rode her horse up the hill from her house. The road was blocked by a locked gate, but the engineer had a key, and in that secluded place they met as lovers. The district ranger was a tolerant man, but to use a Forest Service vehicle and a Forest Service key for what was assuredly not government business was unacceptable. He promised Gerald that he would speak to the engineer.

The warning was given privately, but the small-town grapevine was already ten strides ahead, and when the engineer's wife heard about the key and the gate and the woman on horseback, she threw Bill out. I had listened to the story with open-mouthed amazement, for I could not imagine how Bill had even met Carrie. He was a middle-aged man with the charisma of mayonnaise who went straight home after work and was always described by his wife as a fishing addict. Now he moved into the Forest Service barracks and put in for a transfer. Carrie told Gerald that she was leaving him.

4

On an evening when the big-leaf maples had turned incandescent yellow, Gerald drove his pickup truck on his last journey. He parked between the building where he had learned to pull greenchain and the rusted tepee burner, now cold and dark, that would never again throw sparks into the night and cover the town with the rich, sooty smell of money.

The sun had dropped into the Elk Creek drainage, and Gerald looked out through his windshield at the remains of his working life. Did he think, even then, about the tools of his trade, ready to go under



the gavel at auction? The debarker and the bandmill, the resaw, the greenchain, the log carriage, the edger, the chipper. The hog, the cutoff saw, the planer. The sticker stacker, and the steam-fired kilns that sucked the moisture from boards of pine and fir. The boilers and the blowers. The saw sharpeners. The band saws, log kickers, belts, drives, rollcases, drill presses. Hydraulic operated timber toters. Truck scales that once groaned under 130,000 pounds. Fuel tanks, wiring, conduit, cylinders, chain, pipe fittings, nuts, bolts, motors, reducers, hose, welding rod. The yard lights that turned the winter fog above the river into a cloud of molten gold.

Behind the sawmill buildings, where the ghosts of log decks rose three stories above the mill pond, stood the rows of log loaders, Cats, Hyster forklifts, straddle buggies, loader backhoes, dump trucks, and water trucks, lined up like toys in a sandbox. Did Gerald wonder if Ernie Spinks's collection of pinup calendars still gathered dust on the walls of the scaling shack? Did he think about the nine-foot-long redwood conference table, around which the fate of men like himself had been decided?

With the auction, all the machinery that he had known would disappear. As would his life, once he had raised the revolver to his head, and splattered the road outside his open window with a shower of blood and brains, a last thin layer atop four decades of bark and chips, mud and spit and oil.

The town blamed Bill and Carrie in about equal measure, and although the Forest Service arranged for Bill's hasty transfer, Carrie was left to deal alone with the pain and the guilt. How she told her teenage sons that their father was dead, how the boys dealt with the rift in their world, I never learned. A story reached me that as he prepared to leave Happy Camp, Bill rested his head in his hands and moaned, "What can I do? I don't really love her."

But whether from affection or obligation, Bill did send for Carrie, who joined him, and they were married. And for all I know, the story was wrong, and they were in love, and are to this day.

IN SOME UNILLUSIONED CORNER OF MY MIND, I had known for some time that the old world of loggers and endless realms of timber were

## Light on the Devils

gone. The news of Gerald's suicide simply crystallized that truth for me. I had seen piles of aerial photographs depicting the spaghetti-like maze of roads and endless cookie-cutter holes left in almost every drainage by forty-five years of mechanized logging. For all the talk of tree thinning preventing forest fires, for all the (correct) analysis of how ninety years of fire control had spawned overcrowded stands of young trees, I knew that the Forest Service had never been much interested in remedial vegetation management. It had cut its post-war teeth on the "harvest" of what it had never sown: old growth conifers, chopped down in neat blocks. When that ended, the agency simply did not know what else to do, and men like Gerald had become so accustomed to their work that they thought of it as a birthright, and forgot the shallowness of its roots.

I had spent my childhood and youth in communities that lived on logging and sawmilling. So had Carrie. And when that way of life ended, the Forest Service, in different ways, got us both out. But Gerald had been trapped in that world, and until it was too late, he hadn't even realized that he was its prisoner.

“I haven’t read anything quite like this book. The narrator is a *naturalist*, raised among loggers and millworkers. Her social milieu is Forest Service, and she takes an unflinching view backward at the complicity of well-meaning government in the excesses of industrial forestry. This is not just another environmental scream. It’s intelligent and balanced. It’s unique.”

ROBIN CODY, author of *Ricochet River*, *Voyage of a Summer Sun*, and *Another Way the River Has*

---

When Louise Wagenknecht’s family arrived in the remote logging town of Happy Camp in 1962, a boundless optimism reigned. Whites and Indians worked together in the woods and lumber mills of northern California’s Klamath country, and it seemed the booming prosperity would never end. Looking back on her teenage years spent along the Klamath River, Wagenknecht recounts a vanishing way of life. She explores the dynamics of family relationships and the contradictions of being female in a logging town in the 1960s. And she paints an evocative portrait of the landscape and her relationship with it.

An elegant memoir of place, *Light on the Devils* will appeal to readers interested in Western history, personal memoir, and natural history.



LOUISE WAGENKNECHT worked for the Forest Service for more than thirty years. She is the author of *White Poplar*, *Black Locust*. Her writing has appeared in *American Nature Writing*, *The River Reader*, *Ring of Fire: Writers of the Yellowstone Region*, and *High Country News*. She lives in Idaho.

Oregon State University Press

ISBN 978-0-87071-611-9

Cover design by David Drummond  
Cover photograph of Lower Devils Peak: Alden Moffatt

