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*In this excerpt from Amigos Remember, a collection of reminiscences by Forest Service retirees who served in the Southwest Region, Lou Romero shares his reaction to working on the Bitterroot clearcut in 1969 and then visiting it twenty-five years later. Originally written in 2005, he added a postscript in 2009.*

# CLOSURE...WITH A BITTERROOT CLEAR-CUT & A FOREST SERVICE CAREER

*By Lou Romero*

**I**n 1969, after almost ten years as a forestry technician, I decided to return to college and complete a four-year degree. I was on the Sula Ranger District, Bitterroot National Forest at the time. . . . At Sula, I served as foreman of the Bitterroot Interregional Fire Crew, later as dispatcher in the summer and Slash Burning Crew Foreman in the fall. During the winter months I worked on timber sale layout and thinning crews using snowshoes and snowmobiles. In the spring, I was part of a four-man gasoline-powered auger crew that drilled holes for an all-female tree planting crew.

From those days, I particularly remember a notorious, steep, rocky clear-cut in the Laird Creek drainage. The slash had been burned the previous fall, leaving a naked, blackened, stump-filled landscape scarred by terraces bulldozed and horizontally spaced across the mountainside for planting. To me it was an ugly sight. The terraces were so rocky that we kept breaking auger bits. I recall my passionate debate with the young forester in charge of the planting prescriptions. I contended that we should not plant there—that nothing would grow on such rocky, steep ground. We completed the planting anyway.

In the fall of 1969, I was approved extended educational leave from the Bitterroot Forest to enroll at the University of Montana. . . . The Bitterroot clear-cutting controversy was just beginning to simmer. Protest articles were appearing in local papers. It was during the Vietnam War campus protests. I remember that some clear-cutting protesters started appearing on campus along with war protesters. Aerial photos in local newspapers featuring huge clear-cuts on both sides of the Bitterroot Valley increased public awareness and heated the debate. There was increasing talk, both inside and outside the Forest Service, about more public involvement in decision-making. . . .

I vividly remember a workshop on the Bitterroot hosted by the Regional Landscape Architecture staff for timber sale layout crews. Its purpose was to teach us how to make clear-cuts more aesthetically compatible with natural surroundings. We were shown how to “feather” the edges (boundaries) so they would not appear so stark when viewed from a distance. We were instructed on how to locate them to be less visible from the busier highway routes.

[After retiring in the spring of 1994] I decided to visit the tan-

gible projects of my early days. . . . I particularly wanted to visit my “infamous Laird Creek clear-cut” with the steep, rocky terraces that we planted! . . .

[That July] my close friend (and fellow augerman on the Sula tree-planting crew) Dean Irwin and I set out to revisit our “infamous Laird Creek clear-cut.” Upon arrival, I was both shocked and awed. We found a beautiful, thick stand of Douglas-fir, lodgepole, and ponderosa [pine]. The understory brush was so thick we could hardly walk through it. There was no sign of the terraces left. The only way we could distinguish the Douglas-fir we planted was by the spacing and even heights. They were 30–40 feet tall. The boundaries and edges of the clear-cut had “feathered” themselves naturally to blend quite well with the surrounding uncut forest. I stood there and marveled at nature. I reflected on my debates with the district silviculturist and my insistence that we should not plant there, that nothing would grow! I realized that I had been wrong that “nothing would grow.” But I was right that we didn’t “need to plant there.” Alongside the Douglas-fir we planted were all the other species growing naturally in the surrounding ecosystem. They were just as tall and healthy. Nature regenerated them without the use of augers and broken auger bits! . . .

I look forward to revisiting Laird Creek one of these days to see if “my clear-cut plantation” survived the 2000 catastrophic Bitterroot fires—or will that too be part of the changed landscape?

*PS: 40 Years after leaving—September 15, 2009:* I just returned from the 2009 Forest Service Retirees Reunion in Missoula. I spent one evening with my friends Dean and Barbara Irwin and their families. Dean tells me most of the clear-cuts we replanted survived the 2000 fire complex. He says the surviving clear-cut plantations remain as green islands surrounded by the blackened landscape. I did not have time this trip to go see for myself. I hope to learn what forestry professionals are discovering about the Bitterroot clear-cuts relative to the 2000 fires. I also hope to pay a personal visit to that wonderful valley, my dear friends, and those plantations 50 years later. □

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*Adapted from David Gillio, ed., Amigos Remember (Albuquerque, NM: Southwest Forest Service Amigos, 2005), 91–94.*