

**Entering Ryderwood:  
Family Logging Camp at the End of the Road**

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## **Part 1**

Imagine a place where everyone worked toward the same end, a place where no businesses competed, a place where no one lacked a job during the toughest financial times. You might think this place sounds like a communist country, or maybe even a hippie commune. Although neither Marxists nor flower children ever lived in Ryderwood, Washington, U.S.A., at one time the town did fit this description. Built from the ground up in 1923 by Long-Bell Lumber Company, Ryderwood once held claim to the title of “world’s largest logging camp,” due to its other distinction of being one of the few logging camps designed for entire families rather than only single men. But it’s said that all good things must come to an end . . . so, just as Eastern bloc regimes have crumbled and Utopian communes have died out, in 1953 Long-Bell up and sold its experimental town of Ryderwood. The communal nature of Ryderwood-past, however, survives yet in the people who lived there and pulls hundreds of them to the town reunion every August.

You can still find Ryderwood on the map and, for that matter, at the end of a remote two-lane road in southwestern Washington, right where it’s always been. One thing you won’t find, though, is a single logging family. That’s because Long-Bell sold Ryderwood to Senior Estates Inc., which had in mind its own type of experimental town—“a pensioners’ paradise.” Ryderwood’s nearly four decades of existence as a retirement community now overshadows, in duration, its days as a family logging camp, and new construction there indicates a slowly expanding community. The town’s serene setting attracts retirees from all over the nation who meet the minimum age requirement of fifty-five. The locals of Ryderwood-present like the serenity so much that they force once-again active logging trucks in the area to bypass their town. Not entirely averse to the town’s logging heritage, however, the senior citizens

welcome and join the loggers and their families who return each year. Gathering around Ryderwood's town park in their RVs, some arriving up to a week before the day of the picnic, former residents begin their reminiscing and catching up. Many would meet the minimum age requirement of home buyers in Ryderwood today, and these are the children of the original townspeople.

One of the Ryderwood pioneers was my grandfather, LeRoy "Roy" Merchant Sr. He hailed from Rich Hill, Missouri, about seventy miles south of Long-Bell's headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri. Hearing about the new operations out West and wanting to avoid a coal-mining life like his father's, he and a friend hopped the rails to Ryderwood in 1923. They arrived to find the town still under construction, so they headed to Eastern Washington to try their hands at apple-picking. After the fruit was harvested, Ryderwood's forests then stood ready to be tackled by these teenaged loggers-to-be. The bachelor bunkhouse became home to the two, with Long-Bell deducting room and board from their pay.

Roy's life in Ryderwood probably was not dissimilar to those of the many other men attracted to this domesticated logging camp. In 1924 he met Ruth Pettit, who was visiting her sister and brother-in-law in the area. Like others in Ryderwood, once there Roy didn't wander too far. Isolated in nature like most logging camps, the town was the dead-end of what is today known as State Highway 506. Car ownership was the exception, not the rule. Ruth, therefore, knew Roy was love struck when he found a way to visit her at her parents' house in Puyallup, about a hundred miles from Ryderwood. With a little hard-earned money under his belt, Roy married Ruth in June 1925, and they moved into one of the four-room houses in town, which is the home today for some retired couple. LeRoy Jr., affectionately known as "Sonny," came along on Roy's twenty-second birthday, March 24, 1926. Now the three of them really did fit the design of Ryderwood—a family logging camp.

In the early Twenties when company president R. A. Long sent "Uncle Bill" Ryder to scout the Pacific Northwest for a location for Long-Bell's western expansion, Ryder noticed the transitory nature of the region's loggers. In most cases, the men lived in tents close to the operation and remote from civilization. When the loggers married and had families, they would abandon their vocation. Long, a strong Christian and family man who also founded nearby Longview, adopted the concept of a "family logging camp" for Ryderwood, only the second of its kind. (Snoqualmie Falls, Washington, was the first.)

Wanting to provide its employees and their families with accommodations found in conventional towns, Long-Bell established a variety of businesses. The company store carried clothing and groceries and housed a meat market. Through the years, Ryderwood also hailed a barber shop and a beauty parlor, a Texaco station, a dry cleaner and a shoe repair shop, a cafe, a movie theatre, a creamery, a jewelry store, a “confectionery” that stocked over-the-counter drugs, an insurance office, a church, an inn, and a community hall—almost all of which were owned by Long-Bell. For a time, the company even provided a zoo; Jack and Jill, two black bears found in Long-Bell’s forests, were brought to town and housed in cages to entertain the townspeople.

Although the inn that housed single men and teachers was named “the Tavern,” the company didn’t deal in the liquor business. After a brief stint of selling beer at the company store, they discontinued this practice due to the number of men who overused the service. To buy a beer after a long day at work, a logger would have to walk a mile out of town to the real taverns at Johnsonville.

Alongside the first housing, Long-Bell also constructed a school building. Unlike the businesses, the school’s operation was a public endeavor governed by the state and managed by an elected board of six local men. An unknowing observer may be a bit surprised at hearing traces of a Southern drawl when listening to some of the people who attended school in Ryderwood. Luther Fleming, acknowledged by many as the caretaker of Ryderwood’s history, moved to Ryderwood from Mississippi when he was seven years old. There his father had worked as a scaler for Long-Bell, but in 1929 work ran out and the company offered Mr. Fleming a job in booming Ryderwood. The company didn’t offer jobs in Washington to all their men in the South, Luther says. Only good workers who weren’t viewed as potential union organizers received these invitations from Long-Bell, and they had to get out West on their own. All in all, about five hundred of Long-Bell’s Southern family headed to the Great Northwest before the onset of the Great Depression. Ryderwood, like the rest of the nation, suffered during the Depression, but R. A. Long’s Christian priorities of family and brotherhood kept all men working through that tough time. People who were children in the Depression relate how their fathers were never laid off; they say this policy applied to the single men too. Long-Bell set up crews and rotated them so that each man was assured employment, albeit part-time.

As generous as it was, Long-Bell’s paternalistic authority took a blow when the adolescent Ryderwood joined other woodworkers in the regional strike of 1935. Company accounts mention a Woodmen of the World affiliation in Ryderwood as early as 1928, although Long-Bell tended to avoid

strong union men as Luther recalls. But the walkout in May of '35 showed that the loggers weren't afraid to bite the hand that fed (and housed) them, and the union remained active in Ryderwood until Long-Bell's pull-out, with worker safety consistently being one of its main concerns.

Even with bargained-for wages, times still got tough between paydays for many—but there always was credit at the company store. Long-Bell Mercantile, known to natives as “the Merc,” issued five-dollar coupon books on credit to tide over Ryderwood's employees until the next payday. The coupons, or scrip, were as good as cash anywhere in town, and even just out of town at the privately-owned Johnsonville Tavern. And notice that the term was *payday*, not *paycheck*.. The company paid twice a month in cash only, with such items as rent and coupon books deducted in advance. The men would line up at one entrance of the company office building, receive their pay through a barred window, and then wind around out the opposite door. Roy's oldest daughter, Patsy (my mother), remembers her father's accounts of payday and wonders who was there when the boardwalk in front of the office was replaced—“lots of coins were lost through those boards.”

Due to the loggers' caulk (spiked) boots, the wooden boardwalks were a necessity; cement and caulks don't mix very well. On the whole, Long-Bell was good about providing the necessities one would expect to find in a town of two thousand people. The lack of a bank, however, proves a gaping exception. Luther explains that a bank wasn't needed in Ryderwood because “nobody got that much money. Most of it was spent [on coupons and rent] before the people got it. There wasn't much to spare.” Perhaps the company made a conscious decision to not build a bank, thereby not providing a reminder of the far-stretched wages for its many employees who never had enough money left over to save. A physical reminder of their tight situation, such as a bank, could contribute to low morale or increased discontent come bargaining time. But whatever the reasons for not providing a bank, the company unconsciously may have done its employees a favor—at least there was no bank in town to fail, as so many did during the Depression.

It can't be said, however, that Long-Bell did not actively encourage its employees to save their money. The promotion of United States savings bonds received considerable space in *The Log of Long-Bell*, the company magazine, especially during World War II. While the war bond effort of Ryderwood residents probably is not statistically documented, some of their other war contributions are. Almost every draft-age young man in town served in the war, and three of them did not live to return to their hometown. The men who stayed and worked in Ryderwood during the war earned the coveted Army-Navy Excellency Award for their lumbering contribution. Even Ryderwood's

youngsters participated in the war effort by collecting scrap metal and by buying stamps that could be applied toward the purchase of a savings bond. When the war ended in 1945, the Merchant children donated their bonds to Roy and Ruth so that they could buy the family's first car.

World War II played a big part in the diversification of Ryderwood demographics, contributing to some of the town's best entertainment ever. First of all, with so many of the young men overseas at a time of increased production demand, Long-Bell found itself short of workers. The company sent one of its loggers, North Carolina native "Boss" Cothren, back to his home state to recruit men to work in the Ryderwood forests. Many men in the hills of the Carolinas hadn't been drafted due to their illiteracy, and Long-Bell took advantage of these able bodies that Uncle Sam had passed over. With them, the "Tarheels" brought to Ryderwood a funny way of talking, down-home dancing and singing . . . and moonshine. Most of all, they gave the locals something new and different to talk about. Everyone who lived in Ryderwood at the time of the Tarheel immigration has a story or joke to tell about them. Playing off a few Oklahomans who sought work in Ryderwood during the dustbowl, Luther recalls the common joke about being able to tell a Tarheel from an Okie: "An Okie always had two mattresses tied on his car"; a Tarheel had only one.

The second wartime event that seems to have provided everyone in Ryderwood with a story was the inundation of the town by Army fire fighters in August 1945. With many spots of the woods ablaze from lightning fires, these special forces were called in for several weeks, much to the delight of the town's young women. Life in this dead-end town suddenly quickened. For the first time, movies were projected out of doors on the side of a building to entertain the fire fighters and townspeople. The women prepared large, picnic-style dinners for the soldiers. When not on the fire line, the troops performed their drills in the field behind the tree nursery just out of town where the Merchant family then lived. Patsy recalls that one of them ventured in to visit her mother as a "peeping Tom" while father Roy was on nighttime fire duty. A few of Ryderwood's young women even ended up marrying the soldiers they had met that summer. But the main reason why the soldiers' stay in Ryderwood became such a memorable event was that the war ended while they were in town. Just imagine . . . Ryderwood, guest to 250 Army men, as V-J Day is declared. Nola Blanes, twelve years old at the time, remembers that day as "the first time as a child I ever wanted to be an adult." As someone who had been "playing war" since the age of eight, Nola realized the depressing nature of the world war finally had been lifted, and she wanted to celebrate this with the soldiers, adult-style.

After serving in the war, most of Ryderwood's own soldiers returned to work in the woods. One who did was Luther . . . for awhile. Then one day a football recruiter came to town to persuade some of Ryderwood's best athletes to play for Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon. The recruiter attracted not only Luther but also Sonny Merchant, Roy and Ruth's oldest son. The two young men played some good football for Linfield, and ultimately earned teaching degrees from the college.

At its prime, Ryderwood produced some of the best teams in the area. Long-Bell sponsored men's town teams in both basketball and baseball, which would take on amateur teams from other Southwest Washington and Northwest Oregon towns. Perhaps Ryderwood's winning records resulted from the fact that, as Luther recalls, "if you was a good ballplayer, you could get a job" with Long-Bell.

The school teams shared the winning ways of the working men. Ryderwood's biggest sporting highlight came in 1941 when the school's football team won the Washington State "B" title, traveled to Oregon to play that state's title holders, and returned home the Washington-Oregon six-man football champions. Perhaps surprisingly, Ryderwood High produced just as many scholars as athletes. What seems a significant percentage of Ryderwood graduates attended junior colleges and four-year schools throughout the Pacific Northwest. With more than a touch of smugness, Luther tells about a professor who visited Ryderwood and determined that the schoolchildren "would have trouble makin' it in the outside world" because of their isolation from the "real world." That professor surely missed the mark, Luther thinks, because twenty-six of those youngsters grew up to teach school, and others have returned to reunions as doctors, lawyers, state patrolmen, college coaches and advisers, and even a U.S. District Court Judge.

Nola, herself now the Fulbright Fellowship adviser for the University of Washington, offers a reason for the success of these students outside the Ryderwood schools. The school board, sensitive to the fact of young people's attraction to Ryderwood's steady jobs and cheap housing, structured the curriculum so that graduation requirements could be completed in three years instead of the usual four. For those who completed the core in three years, their senior year was spent on more of such basics as English because, as Nola says, "We didn't have any extra classes; they taught us hard-core stuff, and that was it."

The young people who remained in Ryderwood likely weren't concerned that their careers there would be comparatively short-lived. By 1950 Long-Bell's timber crop had decreased dramatically, as could be expected after almost

thirty years of continuous logging. Even the earliest logged and replanted lands were not mature enough to produce harvestable stands of second-growth timber. In the summer of 1951, Ross Inman and Luther felled the last tree in the Long-Bell woods. Bucking, loading, and hauling the downed timber kept the dwindling crews busy for more than a year. Then on April 8, 1953, the *Longview Daily News* reported the following:

It was on July 18, 1952 that the officials of the Long-Bell Lumber Company announced the logging community of Ryderwood in northern Cowlitz County was “for sale.” Long-Bell founded the community in 1923 in the heart of its Southwest Washington timber holdings to serve as a family logging camp. But in 1952 most of the timber surrounding the model logging town had been cut and the company had established a 67,000 acre tree farm to produce timber for future years. With the creation of the managed-forest, there was no further need for a logging center of the proportions of Ryderwood. The “for sale” sign on Ryderwood came down today. The entire town has been sold by The Long-Bell Lumber Company to a new corporation known as Senior Estates Inc. . . . The once thriving logging community will be converted to a haven for retired persons living on social security payments and other pensions. Harry H. Kem, a Los Angeles realtor and instigator of the project, said Senior Homes will take possession on June 15. . . . “Long-Bell walks out on June 15 and we walk in,” the realtor declared.

Most affected by the sale of their town were the older, early settlers. On the day after the sale was announced, the *Seattle Times* quoted thirty-year resident R. D. Downing’s lament: “I’d like to stay around here and get in some fishing in those trout streams, now I’m retired, but I don’t know. My pension isn’t \$130.” Senior Estates’ plan called for a home buyer’s pension to range from \$130 to \$250 a month. Other long-time residents like Ross and Vera Inman, however, did qualify for home ownership and opted to retire in the new Ryderwood. In 1984 the *Longview Daily News* reported that at the age of 91, Vera Inman still lived in the same house she and Ross moved into in 1930.

Roy and Ruth Merchant, not yet near pension age, still had four of their eight children at home. The family moved to the nearby town of Winlock. Roy, like many Long-Bell loggers, found work with the new timber powerhouse in the area, Weyerhaeuser Company. But, as Patsy recalls about her father, “all those years with Long-Bell didn’t count for anything with Weyerhaeuser.” Once a “cracker-jack faller” who settled into the less dangerous job of scaling

for Long-Bell when arthritis set in, Roy had to start with Weyerhaeuser as a choker setter, a position in which one must be nimble and quick to avoid the snap of the cable when the tree starts to be pulled in. In 1959 on his first day back in the woods for Weyerhaeuser after an arthritic layoff, a log in a choker caught Roy and permanently disabled him. Ironically, just as Roy left Missouri to avoid a life like his father's in the coal mines, none of Roy's five sons works in the woods. Furthermore, it's interesting that Nola, who didn't recall Roy's history, but because her father also was disabled in the woods, reflects that "only mining has as many fatalities [as logging does] as an industry."

Some of the men and families who were willing to relocate found jobs throughout western Oregon with International Paper, the company that purchased Long-Bell's timber interests, before the Ryderwood operation completely shut down. In 1952, even before Long-Bell sold Ryderwood, the common bond between former residents of this unique town drew them back together to establish what would become an annual reunion. The picnics started in Eugene, Oregon, and soon after were moved up to Seaquest State Park in southwestern Washington, some years attracting up to 1,200 former residents. In 1956 the pensioners of the new Ryderwood approved the use of their town park for the reunion on the fourth Sunday of every August, where it is still held. The increased activity must be quite a bit like that August in 1945 when the soldiers invaded this little dead-end town. The big difference is that twelve-year-old Nola, who then wished to be an adult, now is one . . . an adult who is looking forward to when she retires in "four more years." But you won't find her settling down in the new, older Ryderwood. Although "it's so quiet and tranquil and scenic," the more urbane Nola says, "I would never live in a place like that again."

In the tradition of the picnic, in the early 1960s a Ryderwood all-class school reunion was instituted. Every four years on the night before the town picnic, the Monticello Hotel in Longview attracts RHS alumni, who pose for a group picture. Because Luther, the event's organizer, is getting up in years and because the crowd inevitably diminishes each year, the 1990 school reunion at the Monticello was rumored to be the last. But probably even the most cautious gambler would bet that as long as they're able, Ryderwood's logging family will continue its yearly migration to the spot at the end of Highway 506.

## **Part 2**

Luther Fleming and Nola Blanes both call Ryderwood home. As two of the relatively few people who have lived in the controlled environment of a company town, they share similar childhood experiences, although they are years apart in age and come from families whose “roots” started out being thousands of miles apart. Luther’s story follows first, and then Nola’s.

\* \* \*

Luther V. Fleming was born to Denton and Myrtle Fleming on November 14, 1921, in Crandall, Mississippi. The Flemings, like so many other Long-Bell employees from the South, moved to Ryderwood in 1929 when the company shut down much of its operations down there. Luther, his two brothers, and his sister attended the Ryderwood public school, from which he graduated in 1942. During summers in high school, Luther worked in the Long-Bell woods. After high school he served in both World War II and the Korean War and earned his teaching certificate. He returned to Southwest Washington, married a Ryderwood girl, and taught and coached in the area until he retired in 1979, although not necessarily in that order. Today Luther lives with his two dogs and a cat in a park-like setting about fifteen miles from Ryderwood. Since 1952, Luther has been the major organizer of the annual Ryderwood picnic.

Some of Luther’s favorite Ryderwood memories are from his high school days, when he played on the Ryderwood football team that captured the Washington-Oregon title. He recalls that “almost everyone in town went” down to Oregon for that game “at the University of Oregon stadium in Eugene. We beat ’em some pitiful . . . We only played the first half, ’cause we had the score like forty-seven to nothing the first quarter.” And the next year, he says, they did the same thing to the team from Tangent, Oregon, which explains why “after the war they came and got us to go down to Linfield.” Although Luther started setting chokers when he was sixteen and could have made a career out of logging, he accepted the college recruiter’s offer because “anything would be better than workin’ in the woods.”

Evidently a number of other young men from Ryderwood felt the same way. When Luther talks of the town baseball team that he and Sonny Merchant played on during the summers home from Linfield, he mentions fellow teammates Ed Ulowetz, who “was a big wheel from the University of Washington,” Harry Lang, who “was the leading scorer for Pacific Lutheran University,” and the three Moses brothers from Western Washington College. Because “we had all college all-stars . . . we never lost a game, not a one. That was in the late forties and fifties, just before they closed down.”

When Luther and his friends weren't in school, in the woods, or on a ball field, they might have been up at Abernathy, a high peak southwest of town. The fire lookout tower, a local legend for years, attracted probably almost all the young townspeople at one time or another. Some of the braver ones would spend the night, although just the climb to the top sounds frightening enough. Luther recalls how the “wind would blow, and it would rock and creak . . . You had to climb the ladder, ninety foot straight up. One time I packed my little dog up there—we couldn't leave him downstairs. The higher we got, the harder he held on.” Even Luther's mother conquered the tower. He remembers she “climbed clear up over the trap door; she had more nerve than she had anything else.” Fire detection planes eventually replaced lookout towers, and the Abernathy tower was torn down.

Before heading up to Abernathy, Luther and his friends sometimes drove out to Bill Bogard's service station and store to pick up some beer. Luther says Bill would tell them, “I can't sell beer to you damn kids, but you can go in there and get it yourself, though.’ So you'd lay three dollars on the counter, and he'd be lookin' the other way when you'd come out.” At other times, they would get their hands on some of the local moonshine that had become popular when the Tarheels moved to Ryderwood.

Next to timber, moonshine seemed to be Ryderwood's largest industry, and Luther's mother unknowingly became one of its exporters. Because his family was one of the few with a car, Luther says one of their Carolina neighbor ladies “would want Mother to take some fruit for their people here and there. Mother thought she was hauling peaches and stuff that [the woman] had canned, but it was nothin' but white lightnin'. When [the woman's husband] got arrested, she'd been hauling liquor for quite a few years and didn't know it!”

In a logging town, one might expect that alcohol would become an accepted part of daily life. And except for the fact that Long-Bell did not deal in the beer business, this assumption pretty much holds true. Luther remembers that school board member Burt Phillips “wouldn't hire that one guy

because he wouldn't drink a beer with him. He said anybody who wouldn't drink a beer wasn't worth a damn, so he wouldn't let the guy teach in Ryderwood." Looking back at the widespread consumption of alcohol and the lack of concern over drunken driving, Luther marvels "it's a wonder we all survived."

But even for the kids who left alcohol alone, having fun in Ryderwood could be hazardous to your health. Going to see a movie at the Sunset theatre, Luther remembers, was a real challenge: "You'd sit there and some of those rats runnin' down the aisle—they're as big as housecats. Everybody would sit there with their feet up. They'd like to eat that popcorn." Like many theatres in those days, the Sunset also served as a town stage. "The biggest event they ever had in town," Luther says, "was someway they got the Arizona Wranglers to come in. They was a big music group. Boy, they was famous in the old days." And the theatre was "where you used to have school plays." When the Sunset burned in 1943, Long-Bell converted part of the community hall into a movie house. Luther recalls that at different times, parts of the community hall doubled as a gymnasium, a boxing arena, a skating rink, and a pool hall.

The kids in Ryderwood necessarily didn't necessarily need these uptown hang-outs to provide their entertainment; amusement facilities stood in their own back yards. Every other house in town had an outdoor flush toilet, and "the last lickin'" Luther got "was 'cause of that outside toilet." He explains: "I was sittin' out there just hummin' away and singing, you know, and I thought I seen this stake come up. Well, my little brother unclicked it and he yanked the door open and yelled, 'Look, Miss Wickert!' Miss Wickert, our neighbor, was out there hangin' up clothes. I jumped out and picked up a rock and hit him on the head." About the licking, Luther says, "Dad didn't think that was right [that I hit my brother]."

A person in Ryderwood also could gain his or her share of public exposure by placing a phone call. In 1942 Luther's family was one of the first in town to get a telephone in their house. "Otherwise," he says, "you had to go down on Main Street to the main office and call. There wasn't nothin' in town [the operator] didn't know. And if she knew it, everybody knew it.

Luther remembers a Greyhound bus coming into Ryderwood once, a rarity because of the town's dead-end location. "Someone told him he could go through Ryderwood and over the hill and come out at Castle Rock and miss this flooded area in between. So when this big Greyhound bus came into town, it scared off all the kids; they was runnin' and hidin'. They finally got him turned around and headed out of town. I think that was one of the funniest things that ever happened in town."

Another event that shook up the town was when the Army fire fighters came to stay. Luther, back home at the time because his own duty was up, remembers that their presence “caused a lot of trouble. There wasn’t no strange men in town in those days . . . All those high school girls was all a goo-goo. When those Army kids came into town, it was a different ball game [for the local boys].” And a decade earlier, a Conservation Corps camp built in the woods south of town also provided “a big conflict there too,” he recalls. “They had about a hundred up there. The only thing to do was to come into Ryderwood at night and go down to the tavern and drink beer. A lot of . . . the CCs, when they got out . . . went to work there in town. I know of two girls who married them.” Territorial courting assumptions undoubtedly caused “conflict,” as Luther puts it, and some Corps members would get into fights while in town.

Long-Bell didn’t employ a law enforcement officer, but “a big surveyor” doubled as the town judge. “If you got in a big fight,” Luther says, “he might try it instead of going to Kelso (the county seat). They had a jail in town, a one-room one right across from the bear cages.” Because Long-Bell employees would be out of a job after a repeated incident, however, “most people settled their own disputes.”

At night, a watchman protected the families and company property. “He was just one of the old guys who’d been hurt in the woods . . . They had a time clock so he had to be here at nine o’clock, then he had an hour to get to the next clock. When you poked it, it poked your tape . . . so that you could tell where you were. You just had to make your way around, look for fires and stuff like that.” Luther recalls only “a few” houses burning in Ryderwood. “They didn’t have a fire department; they had big rubber hoses wrapped around big wheels, and they’d pull that around. They did have fire hydrants.” Those truckless hoses had to get water somewhere.

Like most people from Ryderwood, Luther has a favorite Tarheel story. One of the men who had come out from Carolina saved his money and sent back for his wife and kids. He received a letter from his wife that included her arrival date and time in Vader, but he couldn’t read so one of his coworkers “read his letter from her. [He] told him his wife had run off with someone and wasn’t comin’ and, oh God, he got upset. He was gonna tell him the difference the next morning, but that night he . . . headed back to Carolina to get her or his money.” The coworker and his friends met the man’s wife at Vader to tell her what happened, and “they had to stay hidden about a week after he got back when he found out what really happened.” Laughing heartily, Luther

acknowledges “that was a dirty trick to play on anybody.” About the Tarheels, he adds, “They’d tell just as many jokes about us. They’re still all my best friends.”

When the Carolinians arrived during the war, they worked “where they needed you, ’cause no one had experience. You’d just go out there green, and the boss would tell you what to do. That’s the reason so many guys got killed. So if they needed a man on a railroad on the section, that’s where you started . . . or if you was young and eager and they needed a choker setter, that’s where you started.” Luther himself started as a choker setter when he was sixteen. “You didn’t have to be smart to do that,” he says, “just make sure you didn’t get killed.” Most high school boys, however, started “on the section gang laying ties.”

“At Ryderwood, they always blew one of the train whistles at five-thirty every morning,” Luther recalls. “That was just a wake-up for people; you’d hear it for miles and miles. Then the trains left up there at six-thirty.” The boxcars, or “crummies,” in which the men rode had benches on either side and a pot-bellied wood stove in the middle. Of all the positions in the woods, he says, “fallers and buckers were the two best paid. But those guys had had experience working in other places before, because they’d been logging in this country for years.” Both positions originally earned their wages by the volume of work performed. When Luther started falling timber in 1944, “we made about seventeen dollars a day, and that was a hard day’s work.” But the job quickly changed on Luther. “The first power saws came into Ryderwood in 1944 to ’45. Then they set your steady wage at fifteen dollars a day; that was all you could make, no matter how many trees you felled. You got fifteen dollars if you only felled one tree, and if you felled seventy-five or eighty, you got fifteen dollars. But if you only felled one tree a day, you wouldn’t be there very long. They expected you to fall three times as much as by hand.” Although Luther’s decision to leave the woods for college wasn’t difficult, he reminisces that “after working in the woods, it kind of gets in your blood; you can’t explain it. Just companionship. You’re with the same guys, working on the same crew every day . . . We’d drink with them on the weekends and work with ’em during the week. Something kind of gets in your blood, you know . . . if you live through it.”

The companionship felt by the loggers is one reason that many of them and their families return to town each year, even though Luther says “they spread out all over the world when Ryderwood folded up.” Everybody “knew it was coming, and a lot of them got out when they could.” Some moved

“to Gardiner (Oregon) and worked for Long-Bell,” and “some went to Weed and Tennant, California. But,” Luther points out, “that meant you had to move out of the whole area then . . . you hated to move out of the area you lived all your life. Most of ’em still live right in this area here.” Luther’s parents moved to Vernita, Oregon, where Mr. Fleming continued his career as a scaler with International Paper.

The selling of the town, Luther continues, was hard on “a lot of them old-timers there . . . ’cause that’s all they knew was logging. They logged all their lives, and they thought they had a job there for as long as they lived. When it shut down, there was a lot of them that really went into deep depression and just couldn’t hardly handle it. It was the first time they’d been out of a job in their life. It was pretty rough to find a job. There was no such thing as going to school to get a computer job, or something like that, for loggers. Weyerhaeuser could only take so many of ’em. But, you see, they didn’t want any strong union men neither.”

The people who moved from Ryderwood to Oregon before the town was sold were the ones who started the annual picnic that’s become a forty-year tradition. When the reunion moved up to Washington, Luther became actively involved in its organization. “Then,” Luther remembers, “when they got this park built in Ryderwood, I came up and talked to the city council. They (the pensioners) didn’t want us to come up there. They thought it was going to be a bunch of motorcycles going to come up and tear the town up.” But instead of arriving on motorcycles, former Ryderwood residents congregate in campers and “it’s just a big party for two or three days.” Furthermore, about half the present residents join the festivities and listen to a bit of their town’s unique history.

“I think one reason we all stuck together there so much was you really didn’t have an upper or lower class,” reflects Luther. “You might have four or five bosses; all the rest of ’em were just common peons, and we was all fightin’ for survival. No one wasn’t any better than anybody else.”

\* \* \*

Nola K. Blanes was born to Emma and Carl Blanes on July 30, 1933, in Ryderwood. Her parents were not only some of the original settlers but also one of the last families to leave the town in 1953. Nola, the youngest of four children, attended the Ryderwood school, from which she graduated in 1951. She later attended junior college and eventually earned a bachelor's degree in painting from the University of Washington, where she now works as an adviser in the graduate school. Nola has lived in Seattle since 1956 and currently shares a duplex in the Fremont district with her two cats. Although Nola prefers city life partly because "in the city you can be anonymous," she has returned to Ryderwood for many of the picnics.

Like most people who were born in Ryderwood, Nola was delivered at home by Dr. E. N. Sulis, the town physician. Because Nola was "sort of an afterthought" and her mother "ran out of names," it was the nurse's aide who "suggested that it might be nice to name" the baby after Dr. Sulis. "His name was Noel Sulis," she explains, "and I was named Nola after him." Several years later Dr. Sulis operated on his namesake, Nola says, because "everybody's tonsils were taken out, whether you needed it or not. Everybody was on company medical, so there were a lot of surgeries that weren't necessary, and there were some recorded that weren't done. He was a great surgeon because he had all that practice." But Nola, like many former residents, recalls the town doctor with a certain fondness, continuing, "He was dedicated; he was there for years and years, and when we'd have these Ryderwood picnics he'd show up. The last time I saw him, he must have been almost ninety . . . he finally died. He was a nice old guy."

Being the only doctor in this logging town, Dr. Sulis must have seen more than the usual physician's share of emergency cases. Nola tells of her third-grade year when two of her classmates' fathers were killed in logging accidents. "There would be this whistle that'd go off when this would happen," Nola remembers. The question in the townspeople's minds would be "Who is it? *Who is it?*" Then one day, Nola says, "there was a whistle for me." She tells about the incident as if it were yesterday. "I come home, and I see my dad's jacket in the wood box. There was blood on it, the cable marks across the back of it, and I'm terrified, 'cause I already know about Mary Morris and Beverly Hammer losing their dads."

It was the pull of a logging cable that changed the life of Carl Blanes Sr. and his family that day. Nola says her father was "a smart man in logging; he went to work in the woods when he was about fourteen," and he was the high

climber who topped the first tree in Ryderwood. But on that day “the cable caught my dad and lifted him up . . . eighty feet in the air. It fractured his skull and broke ribs; he was in the hospital for about six months. And he had been prone to rheumatoid arthritis before that. Particularly after being sedentary for those six months,” Nola says her father was unable to return to work. “He tried again and again . . . but he just couldn’t physically do it. He was kind of a cranky guy to be around for all those last years of his life.” Besides altering her father’s physical and mental states, the accident affected Nola’s family in other ways as well. Her mother, who had been a logging camp cook years earlier, went back to work to help support the family. “My mother was a very shy person,” Nola remembers. “There was people who worked at the store for years and who had never seen my mother until my dad got so ill that she had to go to work.” Mrs. Blanes started in the Ryderwood cafe “first as a dishwasher, and then as assistant cook, and then as a cook.” When the town was changing hands in 1953, Nola recalls that her mother cooked for the clean-up crew. The Blanes’s dining room became a restaurant of sorts, and Nola “got to play waitress.”

Nola’s parents both had inherited property and also had managed to buy a piece of timberland during the Depression, and “they selectively logged that for a number of years.” Nola explains, “That’s how we lived for twenty-some years without my father being employed. He hadn’t worked long enough for any social security, or anything like that, to kick in. We lived very frugally for a very long time.” Because of having to watch every penny back then, Nola says, “I still feel like I’m absolutely destitute . . . and yet . . . what I do for a living is tell people how to get money. But in my gut, I feel poor.” Nola sees the irony in her situation, and about her frugal ways she adds, “One of these days I’m going to get past that.”

Nola’s oldest brother, Ernie, had already worked in the woods for awhile when their father became disabled. Although he could see the debilitating effects of his father’s injuries, Ernie nevertheless made logging his career. He started his own “gyppo outfit” locally, Nola says, then “decided to go down to northern California and log those redwoods.” Over his many years of working in the woods, he “almost died three times” but “was still climbing trees at sixty-five.”

Nola says her other brother, Carl Jr., and her sister, Virginia, “made a concerted effort to try to encourage me to do something.” Ginny, who moved to Seattle at the age of fifteen, would tell Nola that “Vader was the asshole of the world, and Ryderwood was six miles further up.” It seems, however, that Nola didn’t need much persuasion to see their point. She remembers lying in bed at night as a teenager, hearing the mainline train whistles at Vader, and

thinking that one day she would be out of her dead-end town too. “I had no intention of marrying a logger,” Nola insists, “not at all. I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I knew that wasn’t it.” Then she adds, “I just wanted to travel . . . I wanted to be an intellectual, or something like that.”

Carl Jr. continually worked on developing this intellectual desire in Nola by bringing her books to read and telling her about plays he’d seen. Then one day he took his fifteen-year-old sister to the ballet in Portland, where Nola recounts “a miracle happened.” The “prima ballerina,” “professional lighting,” and “Chopin music” overwhelmed this Ryderwood native who had never even seen a play before. To add to her excitement, Carl’s college roommate—a “psych major” who Nola thought was “just so cool” —bought her a corsage. Between the ballet’s matinee and evening performances, they all “went over to the Portland Art Museum, and there was the last stop of what they call the ‘German Masterpieces.’ During World War II, the Germans had confiscated all these paintings. . . . I saw three thousand years of art in an afternoon.” Later that evening in a restaurant, Nola met more of her brother’s college friends, who “were all so sophisticated. It was the first time in my life I was with a group of people that were speaking English and I didn’t understand a damn thing they were saying.” Nola says, “I referred to that as my brush with culture. Not that we didn’t have culture in our town, because we did. But it wasn’t that kind.”

For her high school graduation, Carl Jr. gave Nola a mandolin, an instrument with which she could develop some of the Ryderwood culture she’d known. In her “early days” of college, Nola became a folk singer. She attributes her appreciation for that type of music to the influx of Tarheels in Ryderwood. Nola says, “When all the Tarheels moved into town, there was a kind of ethnic dimension that created sort of ‘Appalachia exotic.’ We all learned about square dancing and that . . . hillbilly music. Because other than that . . . Tin Pan Alley pop was what people knew. It was fun to learn about them.”

The Carolinians brought many other different ways to Ryderwood. “They talked *real funny*,” says Nola, imitating their drawl, “and they went barefoot, and they married at thirteen. They’d never had wooden floors before; they only had dirt floors.” Looking back, she realizes “it was difficult for the kids. There were some of them that could really integrate, but a lot of them couldn’t. They’d just drop out, because they were really backwood hillbillies.” Nola, of course, has her favorite Tarheel story too. “There was this man in [the post office], and he turns to us high school kids and says, ‘How do you spell *rat*? I don’t mean mousy *rat*, I mean *rat* now!’ And we went into hysterics.” Then she adds, “God love ’em.” Besides the immigration of the Tarheels, Nola remembers a few other events that broke the Ryderwood routine. “One day,

a circus came to the end of the road there. It was a one-ringer, but it had an elephant. I didn't get to go; I just hung around outside. It cost too much," she says. Because "it was significant just having it there," Nola didn't mind that she couldn't go inside the tent to see the show. "Never in a million years would I have ever believed there'd be a circus there."

Then there would be the kids in town who would try to drum up their own excitement. She tells about "one summer these boys I ran around with, they were bored" and decided to set an abandoned house on fire. "They were so stupid. They lit the fire, and then they ran up to turn in the alarm, and then they ran all the way back to watch it." Although the company officials figured out who set it, she says, "they never did anything to them."

Nola also remembers the excitement that moonshine added to life in Ryderwood. "We had five moonshiners in our little town. When it got too bad . . . somebody started burning out the competition—three of them." She agrees with Luther that "there was a kind of equality" financially among Ryderwood families, but adds that "there definitely was a class system. There were those people who didn't drink, the temperate types and the church-goers, and then there were the people who went to taverns." Nola's parents were the temperate type, but as a kid in a logging town, her introduction to alcohol was inevitable. Nola remembers sobering up two of her friends when she was eleven or twelve years old, and she herself started drinking at the age of fourteen. "But I was playing both sides," she says. "I did the tavern, and I also did the Sunday school." She tells how "at one of the school dances, some kids . . . stole the pop out of our car, and so all we had was moonshine and bourbon, so I used bourbon as a chaser." Nola ended up with a monster of a headache and "tunnel vision for days." She says she "didn't realize until later, about ten years later, that people could die of alcohol poisoning." Although some of her most memorable Ryderwood incidents involve alcohol, Nola stopped drinking about twelve years ago "when it got to be too much."

Nola tells "that one of those pleasant memories I have with my father" was when "I was very small, my father had a bottle of Miller's . . . I sat on his lap, and he let me have a sip. I felt very privileged." Nola's mother, she recalls, "was just furious." Another of Nola's memories that involves alcohol was V-J Day, "the first time as a child I ever wanted to be an adult. I wanted to be able to let loose like that and party. They had cases and cases of beer. It just went on all night. They showed movies on the side of that building that was painted white . . . some old swashbuckler movie for us kids. We just sat on the grass there in the middle of the night, watching movies . . . and people were fornicating out in back of the store. Lord, it was just amazing."

Although she wanted to be an adult on V-J Day to “let loose,” Nola admits that at the age of five she already was “sort of a free spirit in my own right . . . I’d steal my boyfriend’s trike and ride all over town.” Her playmate, Billy Charles Poindexter, was Nola’s first model of a “free spirit,” and he affected her for years to come. His death as a youngster is an event Nola says she has “never recovered from.” Billy Charles would hop on the log train his father engineered and ride into the shop with his dad. But one day “it was going too fast, and it cut him into pieces.” Afterward at church, Nola’s belief in religion faltered for the first time because “they said Billy Charles was now in heaven, and I said that doesn’t make any sense at all, ’cause he was a rotten kid; he was just terrible. But,” she continues, “he was also very exciting. He was innovative. He had more personality to him than most kids; he was more imaginative.” On that day when Nola saw the “white shroud” covering the body of Billy Charles on the flat car, she went home and told her mother, “Well, I guess I’ll never get married.” Nola realizes “in retrospect, I wasn’t old enough to grieve this properly” because for years “I could not talk about him without crying.” And Nola never has married.

Of her thirteen classmates who did marry, Nola thinks it’s amazing that only one of them ever divorced, and that seven of them went to college. Some “just went to community college a couple years and then quit [but] there were quite a few of us that got all the way through. I think one of the reasons why we had so many kids going to college in my class is that the town was folding down.” Nola explains that “one of our classmate’s mother worked in Longview . . . so we’d just ride with her” to Lower Columbia College. One of her closest friends, Keith Cameron, started commuting to LCC before Nola did. She remembers, “He came back and he said, ‘Nola, you’ve gotta try this.’ He was taking a painting class, and he set up this still life.” And for the second time in her life, Nola says, “a miracle happened. I’d never painted before and . . . that was what ultimately became my major at the University. The miracle was performed there first in Keith’s mother’s kitchen with a still life of apples and a teapot.”

After attending Lower Columbia, Nola moved to Seattle and worked for “Mother Bell” and “Mother Boeing” before working for the University of Washington. Because she prefers the financial security offered by these large employers, Nola realizes she is not “the rebel in my family” that she once considered herself. About the University where she worked four years before becoming a full-time student, she says, “I’ve been on the campus just forever. But I like it there, because there are a lot of interesting people.”

But there were a lot of interesting people in Ryderwood too. Nola remembers reading Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* in high school and recalls that Anderson's novel seemed to capture the universal and also the unique elements of life in a small town. Although Nola "would never want to live in a place like that again," she's "really fond" of the people she grew up with. When Nola was in Europe in 1958, she says, "I felt so guilty that I'd missed the Ryderwood picnic." The town picnics are better than mere class reunions would be, because "you see parents of your friends, and you see their brothers and their sisters, and you see your Sunday school teacher . . . you used to. Now they're dying off."

"It's really amazing how sentimental I am about people," Nola reflects, "that all I have in common with are those early years."

### **Conclusion**

Ryderwood . . . the family logging camp at the end of the road. Once even the world's largest logging camp, because "Uncle Bill" Ryder and R. A. Long envisioned and built a camp not just for loggers but also for their families. In 1953 the "camp" closed down, but to this day the "family" remains in Luther and Nola and many others who lived at the end of the road.

## A Note From the Author

My oral sources for this project were Patsy (Merchant) Gottfryd, Nola Blanes and Luther Fleming. Luther also provided me with his scrapbook of newspaper clippings, copies of *The Log of Long-Bell* and special editions of *Longview Daily News*. Furthermore, I found early editions of *The Log of Long-Bell* in University of Washington's Pacific Northwest special collections.

I strived to produce an accurate account, using the sources available to me (mentioned above) over the course of Winter Quarter 1991. This project, however, is not an academic research report but rather several oral histories that have been enhanced with newspaper and magazine clippings. During the project I struggled with the question of "truth" and concluded that one person's truth may differ from another's. Nevertheless, if you want to send corrections to me, please feel free to do so. I would appreciate supporting documentation, if possible.

I would like to thank Professor Richard J. Dunn, chairman of University of Washington's English Department, for his guidance on this project. I found all of Ryderwood's history as a company town intriguing and a bit overwhelming for a one-quarter project. With Professor Dunn's help, I was able to focus my interest and findings to create this end result.

I also would like to thank Luther, Nola and my mother for the time they spent with me on this project. Their reminiscences opened so many other doors in Ryderwood-past that I would like to explore when I can find the time. If you would like to share some of your stories about Ryderwood with me, please send them to **svoie@scn.org** or:

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I will consider all information as available for possible publication and sharing, unless you inform me otherwise.