

The Real Sawmill

as told by Lee Early, March 2019

On one of the Director's trips back home he let it be known that we were on our way toward getting the Marshalls on a cash economy. The word went out and someone donated a rope driven sawmill. Somehow it made its way across the Pacific to Majuro. What in the hell were we going to do with a sawmill? There were no trees on Majuro. Well, that's not altogether true. There were coconut palms and breadfruit trees. We surely would never cut down a breadfruit tree. Coconut palms? We did see several downed palms resting next to the shore in the lagoon. They were cut down during construction of the air strip. Okay, let's try it.

Now all we needed was a power source for the sawmill. The saw mill had a large toothy cutting saw blade wheel in the center of a sled. The tree was placed on the sled and the rope pulled the tree past the spinning saw blade. There was a platform where the operator stood with levers directing the sled backwards and forwards. What were we going to use as a power source?



Rope driven, circular blade portable sawmill

Strewn around the atoll were rusted out cars. Anything made of metal would rust away quickly in the ocean spray covering the atoll. Even the stop signs – both of them were

made out of concrete. The only parts of the abandoned cars that did not rust were parts covered in oil like the engines. Right! We latched onto a Nissan engine and towed it back to the KITCO parking lot where the sawmill stood. We hooked the Nissan to the power link of the sawmill. Lee operated the engine and Dan operated atop the sawmill. We started the engine. Lee gunned the engine. Dan gave the signal to let out the clutch. With a jerk and a howl the sled raced toward the spinning saw blade. Dan held on for dear life. The sled hit the far stop barrier and kept right on going. Rope, blade and Dan went in all directions.

The power take off to the sawmill required a 60 rpm power source. Our Nissan engine idled at 1,000 rpm. In low gear, gunning the engine raised the Nissan to well over 2,000 rpm. At speeds three times faster than the sawmill would take, it's a wonder some rebellies weren't killed.

Shortly thereafter we found a WW II army truck with a front-end power take off. We repaired the sawmill and hooked up the truck. It worked! After some experimenting, we discovered that the lower third of a coconut palm was hard as stone. The middle third was the grade of yellow pine #2 studs and the top third was decorative and could be used as indoor paneling.

Another loan package was put together. The bank was dubious, putting it mildly. But they love making trips now and then to the islands to get out from their desks on Guam. So, they made the trip to see what all the fuss was about. We had made a four-wheel cart out of coconut palm 4X4's and 2X12's. It was a sturdy cart we could use to haul trees to the saw mill. We showed our banker friends over to the cart and handed one a ball peen hammer. "Hit the cart as hard as you can," we said. He did and the hammer almost bounced out of his hand because the coconut palm was that hard.

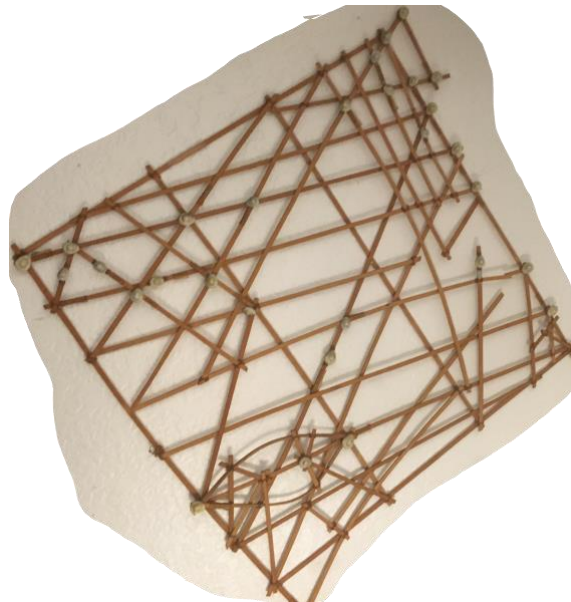
We made picnic tables out of it with the soft wood as a shingle roof. The TASC office was paneled with the soft wood. All the lumber was sold locally.

About this time the first Human Development Project consult was held. Experts in almost all fields flew in. They all went about interviewing the Marshallese and gathered in the late afternoon to debrief. The next morning they received their assignments to go out again.

One of the interviews returned with an interesting story of the Marshalls. There were three "times". The *first time*, the Marshallese navigated the Pacific to populate these atolls and islands.



The Marshallese were ingenious and courageous navigators. Over generations they learned the tides, ocean currents and stars. The stick chart was their navigation tool. It showed the wave action when the ocean collided with an island or atoll. The waves bounced back from the shore – reflection. The waves would also wrap around the islet – refraction. Then, the wave folded back on itself – diffraction. A Marshallese navigator lies on his back on board a ship. He chants X number of times to give him distance. He looks up at the stars to give him direction. He feels the wave action on the hull of the ship to give him location. The stick chart is his tool for location.



The *second time* was the time of foreign rule. The Portuguese, the Germans, the Japanese and now the United States. The third time was the re-claiming of their culture and story. They told stories of how harsh the Japanese rule was. They introduced rice to the menu and killed the fishing culture. They also had a large contingent of troops on Jaluit atoll. Now, hold that thought. I will come back to it later.

A side note - - in 1995, the Marshallese were the first to pull out of the Trust Territory of the Pacific and form their own nation - - The Republic of the Marshall Islands. Amada Kabua, our Baco eating guest became its first President. They were fulfilling their dream of the *Third Time*, reclaiming their culture, identity and self-determination.



Back to the consult. Another team was assigned to focus on agriculture. They explored what was grown on the atoll. Coconut, pandanus, breadfruit and a finger sized, sweet fruit that could pass for bananas. Asked why other crops were not grown and the Marshallese chuckled. There is no soil on a coral atoll, just coral and palm frowns and coconut crabs.

During one of the debriefing sessions, the "Third Time" story came up and someone noticed a contradiction. "There were how many Japanese troops on Jaluit?" There were hundreds. "What did they eat? Well, they ate fish of course and cabbage, radishes, spinach, cucumbers and a host of other vegetables. "Wait a minute – I thought the agriculture group told us the Marshallese said they couldn't grow anything because there was no soil." The Japanese were so brutal that the Marshallese had ripped those terrible memories from their minds and in doing so, forgot they had grown a rather large crop of veggies to feed the troops. We needed a farmer. Soon thereafter Jim and Deborah Durst began the first Marshallese land farm. Jim and Deborah now own and operate the Durst Organic Growers in California. Their produce showed up on grocery shelves here in Seattle. Google it.

More colleagues and volunteers were assigned to the Marshall Islands Human Development Project. We needed housing. Some of us moved into the large ocean side house build for the KITCO manager. It was ten feet from the ocean. The barrier reef stretched out from the shore another 100 yards or so where the ocean waves broke, protecting the shore. The thirty-foot-high wall of ocean spray however was relentless and corrosive. The concrete water catchment tank was remodeled, renovated and reclaimed as Dan's bedroom.

Dan moved into a storage room attached to the ocean side of the water catchment tank. The room was windowless and about 6 x 10 foot, but it was in an upscale neighborhood. The backside of the room abutted the pen for the king's pig and the side facing the ocean was about four feet from the water at high tide. Unless of course it was an exceptionally strong tide at the equinox, and then he could wake up with 3 or 4 inches of water on the floor. Dan went into building mode and built an enclosed bed 5 feet high so he could have a closet under the bed. Then having liberated two pieces of glass, from an undisclosed location, he cut-in two sliding windows.

The night of the move-in Dan slept well until about 1 AM when he woke with one very large rat on his chest nibbling and two nibbling on his toes - all of which had drawn blood. Needless to say Dan spent the rest of the night sleeping on the collegium room table. One of the few times he managed to make collegium on time.

That morning Dan declared war on rats. Going to the health department he got a large bag of poison treated copra. Opening up the wall boards he placed the copra in between all the wall studs and nailed them back in place. Then at the island maintenance shop he got a small piece of plywood and a couple of handfuls of 3/16 inch ball bearings and on to the island hospital where he got strong surgical cord. From these he made a slingshot. That night with his slingshot and 3/16-inch steel balls for ammo he went to war. A week later all rats had moved to nearby houses, but you could hear them talking amongst themselves, "Don't go over there by the King's pig; that guy who lives next door is hell on rats".

There were the rooms above the KITCO store and a row of tin, one room spaces built for KITCO employees. The Earlys moved into one of these one room apartments. The row of cubbies were built out of corroborated tin. The walls were made of tin – one sheet for each wall. The roof was tin – one sheet laid side to side and the floor was concrete. Each cubby was 10'X12'. No kitchen, no bathroom, no lavatory and no toilet. A bucket with a wooden board for a lid was in the corner. When it rained it sounded like a train wreck and the closest bathroom was across the street in the big house. Hence the bucket. The thin tin walls provided little protection from the conversations going on next door. And then there was the "disturbance".

Evidently the cubby Leah and I occupied had not seen an occupant in years. We didn't know it at the time. We cleaned up the space and fixed ourselves a bed. We were tired and climbed into bed. Sound asleep, I was startled awake when something hit me in the face. I slapped it – tossing it back at Leah who was in a state of shock. She slapped it back. I was sitting up now and hit it across the room. The "it" was a large rat. We had

disturbed its nocturnal routine of prowling for food. We had played ping pong with it. We co-habited with the rats and the pigs.