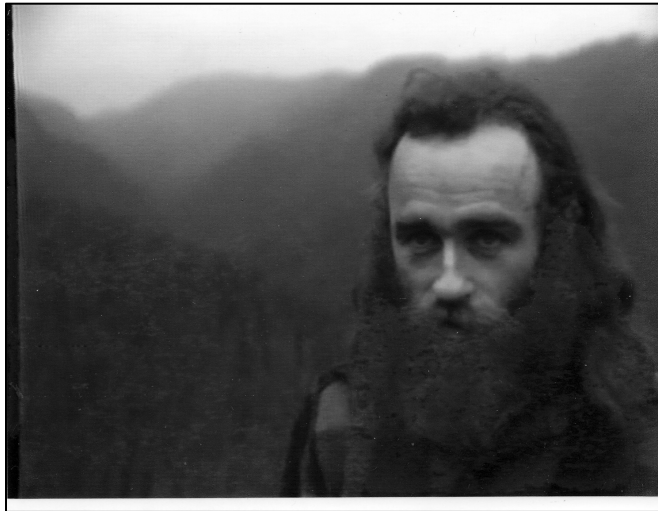


## A Brief History of the Grassy Knob Wilderness

*by Jim Rogers*

*In celebration of the 50th anniversary of the 1964 Wilderness Act, I have been asked to write the history of the Grassy Knob Wilderness Area between the Elk and Sixes rivers near Port Orford, Oregon because I was deeply involved in efforts to protect the area. It was 30 years ago—a long time in a man's life, but I want to share what I remember so people in the future can know the story. Thanks to everyone who helped to save Grassy Knob. Your contributions were invaluable—even if I didn't include everyone here by name.*



It all began back around 1972, when I was the Timber Manager for Western States Plywood Co-op on Elk River Road near Port Orford. My timber cruiser and all-around assistant was Bill Krick. Bill was a logger's logger. At the age of 19 he had been the youngest hook tender in the history of Weyerhaeuser Timber Company. There wasn't a logging problem he couldn't figure out. He had a model logging set-up in his back yard, complete with a yarder and all the rigging. He'd come home with an unsolvable yarding problem on his mind and by the next morning he'd have it solved. Then one day something happened. Weyco shut down the woods because of fire danger. Bill did not believe in such nonsense. There was no ground too steep, no snow too deep, and no conditions too rough to keep Bill out of the woods. Too dry?! He pulled the plug on Weyco and moved down to Curry County where he made a bundle rigging spar poles. But the problem he ran into at Weyerhaeuser followed him down to Curry. If it was too wet, they'd shut down the woods. If it was too dry, they'd shut down the woods. If it was too windy, they'd shut down the woods. In frustration Bill quit logging and went to share cropping at the WSP Co-op. And that was where Bill and I met. Western States hired me to manage their Timber Department and assigned Bill Krick to be my assistant.

Bill and I got along famously. I had previously worked with a retired logger, Max Carver, up in Tillamook when I was a forester for the U.S. Forest Service. Max and I specialized in laying out timber sales. Working with Bill Krick extended my knowledge of high lead logging

tremendously. He regaled me with stories of topping spar poles, including the gruesome end met by many a logger topping a spar tree, but I will spare you these details.

Now it came to pass that the Forest Service was about to enter a piece of real estate unlike any other in the Elk and Sixes rivers country. In between these two coastal rivers was a high ridge called Grassy Knob because it had grass growing on top, but it was loaded with big trees on its steep sides. The Forest Service called the new timber sale area: Mt. Butler-Dry Creek. While most of the Elk and Sixes was steeper than a cow's face, Mt. Butler-Dry Creek was steeper than the back of God's head! Furthermore, it was a very spooky place. I myself had heard rocks mysteriously clacked together and had experienced the feeling of being watched when I was in there all alone, miles from nowhere. Tales of the Swalahist were quite believable in this godforsaken neck of the woods. But we had to make a bid on the sale. The timber-heavy ridge loomed high, right in view of the mill's backyard. Bill was sobered by the prospect of building roads and logging Mount Butler-Dry Creek, especially the largest roadless portion —the Grassy Knob Roadless Area. Sobered, but not cowed. The Forest Service was beginning to experiment with skyline yarders, an old system resurrected for modern logging. Bill Krick had abundant experience with skyline logging. It's important to remember, at the time, the idea of not logging Grassy Knob was not even considered. It was barely even conceivable. Had I suggested such a notion to Bill, well, let's not even go there. With a skyline yarder, nothing was impossible. Then, one day without warning, Bill quit Western States and went to Hale Logging in Gold Beach to run their brand new BU99 Skyline Yarder.

The loss of Bill Krick meant that I had to find a new Timber Cruiser. In retrospect, this was where the guardian spirit who ultimately managed this whole saga first began to intercede. For no sooner was Bill gone when I received a phone call from George Shook. George had been my best friend when we were forestry students at Syracuse University in New York State. George needed a job. He had been teaching English literature at a college in West Virginia, but it had become apparent that academia was not his cup of tea. Well, I told him, I did happen to be in the market for a timber cruiser if he wanted to give that a try. "Hell yes" was his answer. He'd be here in a few days.

Hanging out with George was lots of fun. I spent the first week teaching him how to cruise old-growth timber; how to recognize the intricacies of a Number 1 Peeler (these oldest biggest trees were already almost extinct back then) and the common mistake of misidentifying a Number 3 Peeler as a Number 2 Peeler, and so on. In my day, I was recognized as one of the best old-growth timber cruisers around. And, while I coached George in the skills and knowledge required to be my Timber Cruiser, he told me about his efforts to protect the Cranberry Back Country of West Virginia by designating it as Wilderness. Naturally our discussions included the future of the Mt. Butler-Dry Creek area, including the Grassy Knob Roadless Area. It was George who first suggested the possibility of the Grassy Knob Wilderness Area, and it was Jim Rogers who said FORGET IT! In this community, in the 1970s, to propose not logging anyplace would be heresy, punishable if not by death, then at least by total ostracism and a great deal of middle-fingered waving.

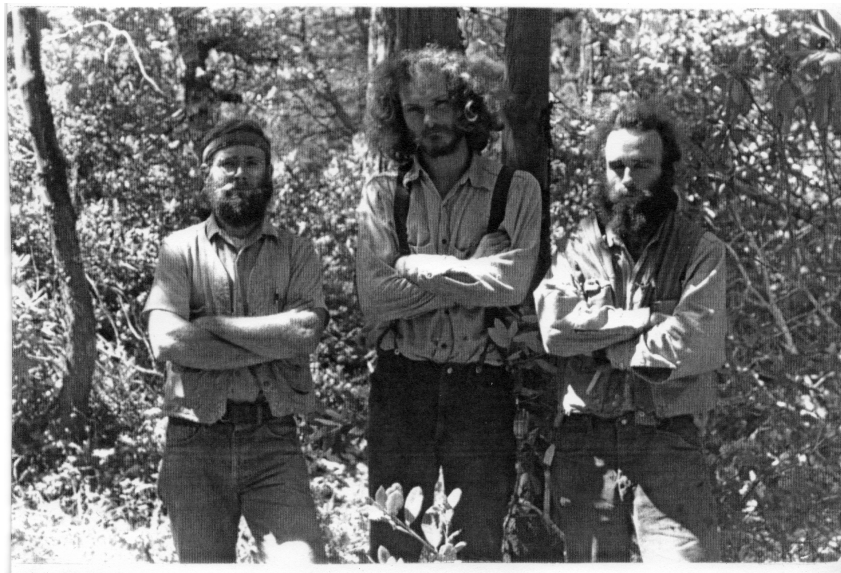
One day we decided to see the area first hand. We drove up Sixes River and then the Moon Mountain Road to the head of Dry Creek. I remember gazing out over the vast, unbroken vista of old-growth forest with the ocean in the background and realizing: that was it. There was no other place left with unbroken coastal old-growth forest of this magnitude anywhere south of Alaska. We hiked down the North Fork of Dry Creek to its junction with the main fork. This was something new in my experience – hiking through magnificent, massive old-growth trees where I wasn't cruising timber in preparation for the fellers to cut them all down. And this realization did pull at my heartstrings just a tad. But my job was to keep a flow of old-growth logs coming into the WSP mill to provide jobs for most of the population of Port Orford. I simply could not look at it any other way, despite the protestations of George Shook.

But the guardian spirit did not relent and paid us a visit one day when we were cruising timber over in the South Fork Coquille. It was one of those days of heavy sideways rain where, at the end of the day, you're just as soaked in rain gear as without. We'd finished down in the hole at the bottom of the unit and began the long hike up to the road at the top of the unit. George suggested that, instead of beginning to cruise the next unit, we head into the Powers Ranger Station to inquire about the Grassy Knob Roadless Area. District Ranger Harold Simes greeted us warmly. It wasn't often that the boys from Western States Plywood paid a visit to the Powers Ranger Station, it being a 2-hour drive. I asked what was happening with Grassy Knob. "Well we've got to hold a couple of meetings yet and solicit public comments before we make any final decisions." George casually drawled in his West Virginia accent, "Think there's any chance of it goin' Wilderness?" The Ranger's face turned beet red. "Gentlemen" he said coldly, his finger jabbing at the Mt. Butler-Dry Creek map on the wall by his desk, "Grassy Knob will NEVER be Wilderness!"

The drive back over Iron Mountain to Elk River was silent except for the monotonous slap of the windshield wipers in the driving rain. Finally I lit up the clay pipe in the pocket of my wool shirt, took a long draw and handed the pipe to George. "So what do you think?" I asked. George replied, "They've already made up their minds." And I knew he was right. I felt a great sadness come over me. I often disagreed with the Forest Service, but I'd always thought they scrupulously followed the rules. Now Simes was essentially saying, "Screw the public – we do what we want."

A short time later I hired Jerry Becker, a strapping young man, to crawl through endless brush, inventorying tree saplings on all of the Western States Plywood land in preparation for closing the mill. We could no longer compete with the big timber companies. Western States Plywood closed in October of 1974 after about 24 years. The closing was a very sad occurrence for me and the 200 families the mill supported in Port Orford. I greatly enjoyed my years with WSP. The cooperative mill had been the heart of Port Orford. Though losing my job was not my wish, I was no longer torn between fighting to log Grassy Knob and fighting to save it. I was asked to sign a letter along with several other resource professionals advocating Alternative 2 of the Mt. Butler-Dry Creek Environmental Impact Statement. Alternative 2 called for logging about one-third of the roadless area. Alternative 3, the Forest Service's preferred option, called for logging two-thirds. I signed the letter along with Paul Reimers and Reese Bender of the Oregon

Department of Fish and Wildlife, Fred Swanson of the University of Oregon's Department of Geology, and George Shook of Western States Plywood. Perhaps there were others – I don't remember. I persuaded the Western States Plywood Board of Directors to sign a similar letter. These letters were sent to the Forest Service as public comment – for what it was worth.



Grassy Knob Wilderness advocates,  
George Shook, Jerry Becker,  
and Jim Rogers, 1974

The professionals' letter appeared in the Coos Bay *World* and created quite a stir among my fellow Timber Managers at a timber sale auction a few days later. I remember having lunch with Jim Izett of South Coast Lumber, Don Koozer of U.S. Plywood and Cecil Rodgers of Brookings Plywood. One of them suggested that we all vote for "Alternative 5 – the Timber Industry 'Log it All' Alternative." They all turned to me to see what I had to say. "Actually, I'm leaning toward Alternative 1 – the No Action Alternative." It was so quiet, you could have heard a pin drop. Jim Izett broke the silence, "Barkeep we need another round of double martinis over here!" One of the guys suggested we compromise on Alternative 3 – the Forest Service Alternative, and so we did. They all vowed that when Western States closed they'd throw me a bone now and then, and they kept their word. George, Jerry, and I cruised Port-Orford-cedar for South Coast and surveyed logging roads for U.S. Plywood.

Grassy Knob fell more or less out of the picture since it seemed that the Forest Service preferred alternative would prevail. George moved away and went on to become a highly skilled wood sculptor. I worked for some time as Timber Manager for Tamco on Euchre Creek then quit that job over a disagreement with an unscrupulous log supplier and moved my family up to the banks of Elk River, where I will likely spend most of the rest of my life. We built a house at the base of one of the draws that climbed up to the Grassy Knob ridge. Then the wife and kids moved to Eugene to further their education, and I lived the life of a single mountain man, roaming off to hunt with no one to worry if I didn't show up by dark. It was on one of those excursions that I received the inspiration to fight for Grassy Knob.

I was splitting firewood one day when I was seized by the urge to go deer hunting. I took my 30-30 rifle “Old Meat in the Pot” together with a couple of raw potatoes and an emergency Mylar Space Blanket that South Coast Lumber had given me in case a storm came up when I’d been left by a helicopter in the snow to cruise timber for them. When I reached the Grassy Knob Trail, I was dismayed to see the pink-topped p-line stakes marking the route for the new Grassy Knob road. I hiked up to the lookout and decided to sleep there in the shelter of a rock. Nearby were the remains of the old family home, including stoves, toys, bricks, and other stuff that was left behind after World War II, when there was no longer need for a year-round manned lookout to watch for enemy planes. Indeed, a Japanese plane did fly from a submarine off Cape Blanco and drop incendiary bombs east of the lookout, but the bombs had failed to ignite, and the forest stood. I ate one of my potatoes and rolled up in the thin Mylar film to sleep.

All during the night I was restless. I kept hearing whispers that sounded like people talking, but I couldn’t understand what was being said. The Mylar kept me from freezing during the frosty night, but I wasn’t warm and definitely couldn’t sleep. Yet the night-time company kept me from being bored. Was there really someone out there in the dark – spirits, perhaps? Was Grassy Knob a Spirit Quest site? If so, what did the Indians call it? I wondered.

Eventually, I watched the sun come up over the eastern horizon and ate my last potato, trying to get warm. It was time for some serious discussion with the Great Spirit. I understood that I might be able to save Grassy Knob. The task would be very difficult, but I was the only one who would try to do it. I would lose my friends in the timber industry and the Forest Service. It was made clear that I would be provided with the necessary help. (That was the one point that convinced me that I truly was communing with the Great Spirit and not just my imagination because there was no one in sight who could provide the help I would need.) If I chose to undertake the challenge I would be provided with the necessary help. If I chose not to try, that was OK.

I didn’t know what to do, but it was time to go home. Usually I went down the North Fork of Anvil Creek or Rock Creek. This time I decided to drop right from the steep flank of Grassy Knob into Anvil Creek. About halfway down I reached a rocky spot that was impassable –straight up and down, loose shale with no hand holds. I didn’t want to climb all the way back up to the top of the mountain, but I didn’t see much of a way to move laterally either. I was petrified by the fear of falling a thousand feet down the near vertical mountainside. Suddenly I heard a man talking and coming toward me across the impassable slope! A moment later a huge brown bear came in sight. I was standing near the base of a large live oak tree. The bear stood on his hind feet and, oblivious to my presence, ascended the tree. He settled his big round butt in a crotch and began pulling branches to his mouth, crushing mouthfuls of acorns and commenting on the delicious flavor: “M-m-m-m good. Yess, very good, m-m-m crush-crush-crush ...!” He climbed to the top of the tree and began working on the thickest patch of nuts. I assumed that he had reached this location via a passable animal trail. I tried to sneak past the tree to find it, but I was wearing caulk boots, and “sneaking” in caulks is an oxymoron. The bear quickly descended the tree and exited the scene as rapidly as possible. I searched for a trail, but alas there was

none. In the end, I had no choice but to climb all the way back up to the top of the mountain, but I was secure in the belief that this episode was a gift from the Great Spirit and a clear sign that it was my task in life to save this place.

Shortly after this revelation I wrote a letter to the local newspapers describing what was at stake – the threat to the Elk and Sixes rivers if the Forest Service went through with its plans to road and log the excessively steep and unstable terrain. The letter reached several invaluable helpers, among whom were Jim Johnson and Wayne Wolf of the Independent Troll Fishermen of Oregon, Forrest Taylor of the Coos Bay International Longshoremen's Union, many of whose members were avid Steelheaders, but first and foremost was Dave Werschkul. Dave came along with boundless enthusiasm and political savvy just when I was starting to doubt that we could succeed. He had recently started a Curry County Audubon Chapter called Kalmiopsis Audubon, still running strong today with more than 200 members, some 30 years later. But the letter also reached people who were not allies. One morning I was walking down the street in Port Orford when an acquaintance pulled up in his black Porsche. "Hop in, we need to talk," he called brusquely. He was the Blackjack dealer at the Pegleg Saloon. "Last night Platehead was saying that you're going to get yourself killed if you don't knock off the Grassy Knob thing. They say that you wouldn't be the first. And if anything happens to either of you, we never had this conversation." Of course it was assumed, and rightly so, that I did not run about unarmed.

Then one day I went into the Post Office, and there on the bulletin board was a notice that bids were being accepted by the U.S. Forest Service to build the Grassy Knob Road. I immediately called the Powers District Ranger, Herb Wick (Harold Simes having retired), to ask how he could put the road job up for bids when there had been no official "Decision Notice" or "Finding of No Significant Impact" –basic legal requirements for major projects like this. Herb said that the documents were, in fact, sitting on his desk and would be signed right before the final contract was executed. This meant that I couldn't appeal the decision to build the road because there would be no decision to appeal!

I phoned a forest activist I had recently met, Andy Kerr, who had a pretty good grasp of the legal niceties of dealing with the Forest Service. He advised me to send a registered letter to the Regional Forester requesting a stay on signing the Grassy Knob Road contract until I had appealed the Decision and my appeal had been reviewed by the Regional Forester. The request for stay was granted. I breathed a sigh of relief. This would buy time and give me the opportunity to appeal. Then one afternoon, while I was working on the appeal, the phone rang. "I can't tell you who I am, but I work for the Forest Service, and you ought to know that we signed the Grassy Knob Road contract today. The contractor intends to begin work tomorrow." Incredulous, I asked him how they could do that when the Regional Forester had granted a stay. He said it was an emergency and in an emergency a stay can be withdrawn. "What was the emergency?" I asked. The bid was about to expire, he explained, and the price might rise higher if they had to renegotiate the bid. It went without saying that the Agency wanted to get the road built as soon as possible to bisect the Roadless Area and preclude its designation as Wilderness. That evening I received another mysterious phone call, this one more ominous: "If

our watchman sees you on the work site, he has orders to shoot you and furthermore we know where you live.”

A day or two later they began blasting stumps. I could hear the loud booms from down at my place on the river. With every explosion my hatred for the Forest Service increased. But the outrageous way the road was being built triggered a high-powered response. Jim Johnson phoned to invite me to a meeting the Independent Troll Fishermen of Oregon were having with our local Congressman, Jim Weaver. Congressman Weaver and a Congressman from Ohio had just flown over the eyesore of the new road ripping into unbroken forest up on Grassy Knob. Weaver said he would not have believed the Forest Service was capable of such skullduggery had he not seen it for himself and then assured us of his intent. “Gentlemen, I promise you, there will NOT be an Oregon Wilderness Bill that does not include Grassy Knob!” We could have had no better advocate than Congressman Weaver. But Senator Hatfield was nearly as adamant to his backers in the timber industry that Grassy Knob would not be included in the final bill. The battle lines were drawn.

One of my arguments concerned the Elk River tributary Rock Creek, a stream that hosts a very productive salmon fishery. I wrote to Congressman Weaver explaining that much of the shade for the creek was cast by Port-Orford-cedar and that logging and road building at the creek’s head would introduce Port-Orford-cedar root rot disease (*Phytophthora lateralis*), which would kill off much of the cedar, reduce the shade, and thus increase the stream’s temperature. District Ranger Wick responded with a letter, which Congressman Weaver forwarded to me, stating: “There are only 2 Port-Orford-cedars in Rock Creek and the largest is 6 inches in diameter. Amateurs often mistake Western red cedar for Port-Orford-cedar.” Now I had long been cruising Port-Orford-cedar at that time, and I didn’t see how I could have made such an embarrassing mistake. I hurried up there and found that the upper two-thirds of the drainage was Port-Orford-cedar and the lower one-third was redcedar. Most of the Port-Orford-cedar were 4-6 feet, not inches, in diameter. My argument was unchanged. The majority of streamside shading derived from Port-Orford-cedar, and the death of that cedar would increase summer water temperatures.

Coincidentally, the Forest Service had scheduled a public meeting for July 22, 1980 in Port Orford –just a couple of days after I received Wick’s false letter and field surveyed the cedar. Bill Bradbury was going to video the entire meeting to use in a documentary he was producing on RARE II, the Forest Service’s controversial review of Roadless Areas for potential Wilderness. (This was before Bill decided to run for State Representative.) The guardian spirit was no doubt in attendance. The local rabble was well aroused after hearing of the Port-Orford-cedar deception. Ranger Wick tried to convince the crowd that there were only 2 little Port-Orford-cedar trees in Rock Creek, while I insisted that there were hundreds, many in the 6-foot diameter range. “Let’s have a field trip!” the rabble shouted. “No, that’s not necessary,” the Ranger insisted. Bill Bradbury focused the camera on Wick’s face, sweat pouring down his forehead and onto his uniform. In the background, the unruly mob called for justice. Floyd and Melvin, the only two black men in Port Orford were especially insistent, along with some slightly intoxicated commercial fishermen. I stood up to say a few words when there was a

distant BOOM, which we later found out was the second major eruption of Mount St. Helens! Facing a full-fledged riot, Ranger Wick finally agreed to a public field trip the following morning.

We drove up the new road toward Grassy Knob and met Wick at the head of Rock Creek. Our small but still rowdy group walked down the steep slope to the first spring where, indeed, there were 2 Port-Orford-cedar, the largest being 6 inches diameter as Wick had described. But continuing down into the draw, we encountered more and more Port-Orford-cedar –big ones. I needed the Ranger, "Is that one over 6 inches? What about that one? 6 inches? How about 6 foot?" I pressed further: "Do you want to walk up all these side draws and count the POC?" Wick was getting mad, but I felt no need to call off the dogs. He'd brought it on himself.

In the meantime, a federal judge issued an injunction against logging in any Roadless Areas until a credible Wilderness Act was signed into law. Oregon Senator Hatfield held a public hearing on RARE II (Roadless Area Review and Evaluation), which I was invited to attend. In my testimony, I stated that in all of my history with the timber industry I had never experienced conditions as rugged as Grassy Knob nor had I ever seen such a valuable salmon fishery to be lost. Jim Izett, Timber Manager of South Coast Lumber, testified to the dollar value of the timber, but he did not mention the fishery or the extreme terrain. When he completed his testimony, he sat next to me and said, "I agree with 95% of what you say, but we need the logs." I knew then that my former colleagues agreed with me on some level, even if it was impossible for them to say so publicly without destroying their careers. The Sierra Club, on the other hand, opposed Grassy Knob because Senator Hatfield did, and they wanted to keep in his good graces. They didn't see any wilderness value in old-growth forest.

Things were heating up. There was also an injunction against any logging on Federal lands in the range of the Northern Spotted Owl until a credible plan to protect habitat could be adopted. Congressman Weaver was sticking to the promise he had made – no bill without Grassy Knob. Senator Hatfield would not budge. Dave Werschkul went back to Washington D.C. to lobby for Grassy Knob. The key congressman needed to back Congressman Weaver was Les AuCoin from Oregon's 1st District. Every few evenings I'd get a phone call from Dave saying, "We need six telegrams on Les AuCoin's desk by 5 am." I'd call our little group of die hard supporters and Western Union. Finally, at Harry Truman's 100th birthday celebration Congressman Weaver and Senator Hatfield were standing shoulder to shoulder. Senator Hatfield said, "I'll give you Grassy Knob if we can get a bill." Congressman Weaver agreed. We never knew what deal had been cut, but when the Oregon Wilderness Act of 1984 passed both houses of Congress and was signed into law by President Reagan, Grassy Knob was in.

Work on the Grassy Knob road was immediately halted. They had already graveled 5 miles and cleared another mile-and-a-half, all of which had to be left out of the Wilderness and, on the map today, still looks like a narrow finger poking in. The contractor, Tidewater, was paid for the entire road contract, but unfortunately, in a last minute deal, Senator Hatfield was able to take the 2000-acre Rock Creek drainage out of the final bill so that it could be logged to pay for the road that the Forest Service built in its effort to bisect and thwart the potential Wilderness. After all that grief, Rock Creek's big Port-Orford-cedars would remain vulnerable.

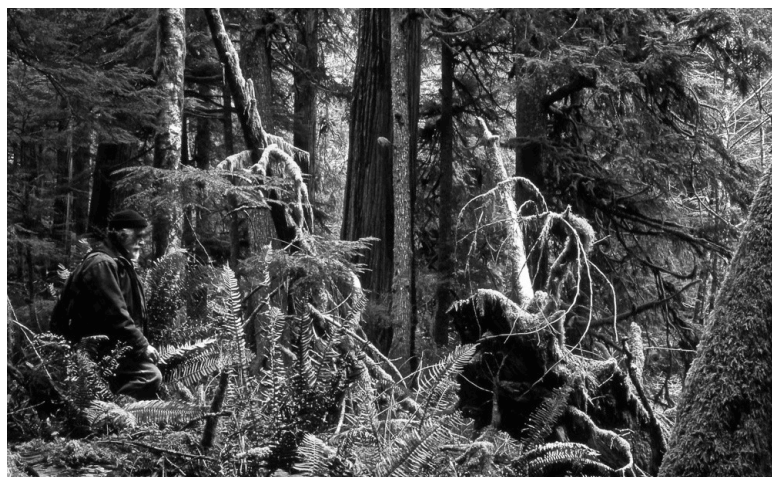


That fall, a dedication ceremony was held on top of Grassy Knob where we met a brand new Siskiyou National Forest Supervisor, Ron McCormick, and a brand new Powers District Ranger, John Barry. Earth First! showed up to harangue the Forest Service but kindly agreed to make the event a purely festive celebration. A few months later Ranger Barry and I were discussing Grassy Knob. "There are still plenty of diehards in the Forest Service who would like to see this logged," he told me, "but as they retire and die off, I doubt that in 30 years, there will be anybody who doesn't think this was the right thing to do." I thought about that for a moment and asked, "How about Frank Barnhard?" Frank was the Timber Staff Officer for the Siskiyou National Forest, a man I liked and respected. "Frank dedicated a big part of his Forest Service career to planning the logging and road building for Grassy Knob. But in doing so he got to see more of it on the ground than any other Forest Service employee. I believe he's happy it turned out this way, too."

After we succeeded in protecting Grassy Knob Wilderness, I've remained engaged in efforts to protect the Elk River watershed with my long-time friend and neighbor Jerry Becker. Many more helpers have showed up along the way, just as I was promised on that fateful day up at Grassy Knob. We started Friends of Elk River and went on to protect Copper-Salmon Wilderness, just to the east of Grassy Knob, in 2009 to secure the watershed of the North Fork of Elk River. Now we're trying to gain some protection for important spawning tributaries on the river's south side by proposing designation of the Elk River Salmon Emphasis Area (ERSEA).

Unfinished business remains in Rock Creek. When the Forest Service tried to log the drainage in 1995, as ordered by Senator Hatfield with the Section 318 Rider (the infamous "Rider From Hell"), intense local opposition thwarted the effort. To date (2014), the huge Port-Orford-cedars that have long shaded Rock Creek are still alive and well, provisionally protected by the Northwest Forest Plan. But soon that may change; the Rock Creek watershed must be added back into the Grassy Knob Wilderness before it's too late.

*Jim Rogers, October 2014*



Jim Rogers in Copper Salmon Wilderness  
(Photo by Tim Palmer)