The Old Swede's Boarding House

By Chuck Bolsinger

For several years I was field supervisor with the Pacific Northwest unit of the nationwide forest assessment program, conducted by the research branch of the U.S. Forest Service. Then, as now, scientific information was collected by field crews on thousands of plots distributed across the forested landscaped. The forest assessment is the source of those big-picture numbers quoted by the media when forests are scorched, blown down, chewed up by insects, "lost" to development, or a topic of political controversy. The information is also used by educators, timber companies, consultants, writers, and interested citizens.

For crews and supervisor alike, it was often a challenging job, sometimes even adventurous. One of my least-challenging jobs, normally, was locating living quarters for the crew, but at Lakeview, in southeast Oregon, I had a problem. There wasn't a vacant bed in any of the motels and hotels in town. Bunk houses at Coffee Creek work station in the Fremont National Forest were fully occupied by fire fighters, and neither the Bureau of Land Management nor Oregon Department of Forestry had anything to offer. Camping out was a last-resort option, based on the idea that quality of scientific data was directly related to living conditions of data collectors. I was on the verge of contacting headquarters at Portland to request permission to camp out, when another option appeared.

I'd stopped in to say Hi to Randy, an old college friend who runs a commercial greenhouse---called The Greenhouse---north of town. Randy, a no-nonsense kind of guy, heats the greenhouse with hot water piped from the nearby hot springs, site of Lakeview's famous geyser. Randy produced wonderful tomatoes, sold far and wide as Desert Gems, until he was

underpriced by mega agri-business firms in California. He now produces planting stock for local sale, and Christmas trees from his nearby tree farm.

After bringing each other up to date on what we'd been doing the past several years, I mentioned my problem finding living quarters for my crew. "You should try the old Swede's boarding house?" he suggested.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"It's on the road that goes to the sawmill. Go past the 'Y' then it's the second road going west . . . heck, I'll take you there." He said to follow him, and started to get into a beat-up Ford Ranger pickup whose bed was piled high with bags of vermiculite. A large German shepherd came out of nowhere and leaped into the cab of the truck. Randy grinned. "This is King. He acts like one, doesn't he? He normally rides in the back, but he knows how to take advantage of a situation."

I followed Randy in my Scout, and in less than five minutes he turned into a driveway that led to a large two-story white house. A white picket fence separated the gravel parking area from a lawn shaded by an enormous silver maple tree. Randy said, "I'll introduce you. Karl's probably at work---that's Karl Linder, he's foreman down at the sawmill---but his wife, Gina, should be home." He told King to stay put, and we followed a flagstone walk to a large porch where we were met by a beautiful young woman with reddish blond hair. I thought she might be Karl and Gina's daughter, but she turned out to be Gina herself. She couldn't have been more than 18 years old, I thought, and wondered about the age of this "old Swede" I was soon to meet. Randy introduced us, and I was glad he came along, because Gina's English was only

fair, and to my surprise, he spoke some Swedish. Later I was to find out that when Gina was agitated, her English was non-existent.

There was plenty of room for us at the boarding house, Gina said, though I'd have to wait for her husband to come home to make reservations. She made a phone call, and said he'd be right up. She asked if we'd like some coffee and cake, which sounded good to me, but Randy had to get back to work. Gina and I were having coffee and cake and making small talk when Mr. Linder arrived in a pickup similar to Randy's without the dog and vermiculite. Tall, large-boned, with curly grayish blond hair that stuck out around a green baseball cap crowded with the words *American Forests Products*, he looked to be in his sixties. He offered his hand---two fingers were missing, and, I noticed, his thumb and a finger were missing from his left hand. He said to call him Karl, and unlike Gina, he had absolutely no accent that I could detect. I told him about my project and the crew, emphasizing that they were hard-working young adults who wouldn't cause problems (I had to bite my tongue about that later). He took me around to see the rooms while quoting prices and filling me in on boarding house policies: meal times, sack lunches available with advance notice, quiet times, use of the phone, T.V., laundry room. We'd eat family style, sharing the table with three men from The Department of Transportation, and a cat-skinner from a gyppo logging outfit.

A week later, my crew moved in and got settled for what I'd estimated to be a three-week stay, if the weather stayed nice, as it usually does in eastern Oregon in the summer. The food was wonderful, and there was plenty of it, all cooked by Gina without any assistance. I expected to see other people helping out, perhaps a woman to come in and clean rooms, peel

potatoes, wash dishes, but except for some help from Karl in bringing dishes of food to the table, and carrying out trash, Gina seemed to do it all.

The obvious disparity in their ages wasn't lost on the six men and two women on my crew. They speculated why a beauty like Gina would take up with an old guy like Karl. Alice said, "He's an attractive man, though he could be her grandfather." Bob wondered how they met. Ray came close to figuring it out: "He's Swedish, and so is she. Maybe his first wife died or left him, so he goes back to Sweden and meets Gina, and since he's probably pretty rich, at least by Swedish standards, she takes up with him, like the girl and the rich old guy 'with hands as cold as ice' in that Eagles song, "Lyin' Eyes."

As the days went by, Karl became quite friendly, and after dinner he'd often come into my room to talk (I had a single room; most were double occupancy). I sensed that he felt the need to socialize with someone other than his teenage wife, though why he chose me---two-and-half decades his junior--- I have no idea. I'd brought my guitar, though I rarely had time to play it, and Karl picked it up and, despite the missing fingers, played some passable riffs and chords. "Before this happened," he said, holding up his hands, "I wasn't too shabby on the guitar. My first wife, Sonja, played too, and sang. We both came over from Sweden as kids. Hey, I'll show you something." He left and came back in a few minutes with a yellowed page from ***Oregon Posten***, 1934, a Swedish language newspaper, preserved under laminated plastic. There was a photograph of several people, adults and children, standing on a dock, ships in the background. "The paper urged Swedes to come to Oregon, where there were opportunities in forest products and agriculture. So we came." He pointed to a boy in the photo. "That's me; I was ten. And there's Sonja ; she was eight. We married when I was twenty-one."

We were interrupted by two guys on my crew, Don and Jeremy. They had questions about data they were looking at on a laptop. Karl excused himself, though he'd aroused my curiosity and I was glad when he came around the next evening. He knocked on the door and asked if I was too busy to talk, and I shook my head and motioned him in. He said I'd probably wondered about his young wife, and I nodded, but didn't say I'd first thought she was his daughter.

"Gina's my third wife, actually," he said. It's a long story:

"When Sonja and I married, I worked in the woods, first setting chokers, then falling trees, over in the Westside Doug-fir. Those steep hills and brush and the rain didn't agree with me, so I got a job bucking pine logs with Brooks-Scanlon at Bend. That was worlds better. Then I went to pulling on the green chain for Long-Bell Lumber Company over at Klamath Falls. I took a big cut in pay, but thought it'd pay off in the long run. Long-Bell's now Weyerhaeuser, you know. Sonja and I had worked up a musical routine, and were planning a trip to Nashville about then, when I had my accident. The green chain gets a lot of guys. It was winter and I was wearing a heavy coat that got caught in the gears, and I was pulled into the machinery. If a fast-thinking guy hadn't shut things down, I wouldn't be here now. Besides losing fingers, I got a punctured lung out of the deal. I was in the hospital and Sonja, who'd never driven a car before, decided she needed to drive, and she lost control on the icy roads one night and died in the crash. They didn't tell me for days, and when I got out of the hospital I just couldn't deal with it. I went back to Sweden to recuperate, and while there I met Olga, who was a little older than Gina is now. We married and a few years later came here to Lakeview and I got a job with American Forest Products, working up to mill foreman, my present job."

He pulled out his wallet and showed me a photo of Olga, an attractive, dark-haired young woman. "Well she didn't like it here, or maybe it was me she didn't like, because one morning she announced that she was leaving. Just like that. She didn't even let me give her a ride to the bus station. Last I saw of her, she was walking down the driveway carrying two suitcases. A guy came by months later with divorce papers, and like Hank Williams sang, "That's all she wrote."

He looked at me and shrugged. "I can't do without a wife, but American women---they're beautiful and smart--- scare the waddin' out of me. I never learned how to even talk to one. Those two women on your crew, for instance, I keep imagining they're snickering at me behind my back."

I assured him they weren't.

"Anyway, I went back to Sweden and found Gina, and she's a gem. The guys at the mill razz me, saying things like the older I get, the younger my wives get, which is how it's worked out all right, but I didn't plan it that way. I'm just happy that Gina likes it here, and hope that doesn't change."

Two days later something happened that might have changed that, and because it involved a man on my crew, I felt responsible.

I normally went out in the woods each day, rotating from crew to crew, but I'd stayed in town to have repairs done on one of the rigs while a crew used my Scout. I returned to the boarding house about three, planning to edit field data, and as I got out of the rig, I was startled to see Gina running down the flagstone path toward me, carrying a broom and screaming, in Swedish, I guessed. She'd jab her finger at me, then back at the house, and in between words I

couldn't understand, she'd make a SH-SH-SH-SH sound through gritted teeth, which I thought might be some kind of Swedish expression, like Tsk! Tsk! or Woo-hoo! in English.

She ordered me to follow her into the house and up the stairs to the second floor to the room shared by Jeff and Don, two of my best workers. The door was closed and she told me to open it. She stood back, looking like she was prepared to make a run for it. I opened the door and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Gina handed me her broom and told me to hit it against a cardboard box under Don's bed. I did. A SH-SH-SH-SH sound came from the box.

Gina emitted a long stream of words strange to my ears. I knew what was in the box, was dismayed, actually. Quickly reflecting that Don had mentioned being interested in herpetology, I concluded that he'd found a rattlesnake out in the woods and had brought it back to the house in a cardboard box. What he'd planned to do with it was anybody's guess. Gina's hysteria had ebbed to the point that I could understand her, and the story she told went like this: She was sweeping the room and bumped the box sitting under Don's bed. She heard the strange noise, but had no idea what it was, so she pulled the box out and started to open it. The snake's head rose out of the box, forked tongue flicking at Gina's face two feet away. She frantically closed the box and shoved it back under the bed, ran screaming from the room and down the stairs and out of the house, just as I arrived.

I took the box with the snake in it outside and sat it in the shade of the maple tree. Gina stayed on the porch, telling me over and over that if the snake didn't go, she would, and she might just go anyway, having to deal with snakes was just too much. I told her I would have a talk with Don first thing when he came in, and promised her over and over this would never happen again. She went back into the house and called Karl, who showed up a few minutes

before Don and Jeff's rig pulled into the driveway. Don saw the box sitting in the shade, and immediately started apologizing, saying he'd worried all day about leaving the snake in the house, and he'd take it back to the woods the next day.

In perfect unison, Karl and Gina said, "NOW. You take it NOW!" Don looked at me, and I said, "I'll go with you. We'll take the rig that was in the shop; I need to see how it runs anyway."

I half-expected to be notified of our eviction when we return to the boarding house, but nothing was said about the incident, then or later. For the rest of our stay there, though, Karl never came into my room to talk.

Don went on to get a Master's degree, and then a PhD in forest ecology, and after a stint with Simpson Timber Company, became a professor at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California.

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