

# TIMBER-R-R THIEVES

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## INTRODUCTION

TREES ARE BEAUTIFUL. They give shade. They provide homes for animals. Trees help keep our air and water clean. And some trees are grown to be sold, like farmers grow corn.

Walnut, oak, and maple trees are among the most valuable. Their wood makes beautiful furniture, cabinets, and floors. Owners can cut just a few trees and earn a lot of money.

A few years ago one Wisconsin family discovered just how much their trees were worth.

Many people don't know that trees are stolen all the time.

How? Thieves find valuable trees. They watch for the own are to leave. Then the thieves come with a truck and a chain saw. A thief can cut a tree, load it on a truck, and be gone in less than ten minutes!

A Wisconsin family went to church. When they came back, the walnut tree in their front yard was gone. Someone had cut it down and hauled it away.

Police and DNR foresters said the tree was worth more than \$5,000. The family was shocked!



## TIMBER-R-R THIEVES

Paul pulled on his red **mackinaw**. Late again! At milking, Susie had fussed and bellowed. Paul could still smell cow manure on his boots. He raced out the door.

**mackinaw:** heavy red and black coat or jacket

Paul ran to the bus stop but reached the hill just as the school bus drove away.

Oh, no! Three miles to walk. Asking Mom for a ride was useless. She'd smile, like always. She'd say, "Yep, that's a real problem! Better get moving."

Paul groaned. If he ran through the **pasture** and across the creek he could cut a half-mile off the trip. Like Mom said, he'd better get moving.

**pasture:** field where farm animals eat grass

Paul slipped across the muddy pasture. He scrambled down the steep hill of stone called the bluff. Jump! He leaped across the creek.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Paul saw a flash of red. He whirled around. He stopped. He stared. Something. No someone was in the bushes on top of the bluff.

Who could it be? He scanned each tree and bush, but he didn't see any thing or any one. Finally, he turned to leave. I don't like this, he thought as he hiked to the road. Who would be on our land so early in the morning?

At the top of the State Park hill, Paul stopped thinking and started running. He heard the first bell ring. In ten minutes he'd better be sitting in Mrs. Cain's sixth grade. One more tardy and it would be detention for Paul Meyer.

He looked at his watch. Eight minutes. He sprinted across the baseball field. Past second base. Pitcher's mound. A giant puddle at home plate. Splat! Mud flew everywhere—on his pants. His jacket. Tiny brown droplets on his glasses. Five minutes.

Paul jumped the fence and zigzagged through the teachers parking lot. Three minutes.

Bang! He pushed open the door. Past the library. Past Mr. Clump, the teacher who painted a map on his classroom floor so kids could act out Civil War battles with plastic soldiers.

Paul slid up to his locker. One minute. He grabbed his math book and made one last dash to Mrs. Cain's room.

Paul slipped through the door just as the bell rang, Mrs. Cain wasn't smiling.

"Mister Meyer," she said. "Are you trying to set the record for tardiness? Or for tracking the most mud into my classroom?"

Paul wished he could disappear. Detention. And it wasn't even eight o'clock in the morning yet. Then he smelled cow manure. And the smell was coming from his boots!



The day was a blur of books and Mrs. Cain talk, talk, talking. At least in detention Mrs. Cain wouldn't talk!

On the Detention Room board was written, "SILENCE. HOMEWORK. ONE HOUR."

Paul plopped into a seat.

He thought about that morning and seeing the flash of red on the bluff. Not cardinal red. Not like red paint.

He'd seen something—or someone—on the bluff. But who? And why?

After detention, Paul trudged home in the rain. He arrived just in time for chores. And after chores, supper, dishes, and homework.

He fell into bed, tired. But, just as his eyes closed, Paul remembered something about that morning. That shade of red—it was exactly the color of his own red and black mackinaw jacket.



Ring! Ring! Saturday morning the alarm clock read 4:30. But the cows weren't sleeping in, so neither could Paul. He pulled on a sweatshirt and jeans and grabbed his favorite belt. The belt was plain brown leather, but the buckle was one of a kind. His lumberjack belt.

Paul's great-great-grandpa Jake had been a lumberjack. All his life, Paul heard how Grandpa Jake drove logs on the Wisconsin River. He broke a logjam with dynamite. Once, he dunked thirty lumberjacks in a log-rolling contest. Grandpa Jake was Paul's hero.

Paul got his lumberjack belt on his tenth birthday. Dad gave him a small, heavy package. It was round and flat. Very hard. Bumpy, Paul ripped the paper off.

Inside was an iron circle with an X in the center. Dad grinned. Mom's eyes sparkled.

"It's a belt buckle," Dad explained. "An exact copy of Grandpa Jake's logger's mark. His mark was on an iron hammer about the size of your fist.

When trees were cut, Grandpa Jake stamped the ends of every log. Nobody else had the circle X mark. With this mark any lumberman in Wisconsin would know which logs were Grandpa's.

Mom smiled. "A blacksmith copied the mark for you."

Paul traced the metal shape with his finger. Now, Grandpa Jake's mark would be his mark.

Dad dug out an old leather belt. Together, he and Paul soldered the iron circle to the buckle.

"Grandpa Jake would have been proud to see you wear this," Dad said.

Paul threaded his lumberjack belt through the loops on his jeans and ran downstairs to breakfast.

"Dad, was somebody at the farm yesterday morning?" Paul asked as he pushed French toast and bacon onto his plate.

Dad shook his head. "Nope. Too early for hunters."

"Bird-watchers?" Mom said.

"Too late for birds," Paul said. "I saw red on the bluff."

Dad's face was serious, "Well, son," he said. "You know what red means."

Paul sat up straight. What? What did red mean?

"UFOs," his dad said. "Alien spaceships."

Mom and Dad laughed. But Paul didn't feel like laughing. Someone was on that bluff. Paul wanted to know who. And why.

Work never ends on a farm. Every day there are cows to milk and stalls to clean. Chickens to feed and water to pump. Paul loved the farm. He loved the crabby old cows and the soft-eyed new calves.

But all morning Paul thought about the bluff as he worked. Could the red flash be someone's red and black mackinaw jacket?

Johnny and Mark Jackson wore red and black mackinaw jackets, Paul remembered. The Jackson boys were tough eighth graders. Kids said they even chewed tobacco. But their farm was five miles down the road. Why would they be on the bluff?

That afternoon, Paul headed to the state park. His scout troop was building trails. Mom and Dad left too. They'd be running errands till suppertime.

Paul cut through the pasture, just as he'd done the day before.

He wanted another look at the bluff. With his mind on that flash of red color, he searched the bushes and tree branches. He scanned the ground for footprints.

Nothing. There wasn't one footprint anywhere on the rocky bluff. Finally, he followed a muddy path out to County Highway 10. He had to wade a storm ditch to reach the road. There, he found a single tire track, deep in the mud.

"One track doesn't mean anything." Paul frowned. "No foot prints. No clues. Maybe nobody was on the bluff. Maybe I should stop acting like the FBI."

Paul felt silly. Why would someone stop on Highway 10, wade through a storm ditch, and hike to the bluff? It didn't make sense.

Paul felt his face get hot. He'd let his imagination run wild. He felt more than silly. He felt embarrassed. And angry—at himself.



Troop 251 spent the afternoon at the state park. Paul hauled stones and shoveled sand. Later, he hammered wooden frames to make walkways for wetland trails. He whacked those nails as if they were Public Enemy Number One. The harder he hit

them, the better he felt. He pounded and pounded until he'd hammered away all his embarrassed, angry feelings.

At 5:30, Scoutmaster Allen blew his whistle and the scouts headed home. Mr. Allen dropped Paul off at the top of the hill. As he walked toward the house, he noticed the pasture gate was open. Strange. He and Dad never left the gate open. Never. That gate was the only thing between their cows and the cars on State Park Road.

When Paul reached the gate, he stopped dead still. There, in the mud between the gate and the road, were tire tracks. Deep tracks. Somebody had driven into their pasture! And if Paul's guess was right, that somebody drove a big, heavy truck.

What if that somebody was on the bluff? A truck couldn't cross the ditch on Highway 10. So the somebody had to drive through the pasture.

Paul's mind ran in circles. Why the bluff? Why a truck? What does this person want? Suddenly, a picture flashed into Paul's mind. He saw himself standing by the creek looking up at the flash of red on the bluff.

Flash again. Last Friday, he had been looking up at the bluff. Someone in red was on top of the bluff looking down. But, looking down at what?

Paul took a deep breath. The Meyers had a secret—a valuable secret. And it was at the bottom of the bluff.

"My college trees," Paul whispered. "The somebody in red wants to steal my college trees. And now, he's brought a truck to do it!"

The college trees were four black walnut trees growing along the creek on their farm. "Those are your college trees," Dad always said. "Furniture makers pay money for walnut wood. Enough for you to be the first Meyer to graduate from the University of Wisconsin."

Mom and Dad's families had no money for college. But they had different dreams for Paul.

Once they even took a trip to the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Dad drove by the big, white barns of the agriculture school. They ate lunch by the lake.

"This is your place, son," Dad said. "Four trees. Four years of college. It's a perfect plan!"

But, that perfect plan would be ruined if the trees were stolen.

Paul dashed across the pasture. Please, please let Dad's black truck be parked by the barn. No. He looked up and down State Park Road. No again. His heart was pounding so hard he could almost hear it.

Mom and Dad weren't home yet. So unless Paul could stop them, thieves were going to cut down his college money and haul it away. The sun was setting. Soon it would be dark. Paul had to do something now, or it would be too late.

He ran to the far end of the pasture. From there, he could barely see the shape of a big truck near the bluff. He saw the truck but no people. They must be down at the bottom of the bluff, where his college trees grew.

The hill was muddy, Paul slid to the bottom of the bluff on the seat of his jeans. Stay low. No sound, Paul told himself. At the creek, he rubbed mud to **camouflage** his face and hands. He rubbed mud all over his sweatshirt and pulled the hood up over his head. Then he began to crawl.

**camouflage:** to hide

Paul crawled until his arms and legs ached. Soon he heard rumbling and men's voices. Paul crawled toward the edge of the creek and the four walnut trees.

Paul hid behind a big rock. The sky was almost dark. He could see two men. One was tall. One was short. But he couldn't see their faces.

The men and their chain saw had cut down Paul's college trees. All four of them. He felt sick. When would Mom and Dad come? Paul couldn't think of a single way to stop the men.

"Make sure that chain's tight," Paul heard the tall man say. "I'll run up to the truck. Flash your light twice when it's ready to lift. Then, climb up to help me load the log."

"It'll take forever to haul and load these four logs," the short man said.

Paul heard the tall man laugh. "Yep. But we'll be rich when we're done."

Paul froze. The tall man ran right by his hiding place and began to climb the bluff. The short man checked the chains around the first log. Paul waited. Every second seemed to last an hour. Paul was afraid even to breathe.

At last, the short man flashed his flashlight. Once. Twice. Then he climbed the bluff, just as his friend had done.

They must have a **winch** on that truck, Paul thought. It wouldn't take long to pull the logs to the top. Then they'd drive away. In a couple of hours, the thieves would be so far away nobody would ever find them—or the logs.

**winch:** pulling machine

Paul wished Grandpa Jake were still alive. He'd know what to do. He'd use his lumberjack muscles to fight the men. Or maybe he'd smash the chain with a hammer.

Hammer. Paul remembered Dad's words, Grandpa Jake stamped every log with his hammer. ... With this mark any lumberman in Wisconsin would know which logs were Grandpa's. An idea exploded in Paul's mind.

Paul couldn't stop the thieves, but he could mark the logs. He had his belt with Grandpa Jake's mark. Even if the thieves drove away, Paul could prove the trees were his. But he had to move fast.

Paul scrambled toward the first walnut log. Any second, the men would pull it up. Paul fumbled with his belt. Hurry. Hurry. At the top of the bluff, the truck engine rumbled.

He pulled off his belt. Snap! The chain pulled tight. Inch by inch, the log lifted. Paul pressed the buckle hard against the end of the log.

He grabbed a stone. Whack! He hit the buckle. He hit it again. He hoped the noise from the truck would cover the pounding sound. The mark in the hard wood was faint, but it was there. Just before the log lifted out of reach, he scooped a handful of mud and covered the mark so the men wouldn't see it.

Up. Up. Slowly, the log rose until it disappeared over the edge of the bluff.

With his belt in one hand and the stone in the other, Paul hurried to the other logs. He pressed Grandpa Jake's mark against one end of each log. Whack! Whack! He pounded the buckle as far into the wood as he could. He covered each mark with mud.

The men hauled the logs up, one at a time. Each time, they climbed down, fastened the chain, then climbed back up to load the next log onto the truck.

Paul hid behind the big rock as the men came back for the second log. Then the third. The night was getting colder. Paul shivered until his teeth rattled. But he didn't move.



Finally, the men shone their flashlights on the last log. Paul held his breath. What if they found the circle X mark?

"Check the chain at both ends," the tall man ordered. "And hurry up about it."

Paul shuddered. If the men found his mark, they wouldn't have to look far to find him.

The short man tugged at the chains. The beam of his flash light shone on one end of the log.

"Hey, look at this," the short man said.

The tall man growled, "I don't care if ya got gold bricks there. Get up top and let's go. If that farmer comes back we're in trouble."

Paul saw the short man shake his head and turn away. Then both men climbed to the top one more time. Paul waited as they lifted the last log from his college trees through the air. He heard the whirring sound of the winch and the clanking of chains. He waited and waited. Finally, he heard a different sound. The driver had shifted the truck into gear.

Paul jumped up as if he'd been fired out of a cannon. He stuffed his belt into his sweatshirt pocket and scrambled up the bluff. Every minute mattered. He had to call the police. But before he could call the police, he had to know where the thieves were going.

Paul reached the top just in time to see a flatbed truck drive across the pasture. The cab had a rounded front. The taillights were round, too. The light above the license plate wasn't bright, but Paul could make out two numbers—2 and 6.

At the pasture gate, the thieves didn't even stop. They crashed through and turned left, toward Highway 10. That was all Paul needed to know.

Paul raced toward the house. He didn't care about mud or puddles or cow manure. He only wanted to get to the telephone before the thieves reached the highway.

He ran fast. And faster. Down the hill. Through the yard. Straight to the front door of his house.

Paul's fingers shook as he dialed the phone. "O" for operator. His whole body was shaking.

"Operator, how may I help you?" a voice answered.

"Uh. Police," he stammered. "I need the police. Robbers. They stole our trees."

"Just a moment," the operator said. "I'll connect you to the police department."

The operator sounded so calm. Paul had almost forgotten what it felt like to be calm. "Hurry," he yelled into the receiver. "They're getting away."

The phone began to ring again. Hurry. Answer the phone! Paul felt like he was going to explode.

"Police Department," a voice answered. "Officer Hansen."

Paul blurted out the whole story. "Two guys," he said. "One short, one tall." Paul told about the walnut trees. "Four logs. A flatbed truck. The front of the cab is rounded. So are the taillights. Numbers 2 and 6 in the license plate. Hurry. Hurry! They're headed toward Highway 10."

Officer Hansen asked a lot of questions.

"No, sir. I never heard their names," Paul answered.

"No, it was dark. I don't know what color the truck is."

"It was too dark to see their faces."

"No, the truck was across the pasture. I don't know whether it's a Ford or Chevy."

"No. No. No."

Paul wanted to scream. Hurry up. You're wasting time. But instead, he answered question after question. Most of his answers were no.

Finally, Officer Hansen said, "We'll look into it, son."

Look into it? Son? Paul couldn't speak. What did the officer mean? He didn't want looking into, he wanted chasing. And catching.

"Have your mom and dad call when they get home," the policeman said.

When my mom and dad get home? Then Paul really did explode. He yelled right into the phone receiver. "Listen. Those guys stole our trees. My college trees. You've got to chase them now. Now. If they get to Highway 10, they could go anywhere."

Officer Hansen said. "You gave us a lot of information. I'll ask the road patrol to keep an eye out. I promise."

Click. The officer hung up. Paul's stomach felt upside down. His knees shook. He couldn't stand up.

Paul heard the doorknob turn. It seemed like the door opened in slow motion, and there stood his folks. Mom screamed, "Paul!"

Dad yanked the hood of Paul's sweatshirt back. "Are you hurt? What happened?"

In that second Paul realized how he must look. He was solid mud, head to foot. Every inch of skin and clothes. He fell into Dad's arms. "Mom, Dad," he mumbled. "They stole my college trees."

Paul explained how he'd found the gate open and followed the men. How he'd covered himself with mud and crawled along the creek. He pulled his belt from his sweatshirt pocket and showed them how he'd stamped Grandpa Jake's mark on the ends of the logs.

"I told the police. They promised to check it out, but I'm afraid they thought I was just a kid," Paul said.

Mom hugged Paul, mud and all. Dad's eyes sparked like Fourth of July firecrackers.

Dad grabbed the phone and dialed "0."

"State police," he ordered. "Emergency."

By the time Dad hung up the phone that night, Paul had talked to the state police, the forestry department, and the U.S. Marshal. He carefully told each person every detail he could remember.

"You pounded a mark into the ends of the logs?" asked the county forester. "What in the world?"

Paul explained about Grandpa Jake's logger's mark. He told how he used his belt buckle to stamp the logs.

"When you find my logs, just clean off the mud and you'll see a circle with an X inside. Nobody in the world has that mark. Just Grandpa Jake. And me."



Paul stood in the shower for half an hour. The hot water felt so good. Mom stuffed his clothes into a garbage bag. "Well, Mudman," she laughed. "I'll have to scrape these with a wire brush before I dare put them in the washing machine."

Later, Mom and Dad sat on the foot of his bed, like they used to when he was little.

"Your Grandpa Jake would be so proud of you," Mom said. "Marking the logs with your buckle! You're amazing."

"Smarter than smart," Dad said. "We're proud of you, son."

Paul slept and slept. He slept all night and through milking, breakfast, and the entire morning!

Finally, he woke up. He stretched. Ouch! His hands were scraped and sore. His legs were black and blue.

“Paul?” Dad called from downstairs. “The state police want to talk to you.”

Paul forgot about his bruises and scrapes. In three minutes he was downstairs with his jeans on and a football jersey in his hand.

“Did they find the logs?”

Dad smiled. “They think so. But they need you and your belt buckle to prove the logs are ours.”

Paul wanted to leave that second. But Mom sent him upstairs to brush his teeth and, she teased, “Use something beside your fingers to comb your hair.”

When he came downstairs again, his belt lay on the kitchen table. Clean as a whistle. Paul picked up the belt as if it was made of solid gold.



"Looks like the forestry department and state police spent last night playing detective," Dad said as they drove west on Highway 10. "The forester made a list of sawmills that buy walnut and oak."

"This morning, police showed up at one mill in Iowa," Mom said. "And boy, was the owner surprised!"

"The logs are there?" Paul asked.

"Looks like it," Mom said. "The owner says two men came with papers showing they bought the trees."

"But they saw the marks, right?" Paul asked.

"I don't know," Dad said. "That's why we're going. To show your belt buckle to the police and see if the logs are ours."

Paul felt a sting of worry. What if he hadn't hit the stamp hard enough? What if the mark didn't show?

"We told them you could prove the trees were ours," said Dad.

"So we're meeting the whole gang."

"In Iowa?" Dad laughed. "Yep. You've started a two-state police roundup."

Two hours later, dad drove into a parking lot and parked next to an Iowa state police car. "Pearson's Lumber" read the sign. A man in a Wisconsin forester's uniform opened the door.

"So let's see this logging mark," said Mr. Jacobsen, the forester. Paul pulled off his belt.

"My great-great-grandpa marked logs with a circle X," Paul said. "Check out the ends of those walnut logs. Find this mark, and the logs are ours."

In the log yard, logs were stacked everywhere. Four walnut logs lay in one corner. Paul brushed the end of one log with his hand. It was caked with dried mud. He pulled at the mud with his fingers. He scraped with his nails. Like magic, a circle appeared. Then an X in the center.

"Looks like we've got some timber thieves to put in jail," said a state policeman. "Good work, young man."

People started pounding Paul on the back and shaking his hand. "Quick thinking to mark those logs!" the forester said.

"How about joining the state police?" someone else said. "We need a good detective."

Paul wanted to jump and cheer.

"You saved your college trees, son," Dad said.

Paul smiled. "Yep."

"We're so proud of you," said Mom.

Paul smiled again. It felt as if his whole face was one huge smile. "I know," Paul answered. "And Grandpa Jake would be proud, too."

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