

BRUCE WILLEY

Through the Trees, 2016
Archival Print, 20 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

TIM CLANCY

Hoedad Life

Planting trees in the majestic West and Pacific Northwest backcountry

For most of the winter of 1976–77, I worked as a tree planter in the Coast Range of southern Oregon. During that time, I lived in a tent, at a primitive campground called Park Creek, twenty winding miles from the nearest phone, gas station, or grocery store. My approximately twenty-five coworkers were members of Cougar Mountain crew, one of ten such crews that formed Hoedads Co-op Incorporated, a worker-owned reforestation company based in Eugene, Oregon. Under contract to the Coos Bay District of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), we had sixty days to plant approximately nine hundred acres.

In the predawn darkness of my first morning as a Hoedad, I crawled from my sleeping bag and was promptly showered with frost, the result of a cold night's worth of breath that had condensed and frozen on the ceiling of my pup tent. I groped about, shivering and cursing, trying to remember where I had stashed my flashlight. Maybe quitting college and moving across the country to work in the Oregon woods had not been such a fine idea.

I heard the approaching crunch of footsteps and then a voice: "Hey, you awake?" I poked my head out of the tent and saw someone holding a lantern. He had a full black beard and his weathered canvas pants, held up by suspenders and cut off above the ankle, were unmistakably those of a tree planter. It was John Ivey, a fellow Hoedad. He invited me over to his tent for tea.

The Hoedads—named after the tool of their trade—had found a way to earn a living that, while physically demanding, offered the chance to work close to the earth in the majestic backcountry of the West and Pacific Northwest, with a large group of self-employed and like-minded coworkers. Such jobs were scarce for the mostly college-age—and educated—men and women from all over the country who had come to Eugene in the 1970s, looking for an alternative way to live and to earn a living. In fact, in each of the three years I worked with Cougar Mountain, which happened to be the peak earning years in the twenty-two-year history of the co-op, the Hoedads secured contracts worth more than two million dollars—the equivalent of nearly seven million dollars today. And of course the karmic value of planting trees was no small perk.

Every morning that first week at Park Creek, I ate hot oatmeal and drank gingerroot tea over at John Ivey's