



MASTER WOODS WORKER

LANCE OLSON LOGS 30-PLUS YEARS AS PENINSULA STATE PARK'S LUMBERJACK.

Kathleen Harris

Sven's Bluff skewers the sky like the jagged blade of a steel gray saw. In late April, hundreds of Dutchman's breeches spill down this cliff, their green leaves and white flowers softening the edges of the 420-million-year-old rock.

It was here, about that time of year in 2001, that Peninsula State Park lumberjack Lance Olson nearly met his maker.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics rates logging as the most dangerous oc-

cupation in the U.S. What happened to Olson on Sven's Bluff proves the point.

"I was felling a large dead birch on a steep incline below Sven's Bluff," Olson recalled. As always, he estimated where

Sven's Bluff in Peninsula State Park certainly looks beautiful, but no one knows better than lumberjack Lance Olson about the dangers that can be encountered there.



NICK WEIERS

the tree should fall by pacing 20 steps. The birch was about 60 feet tall and nothing seemed to be in the way.

But the tree had other ideas. "The birch got held up by a group of cedars," Olson said. It suddenly snapped.

"The bottom of the tree, where it broke off, slid down the bluff. The top, still suspended, reversed direction and fell towards me," Olson continued. "I ran for shelter behind the nearest standing cedar and rested my right hand on a piece of deadfall to support myself."

Olson's hand extended past his cover. "The birch hit my hand and smashed and broke one of my fingers." The fel-

low working with him that day called it a lucky break.

Despite Olson's years of experience, the unpredictable still happened. "You can't look inside a tree," he said. Birch is especially notorious for splitting and falling at unforeseen angles.

Adrenalin took over to help Olson avoid a tragedy. "I didn't look back to see where the tree was falling," he said. For people who only cut trees occasionally, a failure to consider the unexpected can be deadly.

Handling hazards

Peninsula State Park hired Olson to run its woodyard in 1984. He took over from Ray Hamm, who owned Camp Tel Campground in Egg Harbor. Olson had worked for Hamm since graduating from high school four years earlier.

"Being outside in the park environment was and is a favorite part of the job," Olson said.

Providing campers with firewood may seem to be this private concessionaire's primary purpose, but Olson also provides a more critical service. Hazardous trees are his firewood source. "I remove diseased or dangerous trees," he explained.

Visitor safety is a primary concern in the Wisconsin State Park System. Olson cuts about 200 cords of wood each year, using a log splitter as well as splitting much of it by hand.

The arrival of emerald ash borer (EAB) and beech bark disease to Peninsula State Park has intensified hazardous tree removal in high-use areas like campgrounds and trails. To manage the increase, Department of Natural Resources foresters and the park superintendent are marking problem trees that may appear to be healthy but are not. Campers may notice stumps where favorite trees once stood.

Woodsmen like Olson know how to recognize telltale signs of tree disease. Flecking, the absence of bark on ash from woodpeckers searching for beetles, can indicate the presence of EAB. A scant covering of soft, white fluff on the gray bark of a beech signals beech bark disease. Bracken or shelf fungus suggests a tree is decaying fast.

Olson recognizes lightning strikes on trees, too. "A lot of the big white pine on the bluffs have lightning strikes," he said. "But those pines can still live a long time."

People ask why he doesn't cut and split downed trees lying on the forest floor.

"Downed trees are too decayed to be of good firewood quality," he said. "Besides, rotting logs and branches release nutrients into the soil." Hollow stumps also provide homes and even food (insects) for wildlife.

Each tree has different merits. Basswood is easiest to cut and pine is messiest because of sap. Cedars almost always have some rot inside. But Olson said his favorite tree to fell is "one without nails."

Campground trees can contain hidden nails, pounded in years ago by folks wanting to hang a lantern or string a rope to dry beach towels. New wood grows around nails, absorbing and concealing them. When struck by a chainsaw, they dull blades and make logging more dangerous.

Changes through the years

The Peninsula State Park woodyard has been on Bluff Road for decades, perhaps starting as a staging area for Peninsula's former sawmill. Early on, rangers delivered firewood, often free, to campsites. Crews spent all winter making firewood then worked a couple of hours each summer night selling it.

Changes came in the winter of 1974, according to Gary Patzke, who was park superintendent from 1974-84.

"A huge pile of 8-foot logs was piled in Nicolet Bay campground, ready for bucking," said Patzke, now retired. "Park facilities were in poor shape and I thought the effort put into the firewood operation could be better spent upgrading facilities, so I developed the current (private contractor) operation."

Over time Olson initiated changes, too. He added wagons for campers to haul racks of wood to their cars and a large canopy and tarps to cover wood in rainy weather. And he began selling kindling and fire starters.

Beginning about 10 years ago, restrictions on where firewood could originate as well as laws prohibiting removal of firewood from the park were put into place to help prevent the spread of destructive insects and disease. Olson began selling certified wood and also sells "natural chimneys." These hollow logs are easier to start and keep flames more contained, making them safer. The chimneys have become a Peninsula tradition.

A family affair

For Olson personally, the biggest change came with a game of darts in Sturgeon Bay, where he met a young woman named Sue Kramer. Within a few years, Olson was hitched to the hardworking southern Door girl, who gave up showing quarter horses for lumberjack summers. Sue Kramer Olson also teaches at Gibraltar School in Fish Creek.

The Olsons have two daughters, both born in the month of May, which means they came to the woodyard the day after getting home from the hospital.

"The woodyard opens in May so we had to be there," Olson said. "We would arrive early then drive in circles around the park until the girls fell asleep. We covered the rolled-down car windows with mosquito netting. When they got bigger, we put them in a Pack 'n Play covered with mosquito netting."

Helping at the woodyard was expected of the girls, Cassie and Anissa, as they grew up. At first, they alternated between filling racks with wood and playing in the woodyard — always within view of their watchful parents. They looked for critters such as frogs and salamanders in the nearby black ash swamp and watched bats swoop between the cedar trees.

The family also camped at Peninsula, usually at site 602 in North Nicolet Bay. "It is close to the beach and we could see the girls from the campsite if they wanted to go to the playground," Sue said.

By high school, Cassie and Anissa had started to accompany their father occasionally when he cut hazardous trees. They dragged branches off park campsites and trails, and rolled heavy logs toward his truck.

"When the girls got older, they asked why we did not get to go on summer vacation like everyone else," Sue said. "I told them it was because we lived in a place where people come to vacation."

Learning the value of hard work has paid off. Today, Cassie is completing Doctor of Physical Therapy studies and Anissa is pursuing a degree in interior architecture.

Memories, friendships and no regrets

Like his daughters, Olson has experienced tradeoffs in running Peninsula's woodyard.

"My job is labor-intensive," he said. "The equipment can be expensive, as

can the insurance. A chainsaw, a wood splitter and a dump truck are essential. So is a tractor. I didn't have either one when I started."

On the other hand, he has seen amazing sights. "In 1992, a black bear was treed on Bluff Road. She was big — maybe 300 pounds," he recalled. People came from all over to gawk, but when night fell and the crowds disappeared, so did the bear.

Olson saw bear tracks near Middle Road in 2015. He has spotted fishers, raccoons and a weasel "probably eating mice in the woodyard." He also has seen porcupines, noting "they do a lot of damage to the tops of trees, especially maples." And he "watched an eagle catch and eat a snake at Tension Bay."

Weather events have provided memories, too. Olson was on cleanup duty following the September 2011 storm that closed all Door County state parks for five days. And he remembers the 1988 drought that caused great damage. "(It) wiped out a lot of birch that weakened then deteriorated," he said.

After the drought, Olson said the park ranger at Peninsula marked so many trees as hazardous that the superintendent became alarmed.

"(He) painted over some of the orange blaze," recalled Olson, chuckling. "But you know all those trees eventually died. There was so much wood from the drought that I filled the field on the south side of Middle Road, across from Kodanko Field." Pines grow there now.

That drought also killed red oaks at Welcker's Point campground. Oaks that survived were further weakened by disease. As of this publication, oak wilt disease is not present at Peninsula, but other maladies are.

It's been a good run for Lance Olson, with no regrets. He and Sue have been around so long they now are meeting the children of adults they knew as toddlers.

"Ed Beaman was a campground host in the 1980s," Olson reminisced. "After Ed passed away, his daughter continued to camp at Peninsula. Her daughters and ours became lifelong friends."

With so many friendships, a love of hard work and a dash of luck, Olson plans to remain Peninsula's lumberjack for a few more years. Why leave when you can experience the best of Wisconsin outdoors? ❧

Kathleen Harris is the Peninsula State Park naturalist.



Working at the Peninsula State Park woodyard has been a group effort for the Olsons, from left, Anissa, Sue, Lance and Cassie, with family dogs Vessie and Jericho.

KIM BEAMAN-LEE