

Pastoral Wallowa County

Reading a book review essay about Simone Weil, the French writer, it came up that she had worked on an auto assembly line in the 1930s as a way to understand what it was like to be a factory worker, despite being clumsy and inept. She describes it as being like a cog in a giant wheel that turns relentlessly and unmercifully every minute of the workday, and she could never keep up. She compared it to the silent movie *Modern Times* with Charlie Chaplin. Every day she became a repeat failure in her mind. This experience colored her view of mechanized labor for the rest of her life.

This image reminded me of a work episode in my own life. Most of my early work life was spent in open-ended work that was not repetitive and which was in natural rural settings: working around the farm with animals, driving tractors, riding horses, irrigating the fields, building fence, walking through the fields....these are non-mechanical efforts out in the elements. I also worked in the forest for the Forest Service amid the rivers, mountains, and canyons.

The summer of 1966, during college, I decided to earn more money for school expenses the next fall. I took a job at a plywood veneer mill in Springfield, Oregon. The job paid \$6.00 per hour, about three times the amount I normally earned from the Forest Service. The job was to pull 1/8 x 8-1/2 ft long sheets of green veneer off the continuous belt that ran in front of you. It was called Pulling Green Chain (see YouTube). The belt was about 10 feet wide and 50-75 feet long, and along each side several men worked pulling the veneers off and guiding them into one of three grading carts according to their quality. The veneer line was coming from the log slicers which were relentlessly slicing veneers off the log until it was wasted, and another log was loaded. The belt moved fast and as soon as one veneer was pulled off there would be another one to grab. You really should watch *Modern Times* on YouTube, a very easy laugh, but sobering if you do this kind of work for a living.

The shifts were 12 hours long (so 12 hours on and 12 hours off) and you worked 6 days a week with Sunday off when mechanics serviced the equipment. The mill was so loud that even when we yelled at each other across the line we could not hear what was said. Everyone came on in staggered rotations and took their lunch at staggered times. For two weeks I smiled and waved at the guy across from me but never met him nor had a conversation with him. Every night I ate dinner and hit the sack, physically tired and mentally depleted. Sunday was just for recouping before the 6:00 am Monday shift started.

At the end of two weeks I was turning into a mechanical zombie, a cog in a giant machine, like Charlie Chaplin. There was no "me" anymore, just a mechanical arm. Endless bending, grabbing, turning, tossing, repeat, repeat, repeat...for 12 hours, 6 days a week, month after month. I realized this was going to be an awful summer. I had never done work like this before in my life. Physically it was not difficult but mentally it was deadening. My whole sense of myself began to rise in rebellion. I simply could not do this. My mind was built around working out in nature: quiet except for birds, the put-put-put of the tractor, water running in the river, wind blowing through the trees, rain on your hat and sun on your skin, the mountains in the distance with the blue sky and puffy white clouds and the emerald green of the ripening fields as a backdrop to my work. I was in deep trouble.

One day during our twenty-minute lunch I called my old boss Gib Hansen at the Joseph Ranger Station and asked him if he still needed some help that summer. Gib was a wonderful guy, and he said "sure, come on up and you can work out at Lick Creek for the summer". My whole life turned 180° in that moment. With a large smile on my face, I walked into the mill supervisor's office and tendered my resignation for the end of the shift. The next morning, I had packed my bags and was on the back roads from Eugene to Joseph. I never felt so happy and light as on that drive back to my rural homeland.

Mechanization began in the 18th Century in England and caused a complete revolution in the way mankind related to the natural world. Along the way there were periodic uprisings by workers being turned into mechanical bots. It forced the parents off the family farm and into factory jobs, and it split up family life. Children worked 16-hour days in textile mills and the mills were dangerous places without safeguards. My brief foray into repetitive line work on the Green Chain convinced me never to go down that path again. Be grateful you live in pastoral Wallowa County.

Note: Getty Images has fascinating factory scenes located under Industrial Revolution, Factory, Editorial

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Green Chain Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_w307HU2-Q