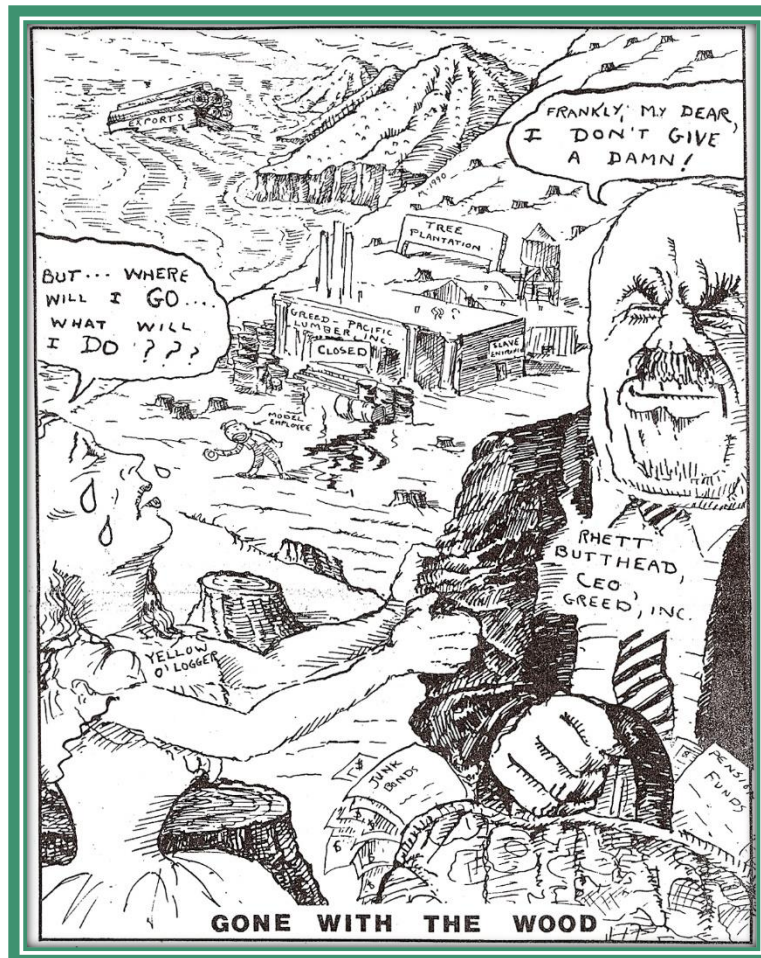


Chapter 13 : They're Closing Down the Mill in Potter Valley



“A year before (the closure) was announced, they told us we’d work ten more years...if they hadn’t gone to two shifts five years ago, we could’ve gone twice as long.”

—Ray Smith, 14 year L-P employee commenting on the closing of the Potter Valley Mill.

“Harry Merlo, L-P’s president, makes a million dollars a year in salary and fringes. Forty-five Potter Valley mill jobs at \$20,000 per year out of Merlo’s annual booty would still leave Harry a hundred grand a year.

—Bruce Anderson, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, December 28, 1989

*“Now Ray says there’s timber back there, They’ll haul it right past town,
Sam says the only way they’ll reopen, Is if another mill burns down,
The company says it’s environmentalists, Crampin’ up their style,
But as I look out on the Mendocino Forest, I can’t see a tree for miles...”*

—Potter Valley Mill, lyrics by Darryl Cherney and Judi Bari, January 1989.

The ideological battle being waged between Corporate Timber and the environmentalists continued. Although the Louisiana Pacific workers had been largely silent since the unions had been busted three years previously, they were about to be shocked out of their malaise. Despite announcing record company quarterly earnings of \$51.5 million at \$1.34 per share (in contrast with \$36.8 million at \$0.97 the previous year)¹ L-P announced, on November 28, 1988, that they would be closing their lumber mill in Potter Valley in Mendocino County, which had been in operation for fifty years and employed 132 full-time employees, the following spring. L-P's Western Division manager, Joe Wheeler admitted that the timing of the announcements, just before the Christmas holiday season, was "especially difficult", but felt it was necessary so the workers would not "extend themselves financially through the holiday season."²

Rumors of the closing had been circulating for some time. The company confirmed them in their usual fashion. As they had prior to the temporary mill closures in the earlier part of the decade, L-P management bought the workers donuts. "For the past 15 years it was the same rumor. 'Here come the donuts,' the workers would say, expecting the worst, but it was usually a (temporary) layoff," declared Linda Smith, whose husband, Ray, worked as a saw-filer in the mill. Indeed, many initially thought that the latest layoff would be no different, but this time they were mistaken. "It hurt," said Ray Smith, "There's no mill like Potter Valley. Everyone was close there. We were like a family. It was like when you graduate and boom...all your friends are just gone."³

The company offered the workers scheduled to be laid off jobs in their other facilities, but did not guarantee they'd actually be hired. Nevertheless, Shep Tucker, L-P's spokesman for Humboldt County, opined, "With five months to go before the closure, it's a definite advantage for the workers." The workers themselves and the residents of Potter Valley, many of whom worked for or owned small businesses that economically depended on the existence of the mill, were not so optimistic. They agreed that a lucky few might be able to secure positions in nearby L-P facilities, such as in Cloverdale or Willits, but many

who sought continued employment with the company would have to move away from the North Coast or even out of the state.⁴ Even if they were fortunate enough to remain in the area, they would have to start at the bottom of the ladder again. "It's depressing to go from a day job to a night job making \$2 hour less," declared Ray Smith.⁵ The owners of the dependent businesses faced an even worse plight. The economic impact on Mendocino County would include a \$5 million payroll loss and an estimated loss of \$145,000 in property taxes besides. None of these figures boded well for the already financially strapped timber dependent county.⁶

L-P quickly identified a convenient scapegoat for the closings: unwashed-out-of-town-jobless-hippies-on-drugs (as usual). The company spokespeople blamed the closings on a dwindling log supply, US Forest Service timber cutting regulations, and environmentalist inspired lawsuits involving fire salvage operations.⁷ Additionally, L-P spokeswoman Glennys Simmons blamed set asides for spotted owls, citing her erroneous belief that spotted owl protections required 2,600 acres of forestland for each pair of owls, but in fact, the actual amount required was 1,000. These charges were echoed and played up in the media by Doug Bosco, who stated, "When we can't even salvage fire damaged timber, then I feel the environmentalists do have to take some of the responsibility for the 132 people who will be out of work in Potter Valley."⁸ Congressman Bosco had also resurrected the oft repeated (but false) argument that most of the old growth timber was protected in parks and protected wilderness areas.⁹

Local media jumped into the fray and excoriated the environmental movement for its insensitivity to timber workers' livelihoods.¹⁰

As if these statements weren't bad enough, the right wing majority on the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors practically had an orgy of fascist daydreaming at the environmentalists expense. On

¹ "LP Reports record Company Earnings", *North Coast News*, October 19, 1988.

² "Potter Valley L-P Mill to Close", by Suzi Brakken, *Ukiah Daily Journal*, November 29, 1988; and "LP to Close Potter valley Mill", By Suzi Brakken, *Mendocino Beacon*, December 1, 1989.

³ "Donuts Were a Tell-tale Sign of Closure", by Suzi Brakken, *Ukiah Daily Journal*, April 24, 1989.

⁴ "Potter Valley's Fear: Is L-P Closure the Beginning of the End?", by Mike Geniella, *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, December 4, 1988.

⁵ Brakken, April 24, 1989, op. cit.

⁶ Geniella, December 4, 1988, op. cit.

⁷ "LP to Close Two Mills, Blames Environmentalists", staff report, *North Coast News*, December 15, 1988.

⁸ "Bosco Blames Lawsuits for Mill's Closure", by Randy Foster, *Ukiah Daily Journal*, December 1, 1988.

⁹ "LP Lies About Potter Valley Mill", by Ryan Henson, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, February 8, 1989.

¹⁰ "Mill Closure Unnecessary Devastation", editorial, *Ukiah Daily Journal*, December 4, 1988.

December 6, 1988, at their monthly meeting, Jim Eddie proposed converting the soon-to-be shuttered mill into a work camp for prisoners in the overcrowded Mendocino County Jail. In one of his last acts before the expiration of his term, John Cimolino proposed sending the county's welfare recipients there. Marilyn Butcher pulled no punches by stating, "I'd like to see some of the Earth First! people up there doing their job of reseeded and replanting. They are very quick to spike trees that might kill somebody, but I haven't seen any of them planting," no doubt implying that this was one of the good things done by timber corporations.¹¹ Norm DeVall, the lone member of the board not solidly aligned with Corporate Timber sounded the voice of reason, reminding the others that he, and many environmentalists had offered to clean up and replant after forest fires the previous year, but their offers had been denied, but were still open. This seemed to calm the others down, at least, and they decided to refer L-P's announcement to the county's Private Industry Council.¹²

The environmentalists countered that L-P was lying and they provided substantial evidence that proved it. Earth First!ers Betty Ball and Don Morris quickly debunked L-P's claim on lawsuits, pointing out that only three lawsuits had been filed challenging the company's salvage logging plans, and *none* of them had held up the bidding process. The total number of challenges to the approximately 400,000 acre total included in all L-P logging plans for the county affected a mere 800 acres of timberland. Sierra Club forest practices taskforce chair Gail Lucas buoyed Ball's and Morris's figures and added:

"The problems the timber companies are facing now are not caused by environmentalists, or the U.S. Forest Service, or anyone else, but their own overcutting in the past... U.S. Forest Service policies in the national forests do not allow cutting beyond a sustained yield level... The timber companies are looking at a declining timber supply now as a result of twenty years of

overcutting in the 1950s and '60s, when the average annual cut on private lands in Mendocino County was double the average growth."¹³

These statements were backed up by the staff of the Mendocino National Forest who confirmed that there were no lawsuits pending, and that all appeals filed by environmentalists had been denied, though they also stated that the information being circulated by environmentalists was prompting them to reconsider their thinking.¹⁴ L-P, however, had very little old growth left to speak of, and a lawsuit against fire sales or salvage logging in the current context simply made no sense. Just as P-L had done earlier in the year, in response to CDF director Jerry Partain blocking a mere *three* THPs out of 530, L-P was crying "wolf!"

For their part, Earth First!ers were quite prepared to fight to keep the mill from closing, knowing full well that the closure of one mill wouldn't even put a dent in L-P's continued rapacious destruction. Darryl Cherney publically reached out to the affected mill workers, stating:

"I just took a part-time job working for a logging outfit so that I could understand the timber industry better. The mere fact that that L-P has to close its mills proves that it is not operating on a sustained yield basis, which is just as much anti-labor as it is anti-environment. I would encourage workers to walk L-P's timberlands to see where their jobs have gone. Earth First!ers are as affected by the economy as L-P workers; and we're extremely concerned about it. Who isn't?"¹⁵

LP hadn't dropped their final bombshell however. On December 10, 1988, L-P announced the closure of *another* mill in Red Bluff (Tehama County), which employed nearly 100.¹⁶ Joe Wheeler promised that *this*

¹³ "LP to Close Two Mills, Blames Environmentalists", staff report, *North Coast News*, December 15, 1988.

¹⁴ Hensen, February 8, 1989, op. cit.

¹⁵ "Forgive Us Our Trespass: Earth First! Blames Cut and Run Logging for the Potter Valley Mill Closure" by Darryl Cherney, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, December 14, 1988, *Mendocino Commentary*, December 15, 1988, and the *Country Activist*, December, 1988. The *Earth First! Journal* editors in Arizona were evidently not as concerned about the plight of the timber workers, however, opining, "Environmentalists do occasionally win... showing great modesty, environmentalists have denied that they are responsible for the mill closure," in "LP Blames Environmentalists for Mill Closure", staff report, *Earth First! Journal*, Brigid / February 2, 1989.

¹⁶ "LP to Close Another Mill", by Keith Michaud, *Ukiah Daily Journal*, December 9, 1988; "LP to Lay Off 100 Red Bluff Workers; Mill Closure

¹¹ "Supervisors Suggest Turning L-P Mill into Work Camp", staff report, *North Coast News*, December 15, 1988. In fact, Earth First! *did* engage in tree planting, and the only reason why the timber industry replanted trees after logging, was due to long term pressure from environmentalists to make such practices mandatory, which the timber industry had stubbornly resisted. For details see, "To the People of the Northwest", by Darryl Cherney and Judi Bari, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, May 31, 1989, *Country Activist*, June 1990, and *Mendocino Commentary*, June 8, 1989.

¹² "Supervisors Suggest Turning L-P Mill into Work Camp", staff report, *North Coast News*, December 15, 1988.

mill would not be dismantled and could be reopened at some future date.¹⁷ Shep Tucker publically agreed that there were no more North Coast mill closures “on the horizon”, but, considering the permanent closure of the mill in Potter Valley, these were not particularly reassuring announcements.¹⁸

Once again, the company blamed environmentalists.¹⁹ This time, however, the workers didn’t buy it. The Red Bluff mill was one of the few remaining L-P mills that was still unionized, and Fred Emory, President of the United Independent Box and Lumber Workers suggested that, in this case at least, the company’s actual motivations were union busting, stating:

“(The mill closure could be an) attempt on the part of L-P to disrupt the membership of the union due to the timing and manner in which L-P (announced) the closure...LP has used odd work schedules and extended shut downs in the past that have made it increasingly difficult for unions to conduct business.”²⁰

An anonymous worker made it clear that they didn’t believe L-P’s rhetoric about the mill closures being due to the actions of the local environmental activists stating, “We’ve always known that L-P is over cutting, and a lot of us have had our bags packed for the deep, south for a long time now...I guess (the environmentalists) overdo it sometimes, but I’ve got more in common with them than I do with Merlo.”²¹ Even Ray Smith didn’t believe the official company line, suggesting that L-P had made “economic decisions...behind closed doors.”²²

Obviously, L-P had an agenda that they weren’t completely revealing to the public. Earth First!er Don Morris speculated that L-P was attempting to secure more timber from the Mendocino National Forest.²³ Evidence later showed that L-P’s

claims, echoed by Doug Bosco, of insufficient logs available due to lawsuits were indeed a lie, as the Mendocino National Forest’s annual timber Sale Report for Fiscal Year 1988 revealed that over 135 million board feet (mbf) was harvested from 10,000 acres of the forest, and 94 mbf were logged as “fire salvage timber,” all of which could have been bid on by L-P, but weren’t.²⁴ Don Morris also noted that L-P had already contracted that year to log 42 mbf of fire damaged and ‘incidental’ green timber—enough to run the Potter Valley Mill for an entire year—on 6,000 acres of the forest, and that 32 mbf of this total had been obtained for as little as \$20 dollars per thousand bf, which was far below its actual worth, and that the average bid on such timber was between \$71-\$135 per thousand. Additionally, much of the wood secured by other company’s bids generally wound up being milled by L-P in Potter Valley anyway!²⁵ Bruce Anderson on the other hand, speculated that the actual reason for the closure of the mill was motivated by the company’s desire to avoid cleaning up years of toxic discharges caused by their careless milling operations.²⁶

Earth First!er Larry Evans blamed automation and exports. Earth First! could not do much of anything to challenge automation, but they could campaign against log exports. While everything else had been going on, the log export issue had not died down. In 1984, further following the logic of supply side economics, the US Government introduced federal subsidies for private log exports—under rules pertaining to a wide variety of export commodities—which allowed multinational corporations to obtain tax exemptions of 15 to 30 percent of their export income.²⁷ Despite the supposed restrictions on exporting logs from federal lands, exports had increased by one billion board feet between 1984 and 1988.²⁸ In 1987, three bbf of logs were exported from ports on the Pacific Coast of the United States to the Pacific Rim, and almost 70 percent of those were sent exclusively to Japan. On the west coast of the United

Blamed on Lack of Logs”, by Mike Geniella, *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, December 10, 1988.

¹⁷ “LP to Close Two Mills, Blames Environmentalists”, staff report, *North Coast News*, December 15, 1988.

¹⁸ “L-P to Lay Off 100 Red Bluff Workers; Mill Closure Blamed on Lack of Logs”, by Mike Geniella, *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, December 10, 1988.

¹⁹ L-P Evokes the ‘E’ Word”, letter to the editor by Don Morris, *Ukiah Daily Journal*, December 11, 1988; “LP Announces Layoffs”, *Mendocino Beacon*, December 15, 1988;

²⁰ Hensen, February 8, 1989, op. cit.

²¹ Hensen, February 8, 1989, op. cit.

²² Brakken, April 24, 1989, op. cit.

²³ Hensen, February 8, 1989, op. cit.

²⁴ “Here and There in Mendocino County”, by Bruce Anderson, *Ander-son Valley Advertiser*, March 29, 1989.

²⁵ Hensen, February 8, 1989, op. cit.

²⁶ “Here and There in Mendocino County”, by Bruce Anderson, *Ander-son Valley Advertiser*, December 14, 1988.

²⁷ Foster, John Bellamy, *The Limits of Environmentalism Without Class: Lessons from the Ancient Forest Struggle of the Pacific North-west*, New York, NY, Monthly Review Press (Capitalism, Nature, So-cialism series), 1993, “Part 3 – Monopoly Capital and Environmental Degradation: The Case of the Forest”.

²⁸ “Lumber Workers’ Jobs Hit the High Seas”, *Industrial Worker*, Febru-ary 1990.

States, a total of 4.6 bbf of raw logs were exported in 1988, resulting in loss of nearly 14,000 mill workers' jobs.²⁹ Accurate figures showed that log exports by far dwarfed any environmentalist impacts when it came to job losses by timber workers.³⁰

With that in mind, Evans announced a multi-pronged, comprehensive campaign by Earth First! and the IWW to combat the practice. His call encouraged mill workers, loggers, and truckers, stating that they should work together with the environmentalists on this particular issue:

"It's obvious to us that the timber industries' whining about environmentalist-caused mill closures is just another scam to obscure the truth.

"The market for overseas log exports is booming with a 22% increase in volume shipped in 1988 over 1987. This has fueled accelerated liquidation of the forest ecosystems of the American Pacific Northwest.

"The myth that Earth First! and other environmental groups are out to deliberately create an economic depression in the Pacific Northwest is total nonsense... We all suffer the social disruptions caused by large scale layoffs. That's why our beef is with the economic system which encourages forest liquidation for profits and greed instead of reasonable need. If this be free trade, we need free trade like we need a hole in the head.³¹

"We as environmentalists, workers, and union members are pursuing this campaign as the first step towards the attainment of a truly sustainable economy emphasizing the long term health of the land and its ecosystems, as well as maintaining employment for timber workers and their children and their children's children. We do not see these goals as contradictory, but rather as complimentary. Careful land use practices which emphasize the design of nature *are* labor intensive."³²

Evans announced that the campaign would include letter writing drives; public outreach and education through bumper stickers, press releases, literature tables, brochures, and more; research; and, of course, direct action (carefully chosen at the appropriate targets). Evans admonished workers and environmentalists to share information, send anonymous tips, and set up their own, independent campaigns.³³

Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney went a step beyond that and directly called L-P's bluff. They challenged L-P to open up their books and reveal exactly what their actual timber holdings were.³⁴ Stating that they were tired of being blamed in the corporate and local media for the loss of timber workers' jobs, they issued a press release stating that they would call on the local environmental activists to withdraw all of the alleged (nonexistent) lawsuits and all spotted owl set asides if Louisiana-Pacific would agree to permanently keep open both of the mills scheduled for closure and guarantee that all of the workers slated for layoffs working in perpetuity, arguing that sustained yield equals sustained employment. This move was supported by a wide assortment of timber workers, former timber workers, environmentalists, residents, and local labor union officials (including the IWA's Don Nelson). Faced with a P. R. debacle, Glennys Simmons made token gestures of approval, but she was overruled by her superiors.³⁵ Shep Tucker dismissed the Earth First!ers charges by stating, "They can say industry is the bad guy, but they don't know anything about meeting payroll...there's nothing that hurts

³³ Evans, February 1989, op. cit.. This campaign wasn't just talk or isolated either. Over the course of 1989, Earth Firsters throughout the Pacific Northwest organized several anti-export rallies. One of these took place on February 13, 1989 at Knappton, near St John's Bridge in Oregon on February 13, 1989. They organized several more later that year at the huge export dock in Longview Washington on the Columbia River near Portland, Oregon. In this last action, the Earth Firsters climbed atop the large cranes and hung banners reading, "USA and JAPAN: STOP THE WAR ON NATURE"; "STOP JOB EXPORTS"; and "EARTH FIRST! SUPPORTS US MILLWORKERS". Members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) were mixed in their reactions, though at least one sympathetic docker asked the Earth Firsters what had taken them so long. After being arrested, the demonstrators were initially charged with Criminal Anarchy and Criminal Syndicalism laws, of all things—laws which had originally been written to systematically repress the IWW during the 1920s. The charges were eventually dropped. For details, see "Anti-Wobbly Law Used Against Earth Firsters, by Connie Firr, *Industrial Worker*, February 1990, and *Earth First! Journal*, Brigid / February 2, 1990 (the later version was substantially abridged).

³⁴ "Northwest Wobs Call for Support to Keep L-P Mill Open", by Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, December 28, 1989 and *Industrial Worker*, March 1989.

³⁵ Bari and Cherney, December 28, 1989, op. cit.

²⁹ "Jobs, Automation and Exports", by Eric Swanson, *Mendocino Country Environmentalist*, July 22, 1992.

³⁰ "Exports Threaten Jobs!", by Carlos Benemann, *Country Activist*, February 1989.

³¹ "Earth First! to Protest Log Exports", press release, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, May 24, 1989 and *The Mendocino Commentary*, May 25, 1989.

³² "Labor / Environmental Coalition Forming", by Larry Evans, *Country Activist*, February 1989.

more than seeing the faces of those guys when you tell them they're not going to have jobs."³⁶

Darryl Cherney and Judi Bari knew that the campaigns to outreach to the timber workers held much potential, and eventually, they penned their first song together, *Potter Valley Mill*, which not only was written from the perspective of the affected mill-workers, it paraphrased actual quotes from some of them, and Judi Bari designed the cover showing a graphic representation of a lumber mill.³⁷ *Potter Valley Mill* became one of the most requested songs on Country Music station KUKI in Ukiah, where it was often plaid at least twice daily, and was a favorite among local timber workers.³⁸ Workers reportedly sold cassette singles of the song in Potter Valley to raise awareness and hardship funds.³⁹ Bari and Cherney embarked on a short "Musical Missed-tree Tour" around the North Coast to raise awareness about the closure as well as related issues.⁴⁰ According to Judi Bari, "Shortly after the mill closed, (and L-P opened a chip mill in nearby Calpella which only employed 15), three men, who were, according to Judi Bari, "definitely *not* Earth Firsters", tried—unsuccessfully—to torch the new chip mill with a Molotov cocktail"⁴¹, perhaps because the song made two cryptic references that could have been interpreted as promoting sabotage.⁴² Earth First and the IWW had dealt a serious P.R. blow to Corporate Timber in Mendocino County. Could Humboldt County be far behind?

³⁶ Hensen, February 8, 1989, op. cit.

³⁷ The song is featured on *They Sure Don't Make Hippies Like They Used To*, by Darryl Cherney, 1989.

³⁸ "Here and There in Mendocino County", by Bruce Anderson, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, May 24, 1989.

³⁹ "Timber Wars", by Judi Bari, *Industrial Worker*, October 1989

⁴⁰ "Mill Closure Set to Song", by Keith Michaud, *Ukiah Daily Journal*, April 24, 1989.

⁴¹ "Molotov Cocktail Left at L-P Mill", *Ukiah Daily Journal*, July 2, 1989. L-P guard Jamie McLain reported that the three individuals threw the device at him, but the actual cocktail was never lit.

⁴² Bari, October 1989. Op. cit.



Image by Judi Bari used as the cover of the tape single.

Potter Valley Mill

By Darryl Cherney and Judi Bari, 1989 – Featured in the IWW's *Little Red Songbook*, 36th Edition, and on the album, *They Sure Don't Make Hippies Like they Used To*, 1989 by Darryl Cherney,

Now the mill in Potter Valley,
It's been here 50 years,
Millin' all those fir trees,
That used to grow 'round here,
But now they're running out of timber,
And the mill is shutting down,
They're packing up their bandsaws,
And they're moving out of town.

Chorus

*And they're closing down the mill in Potter Valley,
Leaving all us good folks in a bind,
They're closing down the mill in Potter Valley,
And I can't believe the mess we'll leave behind.*

Now Ray says there's timber back there,
They'll haul it right past town,
Sam says the only way they'll reopen,
Is if another mill burns down,
The company says it's environmentalists,
Crampin' up their style,
But as I look out on the Mendocino Forest,
I can't see a tree for miles.

Chorus

Now when they doubled our shift five years ago,
I knew we soon would see this day,
Now our property values are dropping,
I can't sell and I can't pay,
That machinery ought to stay right here,
To move it would be a crime,
We've kept it fixed and running for fifty years,
We ought to fix it one more time.

Chorus