

The People vs Woody Harrelson

Sorrel and Squat

February-March 1997



Woody Harrelson climbing for the redwoods on Golden Gate Bridge, November 23, 1996

photo © 1996 Eric Slomanson ("Slomo")

In the ancient redwoods of Headwaters this fall, the resistance was waged both on the ground and off. The shift from clearcutting to salvage logging of downed trees, however, brought the air force's activities to a halt. Activists had put forth a fierce set of demands, including one that will be met this year: the establishment of an independent Citizen's Review Board to investigate allegations of police brutality on the part of the Humboldt County Sheriffs. Nonetheless, the Ewok Village, a 19-day tree sit in Owl Creek, left some of us of the aerial persuasion thirsting for more. There was, after all, still gear to be confiscated.

As the direct action season wound down, over 1,300 had been arrested and nearly 300 had done a few days or even weeks in the rapidly expanding Earth First! wing of the Humboldt County Jail. There weren't many of us left who were arrestable, and we wanted a climbing action.

A supreme PR spin out of Senator Dianne Feinstein's office had the mainstream media convincing much of the public that Headwaters really was "saved" by the shady deal which Maxxam's Hurwitz orchestrated. To the press, the story had its happy ending, and we were a bunch of wingnuts, or worse, whiners (after all, even the national Sierra Club endorsed the deal.)

Thus, it had been a challenging few months for those of us who spent too much time crammed into the media collective's one-room office, attempting to untangle the truth from the garbled crap the politicians were so cleverly slinging.

We had taken to groveling hard, even picking up Fed Ex tabs to get photos and video out to the disinterested media outlets. Relieved that OJ's civil suit was in full swing, the press shunned the ancient redwoods, telling us the story was dead. Unless Bonnie Raitt and Don Henley showed up again to play an acoustic set down in Yager Creek, they had seen enough of Headwaters for the year.

About this time, the dust was settling after Woody Harrelson's first act of civil disobedience in Kentucky, where he was arrested for planting industrial hemp seeds. Woody and his attorney sped across the country toward Headwaters and sent word: no symbolic line crossing for Mr. Harrelson, he was ready for direct action.

The idea started out as a simple late night joke around the campfire. A local mused, "you could bungee jump, or do it naked, or hang it off the Golden Gate Bridge."

As we pondered the potential of climbing a national monument, we concluded that it would take Greenpeace two months and \$20,000 to do. We had one week, Woody Harrelson and a lot of good karma. Two previous attempts to hit the GG bridge had failed, but they say the third time is the charm. It seemed so outrageous that it was almost possible.

We had a crazy week of organizing. The giddiness of the idea was displaced by the stress of its realization. We ran circles all over the Bay Area keeping track of each other and the many tasks of training, scouting, planning and banner making.

Action day was actually several sleepless days and nights. Details were worked out on the fly. The banner was dried hours before it had to be packed. Despite the lack of time (or maybe because of it), we got it together.

Saturday morning came: the clouds parted and the winds ceased. We hung the banner. Helicopters swarmed. The cops arrived and blockaded traffic. We were arrested. Woody posed for mug shots with every on-duty booking officer at the station. We were released. We partied at the Ritz-Carlton.

The action stirred up some serious controversy, but it created a venue to take the story of Hurwitz's greedy grip on the ancient redwoods international. The media coverage continues to build; newspapers across the country, major magazines, prime-time newscasters, David Letterman and San Francisco talk-show circuits continue to talk about the Headwaters forest, week after week.

Woody and the rest of us have spent many interviews "bridging" from traffic related questions back to the messages of the falling redwoods and the many brave forest defenders who offered their bodies in this season's efforts to stop the madness.

While the criminal case will probably result in lots of community service, we also face a class-action civil suit. Ads are out in Bay Area papers urging anyone who was stuck in bridge traffic that day to share their tales and join the lawsuit.

We never expected it to get to this point, where so many people, as Woody says, "can't see the forest for the traffic" (or maybe for the settlement check?). One can only hope that Hurwitz will get his day in court and time in jail for robbing the American people of a national treasure. Maybe we should take out an ad urging anyone who feels "inconvenienced" by the clearcutting of ancient forests and is angry about it to join a class action against Charlie!

The Ted K Archive

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Earth First! Journal, February-March 1997, Page 23.
<archive.org/details/earth_first_1997>

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