THE HARVEY SKIDOO TREE SERIES

Featured story:

THE SMELTER: FIRST DAYS & IMPRESSIONS

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THE SMELTER: FIRST DAYS & IMPRESSIONS

I have been in numerous novel situations but very few of them were as foreign to me as this one. It was an introduction to the intensities found in heavy industry. It's not for everyone but for those who can adapt to it, it can help you find some hidden parts of yourself that you may not have otherwise encountered.

My first day working in the HBM&S smelter was a bit on the surreal side. One of my assignments, along with a few other guys on the Smelter Bullgang, was to clear off anything on the flat roof of a dirty squarish building inside a much, much bigger industrial type of building. In our late teens & early twenties, we eagerly starting throwing strange heavy objects obscured by layers of dirt and grime acquired over the years. Bang. Heave. Here's a big one. Crash. Dust everywhere. Our gas masks with dust filters were taxed beyond their limits. We were having great fun. Enjoying the destructive nature of the task we were getting paid to do. Enjoying our youth, our strength, the feeling of our bodies working in a physical way.

After raising a lot of dust (and some Hell), we really got to work. We were handed big, heavy sledge hammers and told to go for it, but to be careful about the roof falling in. So off we went, swinging those big, heavy weapons, knocking parts of the wall down, even the roof. Ahh. What a feeling. We didn't seem to mind the burning sting of dust mixing with our sweat as it somehow found itself inside our filthy goggles. The heat, the noise, the dust & dirt. All good fun for a group of energetic young men.

But this wasn't the surreal part. That bit came later. Perhaps it was the same day, perhaps the next. Almost certainly within the first few days as I remember the tour stopping at that new scene of work which was a very unfamiliar place to me. Fire, sparks, violent spurting of magma, globs of molten goo exploding out of the full bellied converters and spitting out of these massive metal pail-like transport pots, threatening any passing nearby with the danger of its hellish contents. I could feel the MASS of it all. Right next to me. Just a scrape, just a glancing slight brush from any of those gigantic moving masses of metal would send me flying off to the side.

My guide and I stood back – far enough away to be safe, I suppose, but certainly close enough to be within it all, to be *part* of it. We watched as one of those giant pots came swooshing hard and fast towards us, supported by the long lengths of metal and cable by an overhead crane. There were at least 2 cranes operating, flying swiftly back and forth carrying those enormously heavy pots of molten metal.

We watched the pot being neared to us, towards the mouth of the furnace. A heavy chain with a hook much bigger than my head started to raise the back end, getting it ready. A man very near to it all raised the door to the furnace when the pot was positioned, carefully not doing it too soon for fear of blinding the crane operator. It wasn't inconveniencing the craneman he was worried about, it was the retaliation. All it took was just a little bump on one side of the pot and that man would have several hours of cleaning up to do. Hot and hard work. In that violent world were codes of ethics, modes of behavior. I had much to learn, not merely the immediate work at hand.

The furnace door was raised. It was surprisingly small for the mass hidden on the other side, I suppose to help reduce the loss of the heat within. The molten slag shot down the tongue-like launder leading into the furnace. Incredibly fast. It was all over in an instant. The slag launder man closed the door and briefly peered at the launder. He was lucky this time. The slag was light and fast. He took a heavy iron bar, maybe two meters in length and quickly broke the thin crispy dark grey layers that were left in the wake. Flakes. They broke easily. He opened the door a crack, shoveled them inside. He tossed a splash of liquid lime with a pail he had dipped into a barrel onto the launder. That was followed by a half full shovel of sand adeptly spread with one toss and within seconds another pot was waiting for him. He worked efficiently, taking advantage of the brief time between pots. After a half dozen or more of these, he could take a quick break until the next session.

He was wearing many, many layers, long underwear covered by pants, shirts, jackets and an apron. The idea was when the hot slag sputtered and caught you, you could feel it burning you before it did any real damage. Without those layers you would be severely hurt before you even felt it. There was a barrel of liquid lime nearby, for the practical use of dipping pails to coat the launder with, but also handy to jump in if you caught on fire. There was a man, the arch blower, who wore thick wooden soles strapped onto the bottom of his boots so the heat of the furnace below wouldn't eat through those boots so quickly. The heat was phenomenal. If you quickly wanted to boil a kettle of water, all you had to do was place it on the floor where you were standing and in a short time it would be angrily boiling away.

The molten slag wasn't always so generously thin and easy to clean. When the slag was slow and thick, it would ooze down the launder, partly freezing on its journey down into the furnace. It would pile up, making it difficult to open or close the furnace door. And behind your frantic efforts to work away at an opening, there would be another pot waiting for you. The outer layers would freeze up, solidifying into a long rock-like substance. You would have to quickly get the jack hammer, weighing in at 20 kilos or more, and start to work away at strategic points, hoping to weaken the hold that slag had, so stuck and thick and stubbornly filling the once empty launder. When you finally broke through the surface, it was still a molten glop inside. And the next pot was still waiting for you.

It was not uncommon to pass out from the heat and the exertion on your first day. Somehow, if you miraculously didn't get yourself hurt, if you didn't just pack it all in and quit on your first day, you somehow developed some partial immunity to it all. You took salt tablets to help keep some of your body liquids inside you. You quickly learned how to 'read' the slag going down the launder chute, how to better prepare or coat the launder for the next load, or how to attack it with the shovels, iron bars and jack hammers. You also learned how to 'read' the crane operators, how to interact with them. Some took pride in their work and made your life easier. Others had a sadistic edge that took pleasure in that little ant below scurrying around, especially when that massive pot full of molten slag was gently bumped or tilted over a touch too fast or sloppily. Then the craneman could lean back, watching that little ant attempting to throw a shovel in his direction but it was always too far away for it to ever reach.

Mixed with the heat and the metallic masses and the force and energy of things in motion were the toxic fumes which just grabbed at you unexpectantly when your face mask with rubber burning on your face opened a small gap when you turned your head in one direction. Then it rushed down your throat, the acid searing deep inside. The strength of its assault was almost like a fire itself, a perfect match to the environment.

My first day on this job, I was amazed at it all. I understood very little, just saw images, and movements and things, and felt the toxic gases, the heat, the violence. For me I imagined how it would be when working on Mars. I don't know why I had this image. If anything, it would be more like the conditions on the fiery hell of Venus.

A short time later my tour ended. I really didn't understand anything of what I had witnessed, just the spectacular show of what man could do. But I was to learn more of it as that job I saw of the slag launderman was soon to be mine. I was the green guy and it was time for me to get broken in.

Over the weeks and months I actually came to like that job. The bosses stayed far away. They left you alone if you didn't screw up and the production kept moving. They didn't like hanging around those particularly nasty places anyway. And there was a certain respect that came with the job, as low as it was in the hierarchy. One of the earned unspoken perks of the job was if you did it well, and were back in plenty of time for the next 'pouring', you could leave your post, wander around. Sometimes I checked with the furnace and crane operators and they gave me a good estimate of how much free time I had, and over time, I got to know the general process better so I could independently work out how much time. So I'd occasionally go for a long walk, confident that I was a man, capable of not only surviving, but doing well in those violent circumstances. I could work with it, adapt, add my own touches. It was a romantic type of job for me. Man against the bare elements, those primitive forces, yet obliged to work with them to move them in the directions he desired, he needed. And that earned me the right to walk where I pleased. (In today's rigid interpretations of one's place, I suspect that 'luxury' would be significantly much rarer.)

One favourite spot after a particularly hard bout was sitting down, back against a tall chimney in an open space, cracking open a cold orange crush and taking the first long drag of my freshly rolled cigarette. I could feel the sweat evaporating and take a quiet even humble moment of pride, thinking I had done a good job.

A moment of well-deserved peace before re-entering Hell.

I may have romanticized it all somewhat but it's all true. Every word of it. Living through an extended set of intense experiences, good or bad or mixed, brings the journeyer to a set of perspectives one doesn't always encounter. There is a peace of mind, a way of looking at things you come to, knowing that you can face almost anything. It's not completely true, of course, and that feeling can slip away from you, but it's good to recognize that you had at least known what it was like.