

Four Power Line Associates

The first summer after my marriage to Mikell Montague, I worked on a power line that went from Chelan, Washington to Rocky Ranch dam. We stayed in a funky cabin on the Columbia River at Entiak, twenty miles down river from Chelan.

One of the guys on the crew, when asked what his name was, I thought he said, "Lois", but he corrected me and said in his Arkansas accent.... "It is Loss!"

Every morning, when we arrived at the job site, before picking up any of the steel angles, we would hit them with our "spud" wrench to alert any rattlesnakes asleep. They had gone under the steel from the day before to stay cozy overnight.

I learned from Loss, who said, "I don't like any back-talky, smarty women....you?" I volunteered that I felt the same. He told me about his previous work in Arkansas as a chicken killer. The chickens would come by him on an overhead conveyer, hung up by their feet. He would slice off their head with a razor knife, splashing himself with blood for eight hours a day. After that training, he was not deterred by any old rattlesnakes or uppity women!

I left that job to work on a 230 volt powerline that went over Stampede Pass in the Cascade mountains, east of Seattle. It was a very good job bolting steel twelve hours a day, double time after eight hours. Two days pay for one long day of work.

One of the guys there, a big Dutch guy, Larry Voss, was master of the bolt truck, a dump truck loaded with boxes of various size nuts and bolts, which he would dispense by size on request. Larry was deaf as a post and on my shouting, "I need inch and three's" (to put in my four gunny sack canteen holders stapled to my work belt); he would answer, "Hunnh??" And when I shouted back, "Inch and three's", he would say, "Yuh...dat's what I thought you said!" Larry was a 6'3", affable, wino, alcoholic Dutch man.

A couple of years later, we worked together on an expansion of a sub-station in Kent, south of Seattle. There, I ran a hydrocrane, lifting stacks of insulators Larry and I had bolted together and placing them on top of aluminum gridwork for the switches. The crew would eat lunch together, but Larry preferred his liquid wine lunch hunkered down in his car in the parking lot.

The third alcoholic lineman was Slim Parr, the ugliest guy I've ever met- a hatchet-head with a beaky nose, a lanky, 6'3" drunk who I'd got to know my first summer that I worked on powerline towers, drinking at the bar in Bellingham. Slim worked with a welder, bolting the aluminum switch gear from a shared bucket rig, twelve feet off the ground.

One day, when I had taken a day off, the piston on the bucket rig failed, bending in half and sending the men in a crash to the ground where Slim crushed both heels. He was missing his wine when I visited him in the hospital in Seattle.

The fourth guy was Berwin Carver, who worked , like me, digging with a shovel putting powerlines underground in Bellevue, east of Seattle. We would lay plastic pipe conduit in a three foot ditch.

I found the shovelling and pulling the rough cable, hard on my hands, necessitating leather gloves. Berwin, eschewing the leather gloves, said, "Hell, a pair o' hands will outlast three pair o' gloves!" I wondered what happened when the hands wore out.

The last day I worked on that crew, when Joe Hailey brought around the paycheques, there was a strange name, a cheque for Betwin Catvat. Turned out it was a secretary's typo for Berwin Carver. From then on, he was Betwin Catvat.