

The Demise of the BIG Corporate Timber Industry in Missoula Montana

By Craig Thomas, Montana Logger

Let me begin by congratulating Pat Williams and all his cronies for their success in eliminating the timber industry in and around Missoula, Montana

Pat was a Montana congressman from 1979 to 1997. He's an old Butte Democrat and strong wilderness advocate. I think he teaches at the University of Montana now. But it hardly matters for purposes of this column. What does matter is that Pat predicted a few years back that the timber industry was finished in Montana. I didn't believe him at the time, but now that the last of the big timber outfits – that would be the Smirfit-Stone linerboard mill at Frenchtown – it's time for me to admit Pat was right!

Pat, I'd like to buy you a rib eye steak at the Depot in Missoula, for we all like a winner, but I can't because I'm unemployed and looking for work, so you'll have to buy your own darn steak.

Now, I know that you could not care less what happens to me or my family, but I'd like the rest of the world to know that, as a forester and logger, I've spent my professional life delivering resources to all of the major processing facilities in the Missoula valley. It's been very rewarding work, too, but times change and you either go with the change or you lose out on the next opportunity. I intend to go with opportunity.

We've almost come full circle with the big corporations coming and now going from our valley. The little guys, like me, are about all that's left here. We're good, hardworking people who enjoy a challenge, real entrepreneurs I guess you'd say. Where there is a need, we'll always try to find a way to fill it. It's our nature.

History reveals that we've passed through a good many phases as a small western pioneering society. Now we are standing at yet another crossroads of opportunity. Actually, there are several roads available. Many are bemoaning the passing of this final corporate giant, but I, for one, am glad to see this phase end, not because I didn't have friends at Smirfit-Stone. I did. But midway through this giant's presence in our world we lost **something**.

In its attempt to survive, the Giant in our Midst started passing the costs of operation to the suppliers of the resource – the loggers and landowners. They simply were unwilling or unable to pay resource suppliers what their products cost to produce-- let alone make a profit. When we had many more mills in our area – competition for the resource – this was not the case, but as the smaller, undercapitalized mills fell – a result of the collapse of our federal timber sale program - Smirfit cut its prices.

Maybe I should have listened to Pat Williams, but I was addicted to the working in the woods. What a wonderful place to be when the sun rose each day, cold or hot or wet or dry, it is a great place to be. And it didn't matter that I was passing most of my earnings on into our little society, as were the rest of us logger types. I was addicted to and loved working in the woods.

But the crossroads of change wait impatiently. Which way do we go? Will another giant step in now that Smirfit is packing up? I'd hard to say. Maybe the pulp industry needs to scale back here so that the market will stabilize at some lower level. Big outfits like Smirfit rarely show their cards, so we don't really know what's headed our direction, if anything. Only time will tell. But I'm not willing to place my faith or trust – or that of my family – on some big announcement that might never come.

The question is, “**What do we do now?**”

Having just completed the giant corporate lesson, maybe we should try a more diverse approach with many smaller players. We still have a huge vegetation resource in Montana that needs urgent attention. Do we go the “leave it to nature” road and let it burn? A smoky and expensive path we know. We could have the federal government buy it all [do they have any money left?] and set up plants to utilize the material, but I am not convinced that government can do better than big industry, if as well.

Here's what I think: I think that if we addressed our own energy needs with as much gusto as we embraced the corporate board and paper folks, we can make a new path for ourselves by building some small biomass-fired power plants here in western Montana. Lord knows we have a perpetual supply of small dead and dying trees that need to be removed from our forests. Just the other day there was a story in our local newspaper about how pine beetles have invested some 2.7 million acres of forestland in our state. That's a pretty good start on a new, home grown cottage industry composed of small biomass power plants and the wood processing facilities needed to supply them.

Many of us have spent hundreds of hours in hundreds of collaborative meetings discussing real solutions. Varied solutions tailored to the small local areas. These solutions were not able to begin with the presence of a huge pulp mill but have suddenly become very viable. Now is the time to act.

With the passing of the large corporate timber industry, many of the Pat Williams types here in Montana seem to be taking on a more reasoned mindset. They're behaving more like foresters and, in fact, some of them are. Socially speaking, I think we're finally headed in the right direction. If we proceed without a huge corporate presence our specific needs are more likely to be met.

BIG has not proven to be the best solution either by industry nor government. Let us try **our** ideas. We now need real leadership. I sorry to say we haven't had much input from our congressional delegation. Maybe our choices have been poor here too. But the fact is that the Smirfit closure will impact about half of all land management activity in

Montana. You would think this fact, alone, would get someone's attention. Where are our leaders? **Who are our leaders?**

Biomass energy could be a big part of the solution to the problems created by Smirfit's decision to pull out – but only if we chose to manage the increasing mass of vegetation in our forests. Trees are the answer, folks. **What will we do?**

[Craig Thomas has written a book that addresses many of the issues this column touches. *Regurgitations of a Montana Woodsman* is filled with laughter, tears, and solutions. You can buy a copy at most local bookstores in the Missoula area]