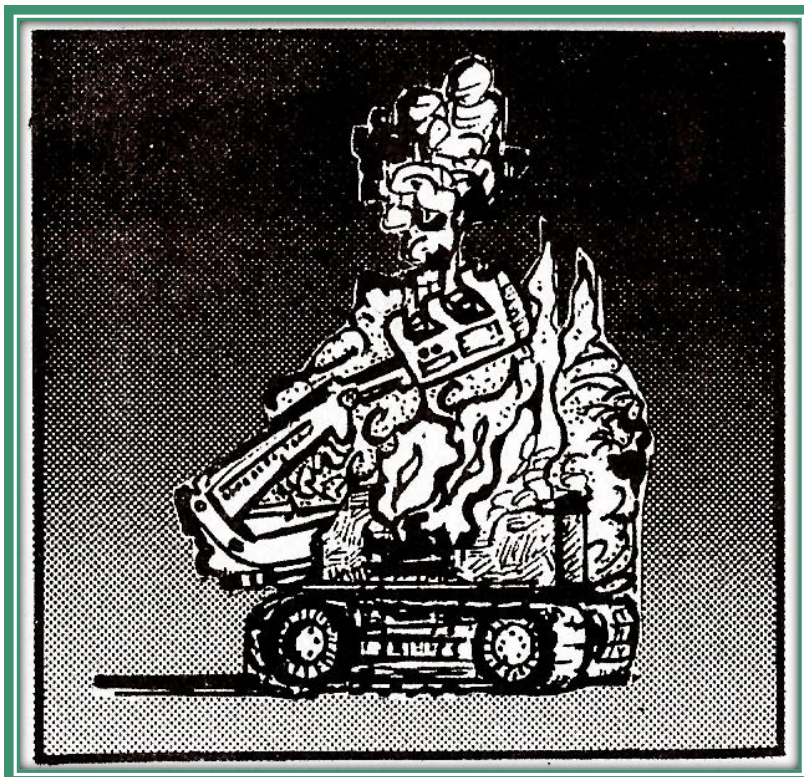


Chapter 25 : Sabo Tabby vs. Killa Godzilla



Between 1914-18, when the IWW openly advocated ca'canny (better known as "sabotage"), it often used the symbol of an angry black cat, with claws borne, fur standing on end, and a bottlebrush tail, as visual code. Indeed, the "sabo-cat", (which may have originally been a tabby to provide a visual play-on-words, i.e. "sabo-tabby" for "sabotage") designed by none other than Solidarity Forever songsmith and IWW organizer Ralph Chaplin¹, is still used today by the IWW, Earth First!, and the admirers of both—sometimes to specifically encourage direct action, but generally as a totem.² And though the IWW and Earth First! may have openly advocated sabotage at different times during their existences, as Earth First!er George Draffan had pointed out, in actual fact, it was the timber workers themselves who actually practiced it more than anyone else.³ While this was often welcomed by the members of Local #1, at the same time, it also potentially caused problems as well.

As opposition to Corporate Timber grew, North Coast activists anticipated a backlash. Already Earth First!ers in Arizona had been set up and framed for "terrorist" acts they didn't commit. It was only a matter of time before something locally would get sabotaged, blown up, or burned down and the North Coast activists would likely get the blame. Indeed, there were some hints that it had possibly already happened. Take the case of the mysterious burnings of the Okerstrom feller-buncher logging equipment.

In addition to Louisiana-Pacific's outsourcing and waferboard production, the use of capital intensive logging equipment comprised the third component of that corporation's liquidation of The North Coast's forests and timber economy. In the fall of 1989, they introduced a new class of log harvesting machines known as "feller-bunchers" which looked like a giant construction machine, similar in appearance to an earth mover or crane. They had enormous claws which would grip the base of small to medium sized trees, and in each claw were saws which would then sever the tree near its base. Once cut, the claws would then lift the tree and stack it to be yarded out. These were ideally designed to work in even-aged rotation tree plantations, and to some extent, envisioned as a viable option for cutting trees in second and third

growth forests. Since L-P had almost no old growth left to cut on the North Coast, having clearcut most of it already, this machine would enable to the new "logging to infinity" and waferboard lumber production outlined by Harry Merlo. As an added bonus, feller-bunchers greatly reduced the size of logging crews down from six to two workers: one to operate the machine, and another to act as a spotter and guard.⁴

L-P gave advance notice that they would favor gyppo operators in the competitive bidding process who were willing to use these \$700,000 behemoths, but as of late 1989, the only local Gyppo operator to use them was Willits based Okerstrom Logging (the same company who had sprayed the loggers at Juan Creek with Garlon four years earlier), who agreed to purchase three.⁵ The machine, described by many as essentially "a lawn mower for the forests"⁶ was universally hated by loggers, environmentalists, and other residents for various reasons, who started disparagingly referring to the monster as "Killa Godzilla," due to both its destructiveness and its tendency to roar when under heavy strain.⁷ Okerstrom defended the machine, claiming that it didn't reduce employment, on the grounds that it made "dangerous, brush choked sites loggable," and also claimed that it had environmental benefits as well, because it reduced the need for skid trails normally caused by Caterpillar logging.⁸ What Okerstrom wasn't telling anyone, however, was the obvious fact that this machine was to be used increasingly, resulting in greater and greater destruction of the forests. Sooner or later, the monster would devour all of the jobs, even if it temporarily added a few—which was a debatable claim to say the least.⁹

The locals, including many loggers, did not welcome the machine's intrusion into their neck of the woods. Okerstrom was using one of these units on L-P land near on Greenwood Road halfway to Elk, and west of Philo in southwestern Mendocino

¹ Chaplin, Ralph, Wobbly: The Rough and Tumble Story of an American Radical, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948.

² "Fellow Workers, Meet Earth First!: an Open Letter to Wobblies Everywhere", by x322339, *Industrial Worker*, May 1988.

³ "What's Really Going On in Timber", letter to the editor by George Draffan, *Earth First! Journal*, Samhain / November 1, 1988, and *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, November 16, 1988.

⁴ "In the Middle of Run Away History: Judi Bari, Earth First! Organizer, Mississippi Summer in the California Redwoods", interview by Beth Bosk, *New Settler Interview*, issue #49, May 1990.

⁵ "Opinion: Sabotage!", by Don Lipmanson, *Mendocino Commentary*, November 2, 1989, reprinted as "Black Cat Strikes Again", by Don Lipmanson, *Industrial Worker*, February 1990.

⁶ "Here and There in Mendocino County", by Bruce Anderson, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, November 1, 1989.

⁷ "Louis Korn Comments", by Louis Korn, *Mendocino Commentary*, November 2, 1989.

⁸ Lipmanson, November 2, 1989, op. cit.

⁹ Bruce Anderson, November 1, 1989, and Lipmanson, November 2, 1989, op. cit.

County throughout September and early October of 1989, nonstop from 5 AM to 8 PM at night. The noise was so loud, that it disrupted the daily lives of many neighbors who lived near the logging site.¹⁰ A coalition of Earth Firsters, IWW members, Greens, and other local residents spent several weeks planning an action to protest the feller buncher's use, including conducting reconnaissance of the site, securing a location for a base camp, and organizing further support among the neighbors.¹¹ Two veterans of the antiwar movement, including Louis Korn, had agreed to chain themselves to the machine in symbolic protest, while the others would stand nearby, singing songs, distributing leaflets, and dialoging with the workers involved in the cut.¹²

The activists planned their next move only to find that their thunder had been stolen. In mid October, during a heavy rainstorm, the machine fell silent.¹³ A couple of days before the planned demonstration, the organizers contacted one of the neighbors to announce the time of the action, saying something like "The demonstration is next Tuesday," to which the neighbor responded, "No it's not. I saw them pulling that machine out this morning. It was torched."¹⁴ Several eyewitnesses confirmed that the behemoth, its cab badly damaged by fire, had been slowly moved on a flat-bed truck along the Greenwood Road towards the coast.¹⁵ Okerstrom at first denied that anything like this had happened, even though it had been confirmed by as many as four separate witnesses, then he altered his story to suggest that a fire had occurred, but not to the feller-buncher.¹⁶

Louisiana-Pacific as expected, blamed the destruction of the machine on "eco-terrorists," and Shep Tucker specifically named Earth First! as the prime suspect. There *had* been a great deal of equipment sabotage carried out in this particular part of Mendocino County, and it seemed to come in waves, suggesting it wasn't random or incidental. For starters, this logging site was not far away from the Cameron Road cut of two years earlier, when the spiked logs that had injured George Alexander had been harvested. Local Gyppo operator Charles Hiatt, who had

logged a site on State Highway 128 near the coast, had reported that his crews had found minor damage to their equipment, including broken gauges, cut hoses, and even some blood smeared around the cabs. Boonville Gyppo Robert "Mancher" Pardini had sugar added and oil removed from several of his bulldozers on an L-P cut in the area that year. Nobody knows for sure who carried out any of these acts of vandalism, though everyone had their suspicions. Many of them followed the types of "ecotage" suggested by Ecodefense. And it was arguable that sabotage of logging equipment was somewhat effective at halting logging operations, even if tree spiking wasn't.¹⁷

To be clear, Earth First! – IWW Local #1 had never publically advocated or participated in equipment sabotage *either*, but there was little they could do to prevent it, because vandalism and sabotage were tactics that were widespread in their use and certainly predated Earth First! (and even the IWW for that matter). Earth Firsters locally had not condemned equipment sabotage, and Darryl Cherney had even been on record stating, "destruction of machinery is morally justified under certain circumstances, while violence against other living things is not." Judi Bari had likewise stated, "History will remember people who destroy bulldozers as heroes...you win a lawsuit to stop a logging plan, then the timber company files an identical plan the very next season. Besides sabotage, what else is left?"¹⁸ Judi Bari was no fool, however, and Earth Firsters were wary of engaging in any activity that might land them in serious legal jeopardy, especially in light of what happened to the Earth Firsters and their allies in Arizona.¹⁹ Bari insisted that not only did she not engage in sabotage herself, she did not know and did not want to know who did:

"We organizers, we don't cheat on our taxes. If somebody hands me a contribution, I'm going to declare it. We don't do sabotage. I don't even do civil disobedience because I don't want to hand myself over to Susan Massini and the 'Justice System' in this county. They would love to get a hold of me. They put Mike Roselle in jail for four months for a minor civil disobedience.

"So, we need to stay as clean as we can. We need to be as open and as public as we can.

¹⁰ Bruce Anderson, November 1, 1989, and Lipmanson, November 2, 1989, op. cit.

¹¹ Bosk, May 1990, op. cit.

¹² Korn, November 2, op. cit.

¹³ Lipmanson, November 2, 1989, op. cit.

¹⁴ Bosk, May 1990, op. cit.

¹⁵ Lipmanson, November 2, 1989, op. cit.

¹⁶ Bosk, May 1990, op. cit.

¹⁷ Lipmanson, November 2, 1989, op. cit.

¹⁸ Lipmanson, November 2, 1989, op. cit.

¹⁹ Letter to the editor, by Judi Bari, *Mendocino Commentary*, November 16, 1989.

And we need to try to build broad, public support.”²⁰

In this particular case, Bari assumed that the loggers themselves had been the culprits, and even though she declared that she didn’t know who they might have been, Bari reported that she had heard, second-hand, that loggers were bragging that they wanted “to take the machine out.”²¹ As to why the workers would willingly engage in such acts, Bari had a very thorough and logical explanation:

“We all know that these people are cutting themselves out of jobs. And they all know it, too...Louisiana-Pacific, for example, sets the price per thousand (board feet), and as the woods become more depleted, it takes more and more labor to get the thousand out. And, since they have no collective bargaining...they have no say in what the price is that they’re offered. So the price per thousand has become so low the gyppos cannot make enough off the cut to maintain their own equipment. What’s happening is that wages have gone to a disgracefully low level—people are starting at \$9.00 an hour in the woods. That is an embarrassment. This is the most dangerous job in the United States, according to the Labor Department...”

“(T)he corporations are threatening their jobs and equipment. They’re doing it by paying them so little per thousand that they can’t pay their employees a living wage, and they can’t afford to maintain their own equipment. That’s where the danger is coming from. It’s not coming from Earth First!...”

“(W)hat is happening is that the smaller gyppos are being squeezed out, as the laws of capitalism play themselves out. The smaller companies have been increasingly squeezed out, and only the larger, more crass gyppos have survived.”²²

These suspicions were echoed by Charles Hiatt, who considered the feller-buncher “an invitation to trouble.” Hiatt was no rabble-rouser, and he had suspected environmentalists might have sabotaged some of his own equipment earlier, but in the case of the feller-buncher, he also suspected workers’ dissatisfaction. Hiatt had refused to purchase one himself, not want-

ing to spend “half a million for a machine L-P wanted loggers to go for, but people don’t want,” even though he was not adverse to using heavy machinery (he owned a sizable fleet of heavy equipment, some of which he displayed publicly in Boonville).²³

It wasn’t even entirely clear that sabotage had been carried out *at all*. Indeed, as time passed, it became more apparent that the machine had simply caught fire due to misuse.²⁴ Okerstrom denied that it was, which was an indication that it was extremely unlikely that (had it actually been sabotage) environmentalists were responsible, because had that been the case, Okerstrom would have enthusiastically proclaimed it. He hadn’t. If it had been sabotage carried out by the workers, Okerstrom *couldn’t* admit it, because then his insurance wouldn’t have covered his other feller-bunchers.²⁵ It was not entirely out of the question that the gyppo owners *themselves* sometimes committed sabotage, because doing so would allow them to commit insurance fraud, collecting on the damage of equipment they didn’t actually want or need, but in the case of the Okerstrom feller-buncher, this is not likely. From every indication, the gyppo owner was only too happy to serve as Merlo’s guinea pig in the use of these new “Killa Godzillas”.²⁶ So if “Sabo-tabby” had indeed defeated Godzilla or the latter had defeated itself somehow, it remained a mystery. The organizers of the aborted demonstration shelved their plans until the other “Killa Godzillas” could be found. Meanwhile a certain government “intelligence” agency watched quietly and, at the very least, took note of what Judi Bari had said or (more likely) *seemed* to have said.

²³ Lipmanson, November 2, 1989, op. cit.

²⁴ “Reports of ‘Ecotage’ Remain Unconfirmed”, staff report, *Mendocino Beacon*, November 16, 1989.

²⁵ Bosk, May 1990, op. cit.

²⁶ “Press Statement”, by Karen Pickett, Tracy Katelman, Jennifer Biegel, and Karen Wood, August 29, 1990.

²⁰ Bosk, May 1990, op. cit.

²¹ Bari, November 16, op. cit.

²² “Some People Just Don’t Get It”, Judi Bari interviewed by Bruce Anderson, *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, June 13, 1990.