

Have hoe dad, will travel

The highs and lows of a professional tree planter

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“It’s like camping except that you work 10 hours a day,” says Jack Knight, describing his life as professional tree planter. For more than 20 years he followed a seasonal circuit that went from the piney woods of the Deep South to the conifer forests of the Upper Midwest.

Planting up to 2,000 trees a day, he has dodged snakes, been shot at by a paranoid land owner, and at times wondered how anyone who hires people to do this kind of work could still sleep at night.

On other days “incredible images of reclamation” filled his senses as he worked in the beauty and quiet of an isolated forest. “On good days, it was something I’d almost do for nothing,” he says.

Knight, 52, lives on 80 acres in northeast Iowa near Luana. He still plants trees professionally, but these days he works only for forestry companies in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. He says he’d like to turn some of his business over to a partner.

Migrant workers introduced Knight to world of tree planting when Knight, then in his 20s, worked on an apple-picking crew in the orchards near Gays Mills, Wis.

“The tree planting circuit was a kind of sub-culture,” Knight says. “I met all kinds of people. Many did it to earn enough money to buy homesteads or to put themselves through college. Some planters demonstrated a curious blend of incredible ambition and creative laziness. They would work six months and then loaf for six months on a beach or travel around the world.

“But they weren’t like ski bums,” Knight continues. “You couldn’t work 10 hours a day while living for weeks in the back of a pickup or a car unless you loved the outdoors and planting trees, and had a sense of doing something for the environment.”

Knight says planters can still earn up anywhere from \$500 to \$800 a week, planting from 500 to 2,000 trees a day, depending on species and conditions.

But the work has changed. In recent years, Hispanic crews have taken over much of the bigger jobs. Knight main-



Jack Knight: “Everything you need you carry on your back.”

tains connections with a tree-planting cooperative, Piney Woods Reforestation out of Jacksonville, Tex., that does smaller jobs such riparian buffers and hardwood planting.

He recommends that young people, if interested, should learn the ropes working for local forestry companies.

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