Making Waves: Iceland Meets Maine on a Portland Pier

A Modern Home on Munjoy Hill (Stargazing Spot Included)

Camp, Upgraded, on Round Pond

PLUS: An Antiquing Road Trip, Up and Down the Coast
It was the first maple I tapped for maple sap, in 1988, the second year of our lives in Maine; a grand old tree with spreading branches that reached probably 40 feet in every direction, north to south and east to west. The house, built in the mid-1860s, came after the tree, and the tree asserted itself by spreading its branches so far, they touched the corner of the house where the roofline joined the eaves, providing a launching pad for squirrels to leap from tree to roof and then into the attic.

I forgave the tree, got rid of the squirrels, cut the branches back. Some tapping seasons, I hung three buckets from the tree, and as the years went by, and it started to show its age, just one, and then none. It was a “yard tree” in the language of maple syrup makers, producing sweeter sap than maples deeper in the grove. Some of the bigger branches died back, and smaller branches would shear off in a winter wind. Then two winters ago, the tree split in a ferocious windstorm and the eastern half came down in a roar, pointing directly at but not reaching our road.

The tree was too big for me to handle with my chain saw, and my wife wouldn’t let me saw it up any way, recognizing my limitations as an arborist-professor better than I would. Mombi passed, it was now June, and one morning while my wife and I were working in our respective home offices, a sound started, a sound you don’t hear very often, a long whoosh, like a giant broom sweeping through the sky, then my wife yelling, then wood splintering and the house shaking.

I rushed downstairs. Checked the wife, unharmed but upset; checked the windows: none broken; looked outside: another huge section of the maple was now gone, the wind blowing the trunk down, I was not unprepared, it was only a matter of time before it would fall, and the house shaking.

When you live in the same place for a long time, especially in an old house—built well before you were born—you develop a sense of loyalty to the entire place, a sense of obligation. You have temporarily been entrusted and been nurtured by the place, others before you cared for it, others after you will care for it, others after you will hopefully do the same. Having nurtured and been nurtured by the place, you are in a relationship with it, one that has to be taken seriously. In short, I owed the tree.

So, I decided I would convert it into something other than BTUs. I would save it, after a fashion. And the only way I could think of to do that was to make boards out of the rescued limbs, and someday, some distant day, do something with those boards.

There were a few problems: I didn’t have a sawmill to turn the wood into slabs, or a planer to smooth them into usable boards, or a good way of moving them to a place where these things could be done. However, I did have a bad way to move them: in late fall last year, I backed our old pickup truck next to where the logs were. They were too heavy to lift, even after volunteering my wife to help with the lifting, which is always gamely willing to do.

I built a ramp from the ground to the tailgate of my pickup. But the logs were still on the ground, not on the ramp. I took a four-foot-long piece of flat steel, rolled a log onto the steel, then lifted one end of the steel and placed it on a stump, then went around to the other side and lifted the other end of the steel and put it on another stump. In this way, I was able to lift the log onto the ramp and attach nylon straps to it, the idea being that I could now use my come-along winch to pull the log up the ramp and into the bed of the truck.

My wife came out to provide grudging support; actually, what she said was, “You’ll kill us both.” As I ratcheted the come-along, she kept the log centered on the ramp. The log began to crawl up the ramp. The wire of the come-along grew taut, then tight, and each pull on the ratchet became more and more difficult. But the log still inched up the ramp.

And then the strap broke, sending the come-along whirling through the air, right between our heads, smashing the rear window of the pickup. Glass fell into the pickup bed, the log fell off the ramp, my wife gave me a look.

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But this country wasn’t built by people who were intimidated by hard work; it was built by people who hired other people to do the work, people who knew what they were doing.

I called Mark, the man who would saw the logs into boards, and explained the problem. It wasn’t a problem for him. He’d caught the spirit of the thing, or at least pretended to. Not long before Christmas, he brought over a trailer with an electric winch, ran a cable through what was now a snowy yard, hooked it to each log, and dragged it across the snow and into his trailer and was off. Thirty minutes, tops.

A week or so later, Mark called to say he was ready to cut up the logs, and did I want to watch? On a cold January day, I drove over to his place in East Dixfield and watched him turn the logs into inch-and-a-half-thick slabs. The portable saw was awesome, just the kind of machine a man would find fascinating, and it made fast work of the logs. I stacked the slabs in the back of the pickup, whose rear window was now cardboard and duct tape, and drove them home. I cut scrap pine into six-inch posts, putting three of these posts between each slab for air circulation, then took ropes and wrapped the stack and pulled tight, to keep the boards from warping. They sat all winter, all mud season, all spring, and in midsummer I was ready for the next step.

I found a carpenter, Wes, out in Fayette, who will plane them smooth for me, and then they will be these beautiful, eccentric objects, mine to do with what I will. The best part is, I have no particular use for them, no project in mind. I just wanted to honor our old maple, by turning it into a lasting testament to old trees and obligations. A pointless alchemy, really, which so far has cost me $350 for 16 boards, most of that for the truck window. Totally worth it.