

# Dolbeer Donkey Engines

Saved by Hume Lake District  
Sequoia National Forest, California

*By Larry Cabodi*

*Larry started as a fire crewman on the Eldorado NF in 1957, becoming a Forest Guard through 1961. He became Forester in 1962 after graduating from Humboldt State, then a Resource Forester until transferring to the Sequoia NF in 1966. He was DTMA/TMO until 1975, when he transferred to the Lassen NF. He moved to Resource Officer then was promoted to District Ranger on the Six Rivers NF in 1979. He retired to construction and a small cattle ranch in 1994, after 34 years of service. He and his wife of 46 years reside in Standish, CA*

The historic logging around Grant Grove on the Hume Lake District, Sequoia National Forest, was significant in many ways. Paul Spivey, Hume Lake District Recreation Officer, found two Dolbeer donkey engines rusting away in the Evans Grove area on the Camp 7 Road since the end of the redwood-logging era. Paul was the sparkplug in the effort that salvaged these important pieces of redwood logging history from what is now a part of the Giant Sequoia National Monument in the Sequoia National Forest.

The Hume Bennett Logging Company started in the 1890s. The company changed hands five times and shut down around 1928 when the mill at Hume Lake burned. During that period they used every form of logging equipment known at the time. Everything had to be hauled into the area by wagon, and the milled lumber was removed by flume that reached 55 miles, over terrain almost impossible to walk, along the rim of the Kings Canyon to the town of Sanger near Fresno.

They built towns, lakes, railroads, log skids, trestles, sawmills, and hauled in all the steel, rails, Shay locomotives, big wheels, steam engines, head rigs, and cement from the San Joaquin Valley through a pass by Grant Grove, which is close to 8,000 feet elevation. The logs were so big and heavy that fresh logs would sink in the millponds, so they felled the timber a year ahead of logging. The last year of operation they were about ten miles into the Camp 7 area, using steam skidders and railroad logging. After shutdown, the Hume Bennett Company sold the salvage of the steel to the Japanese and the land, about 32 thousand acres, to the Forest Service.

However, the salvage operation used trucks by changing the railroad grades into roads. When they got to the end of the railroad, some of the skidding equipment was down an incline that made their removal extremely difficult. So, they left two Dolbeer Donkeys and a humungous Willamette Skidder, all the cables to the down logs, estimated at eight million board feet.



**DOLBEER DONKEY NEAR CAMP #1 ABOUT 1900**

*Chopped wood at left is ready for the boiler. The cut redwood log is being moved onto chute. The cable anchoring the engine is visible. Logs of this size were very heavy and several snatch blocks with long cables were used to gain enough leverage to roll the log. Logs from this area went over a permanent pole chute to the Converse sawmill. Location: Section 12 of T13S R28E.*

Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, Univ. of California, Berkeley  
Paul P. Spivey Collection 1978.035 v. 3:28

In 1966 I was the District Timber Management Officer when Paul Spivey approached me to trade the down redwood material as payment for hauling the Dolbeers out of the woods as he had found someone who would restore one Dolbeer to running condition. He showed me a scale model built by this individual that also was fully operational. I said "no." I knew that trading timber for services was illegal. I told him he needed to get some money and, just prior to his retirement, he submitted a project proposal to do just that.

In 1974 suddenly there was money after another project was cancelled. I looked in the books and lo and behold there was this salvage project proposed for next year using the same kind of money. So, I quickly developed a project work plan by going to the

Action TMO, Floyd Jennings, and getting a commitment of one week of tractor time, a small work crew, a dump truck and a low bed trailer from engineering to salvage a Dolbeer Donkey. The project was developed without ever seeing the machine or the terrain in which it sat.

Later that spring, a small crew, I believe consisted of Ken Slater, Frank Del Carlo, Dave Stone, Dave Thomas and Bob Taber, with every big wrench we could find and a case of Liquid Wrench, followed Paul Roche, our ace cat skinner/dump truck driver, in to the machines. After being impressed by the logs, giant woodpiles for the steam engines, huge cables stretched out to the logs, and the mammoth double piston Willamette skidder with the boiler missing, we went to work.

The two brothers who were going to restore the Dolbeer were old and feeble. The master machinist was in his seventies, and his helper brother was hunched over, used a cane and wore glass frames for his hearing aid. He was in his eighties. The boiler to a Dolbeer was estimated to weigh about four tons. Everything was massive and heavy. Paul Roche said, “How in the hell were these old codgers going to restore it?”

The next week, I went to meet the Denton brothers, Frank & Burton. I was impressed. The machine shop looked like an old chicken coop but the tools were the



*Restored Dolbeer Donkey on display at the Hume Lake Ranger Station, Dunlap, CA*

best. If they didn't have a tool for whatever, they built the tool. The brothers openly talked about Frank's heart condition and they expected him to pass away at any time. He was the older brother.

The first machine had a thirty-six inch diameter boiler; the second had a forty-two inch diameter boiler. I contacted Sequoia Forest Industries, which became Wicks Corp., to purchase the timbers for the skids: 12" X 24" by 20 feet long. When they understood what we were doing, Sequoia Forest Industry donated all the timbers needed for the restoration. They had to make them 19.5 feet that was the longest log that could go through the mill. By this time, the Dentons decided that both Dolbeers had about the same things missing so they would restore both. As the project proceeded and the word spread, people brought in to the Dentons a lot of the missing parts that they had taken or they thought would work, like the brass whistles, knobs & such, for the restoration. And no one wanted any money, not even Sequoia Forest Industries.

As the project neared completion in the spring of 1975, I contacted the Forest Service Information folks for a celebration and dedication. In the meantime Burton contacted me and wondered if they could have a special showing as another brother and family from back East were coming out and with the help of their service organization they would like to show off the machines. So we had the special showing. It was impressive. You could hear a whisper as these machines ran and the Dentons confirmed that when they watched the logging operations, there was very little noise except for the whistles and men talking.

After a meeting with Burton, I returned to Pinehurst about an hour and a quarter away. Upon arrival, Florence Roche, my clerk came out and said Ms. Denton, Burton's sister, was on the phone and wanted to talk to me. She said that after I left, Burton had passed away in his chair and she was happy that he had got to see the completion of his work. I was sure glad we had not waited for the planned dedication to show off the Dolbeers.

Today a Dolbeer steam donkey is on display at the Hume Lake District headquarters and the second Dolbeer is displayed at Paul Bunyan's Forest Camp at Turtle Bay Museums and Arboretum in Redding, CA.

Bronze plaques with the message below were attached to the Dolbeer Donkey engines.

DOLBEER DONKEY  
RESTORED BY FRANK AND BURTON DENTON  
WOODLAKE, CALIFORNIA

INVENTED IN 1882 BY A RETIRED SEA CAPTAIN, DOLBEER DONKEYS WERE USED TO SKID OR MOVE LOGS FROM THE AREA OF FELLING TO A PLACE WHERE THEY COULD BE LOADED ONTO RAILROAD CARS. THIS DOLBEER WAS USED FOR LOGGING AROUND HUME LAKE FROM THE EARLY 1900'S UNTIL 1927 WHEN IT WAS ABANDONED ON THE JOBSITE AT WINDY GULCH.

IN 1975 THE FOREST SERVICE REMOVED THE DOLBEER TO UNDERGO RESTORATION

THE DENTON BROTHERS GENEROUSLY DONATED HUNDREDS OF HOURS, THEIR OWN MATERIALS, AND THEIR MECHANICAL AND MACHINIST'S SKILLS TO RESTORE TO RUNNING CONDITION, THIS UNIQUE MACHINE. THE DOLBEER DONKEY SYMBOLIZES EARLY DAY LOGGING AND WE THANK THE DENTON FAMILY FOR THEIR PART IN PRESERVING A PART OF OUR HISTORY.

US FOREST SERVICE  
1975  
PAUL SPIVEY -FOREST SERVICE RETIRED, MIRAMONTE,  
CA  
THE WICKES CORPORATION -DINUBA, CA  
FRED EDMISTON -WOODLAKE, CA