I was born into an Oregon logging family in 1974 and grew up in the middle of one of the biggest battles between environmentalists and natural resource industries in American history: the spotted owl crisis of the 1980s. This book is my attempt to reckon with the dominant event of my childhood: loving the forests while relying on my father harvesting them so we could eat. Empire of Timber is the story of timber workers and the environment created by industrial forestry in the twentieth century. It argues that workers long used their labor organizations to fight for their own environmental needs, be that a healthy and safe working environment, a forest managed for their interests rather than that of their employers, or work for the unemployed.

My family had long toiled in the hard, tiring, and poisonous work of turning the raw materials of the Pacific Northwest into industrial products. Ranching and logging were common jobs on my father’s side, working for the Hanford nuclear site on my mother’s. My father came home every morning from his graveyard shift at a plywood mill covered with industrial glue, his shirts stained purple. Scars crisscross his arms from a lifetime of wood splinters cutting his skin. He worked forty to sixty hours a week in an intense, fast-paced repetitive motion job that eventually necessitated carpal tunnel and rotator cuff surgeries. He worked very hard and when his body finally would not let him go on any longer, in his early sixties, he settled into a deserved retirement.

As relief from the daily toil of his job, when my brother and I were growing up, despite his exhaustion, he took us to the Cascade Mountains whenever he could. We might go fishing for the day at Leaburg Lake or take a drive to Crater Lake National Park or hike in the Three Sisters...
Wilderness Area. We passed innumerable clearcuts on these drives and he would point to timber company signs saying “Next Harvest, 2010” or “Planted 1972” and tell us how the trees were a renewable resource that would come back and keep the next generation working while providing the beauty Oregon was known for. Today, although I live in faraway Rhode Island, I never feel more at home than on a trail in the Cascades or driving across Oregon’s scenic McKenzie Pass. My father instilled that love of the Pacific Northwest forests in me.

But when I first flew in 1994, at the age of twenty, my life changed forever. I was shocked at the horrible damage to the forests I could see from the air. Everything I thought I knew about clearcuts was a lie. They were scars upon the landscape. Maybe the trees would grow back someday but the environmental impact of the timber industry became clear to me for the first time. Moreover, by 1994 the forests no longer even supported families like mine as the short-sighted timber industry prioritized short-term profits over long-term community stability and had laid off thousands of people they no longer needed to process their industrial forests. A transforming timber industry threatened my father’s livelihood as well, through technological automation, overcutting the forests, the export of unprocessed logs to Japan, and an increasingly globalized timber resource.

Despite the complexity of the industry’s changing economics, like thousands of other loggers and mill workers and their families in the 1980s, my father and the rest of my family pointed their fingers for job losses at the Northwest’s growing community of environmentalists. “Save a Logger, Eat an Owl,” “Earth First, We’ll Log the Other Planets Later,” and “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?” became popular bumper stickers in my hometown when I was a teenager.\(^1\) In the 1980s, environmentalists, organizing to hold the timber industry accountable to federal environmental laws enacted in the 1960s and 1970s, identified the northern spotted owl as a species that needed old-growth timber to survive. Its plummeting numbers became evidence that the timber industry not only had plundered the forest, but had also violated federal law in doing so. In particular, the National Forest Management Act of 1976, which required the U.S. Forest Service to maintain “viable populations” of native species, gave greens a new tool.

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to change how the government operated the forests. Environmentalists sued to make it do so. The timber industry then blamed greens for all the job losses, using them as a convenient excuse to avoid responsibility for its culpability in unemployment. Despite industry attempts to paint them as outsiders, in fact local environmental groups made up of Northwestern residents, recent arrivals, or Oregonians for generations, powered much of the opposition to timber industry practices. Environmentalism was as native-born to Oregon as the timber workers.

Rhetoric ran high on both sides of the debate, with environmentalists accusing the timber industry of destroying the forests and loggers like my father pointing to the indifference of many environmentalists regarding the human costs of environmental protection. While some environmentalists certainly did show indifference toward workers’ future, mostly this charge was unfair, although easy for desperate workers to believe. Still, some environmentalists did use harsh rhetoric against the timber industry and its workers. Too typical was Roy Keene’s 1990 *High Country News* article entitled, “Raping the Private Forests.” Keene’s criticism of multinational corporations that abandoned small Oregon towns through unsustainable logging, the environmental impact of clearcutting, and log exports was valid. These issues had potential for building bridges with workers. Yet while the word “rape” may have caught readers’ attention and galvanized people to action, it certainly did not generate understanding with the timber workers struggling to hold onto their jobs.² Rhetoric that the timber industry was “raping” the forest was overly harsh and unnecessarily sexualized, tapping into long-held gendered relationships with nature, but the long-term effects of clearcutting on forests, mountainsides, streambeds, and wildlife did engender an urgency among greens. The last old-growth forests were disappearing fast. Simplifying the timber industry into a monolith without differentiating between workers and owners might have made rhetorical sense, but did not accurately describe how many loggers felt about the forests. People such as my father and the many other timber industry employees I grew up with had complex relationships with the forest, loving the outdoors as much as greens but also having no way to make a living without permanently altering that forest.

² Roy Keene, “Raping the Private Forests,” *High Country News*, November 19, 1990, 13–14. Of course, many publications provide article titles for pieces accepted so I do not know whether it was Keene or *High Country News* staff who suggested this term.
Growing up torn between environmentalism and work, between the conservative logging town of Springfield and the counterculture environmentalism of nearby Eugene, between the extractive and ecotopian Northwest, shaped who I am and stoked my desire to tell a more complete story about the history of the Northwest forests. As a historian who came to graduate school with a strong environmental ethic and with a background in the labor movement, I found myself drawn back to this foundational story of my youth and of Pacific Northwest history. As an environmentalist, I came to understand that the environmental critique of the timber industry was spot on and as a unionist, I felt deeply for the men and women and children like myself and my family who found their lives torn asunder by a timber industry mismanaging the forests.

The history of the forest is one of trees and owls, of timber executives and government foresters. But it is also a history full of human stories, lives crafted cutting down old-growth timber, laboring in remote timber camps, and dying in timber mills’ saws. It is a history of workers acting collectively to demand that industry respect the integrity of their bodies and the long-term health of the forest. Logging transformed the forest into an industrial environment that loggers and mill workers had to negotiate every day to stay alive and employed. They worried about a future without timber. They went hunting and camping and hiking in their free time. They produced forest products and consumed forest leisure. Throughout the twentieth century, they acted collectively to press their interests on all of these issues.

This story places the actions of timber workers and their labor organizations at the center of twentieth-century forest history. The Northwest timber industry began in the mid-nineteenth century and scholars have explored its development in depth, centering around the tensions between the growing industry and the rise of conservationists trying to develop the forests rationally. Compared to the twentieth century, little labor agitation or worker critique of timber industry practices, either in its logging methods or working conditions, marked the period. This changed with the rapid expansion of the timber industry after 1890. By the 1900s,

Northwestern workers began organizing around the increasingly brutal conditions of their work, leading to the rise of the Industrial Workers of the World in the forests beginning in 1907. The labor history of the timber industry has detailed how loggers in the 1910s became radicalized and engaged in widespread strikes. These historians have expressed more interest in the radicalism of workers and the violence used against them by employers than placing them within the larger context of the larger twentieth-century timber industry. The smaller labor history of the New Deal-era timber-worker unions either sees them as a minor part of a larger


organization, in the case of those affiliated with the United Brotherhood of Carpenters (UBC), or focuses on internal radical politics in the case of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA). This has led to large gaps in our understanding of the role timber-worker unions have played in shaping the timber industry through the twentieth century.\(^5\)

If the history of workplace activism remains largely unconnected to the Northwest’s larger environmental debates, the sizable literature on forest policy and environmental debates in the postwar period has mostly relegated workers and their unions to passing references and footnotes. The postwar housing crisis and political pressure to increase the cut led to a vast overharvesting of the national forests after World War II. In the 1950s, wilderness advocates began putting pressure on the government to preserve not only high mountain areas but also valuable stands of old-growth timber from the saw. The Forest Service sought to exclude these forests from preservation and the cut largely continued unabated. By the 1970s, the growing environmental movement began using the courts to enforce environmental legislation such as the Endangered Species Act and National Forest Management Act. This included suing to protect the northern spotted owl, whose habitat requires preserving the last old-growth forests in the region. The growing ecological crisis in the forest, embodied in the spotted owl controversy, began to make national headlines as environmentalists clamored for locking up the remaining old-growth timber and the timber industry proclaimed the doom that would result.\(^6\)

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With few exceptions however, the literature on forest history largely leaves everyday workers out of the discussion. If workers play a role in these histories, they only participate in protests against spotted owl protection without exploring these actions in the context of workers’ historical relationships with the forest and their employers. In contrast, *Empire of Timber* places labor organizations squarely at the center of the environmental history of the Pacific Northwest forests through the twentieth century. Individual loggers had very little power to transform their day-to-day interactions with the forests; employed as an independent contractor or as an employee of a large corporation, the logger’s or millworker’s day meant the production of timber in order to keep his (and increasingly by the 1970s, her) job. However, like laborers throughout the nation, timber workers created or joined labor organizations, whether labor unions or cooperatives, to advance their personal and political goals. They sought an equitable environment that prioritized both shepherding of the timber resource and workplace protection from the dangers of industrial logging. Different union cultures created different reactions to the rise of environmentalism and environmental organizations found common ground with some unions for the mutual benefit of both.

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In examining these issues, this book builds upon the growing literature on work and nature to center the role played by labor unions in shaping workers’ responses to a natural world transformed by industrialization. Labor unions are the most established method of workers channeling discontent toward employers and displaying power on the job. Understanding how labor unions shaped the responses to people knowing nature through labor must be central to the environmental history of work. Examining how unions conceptualized nature to appeal to members or how unions articulated a specific environmental program that shaped resource usage are understudied questions in the environmental history of work. Labor historians have begun exploring these questions, particularly how unions began influencing environmental policy based upon members’ desire for leisure. However, there remains a great deal of room for expanding our understanding of the roles working people have played in environmental debates.

This book focuses on five labor organizations to tell the story of timber workers’ activism over the industrial forests created by the timber

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industry. First, it examines the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW organized Northwest loggers between 1907 and World War I, focusing primarily on the brutal conditions industrial capitalism forced upon timber workers: flea-ridden bedding, adulterated food, unsanitary toilets, untreated disease, death and dismemberment from logging machines. Second, it considers the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen (Four-L), an industry-wide company union created by the U.S. Army in 1918 in order to organize loggers to cut trees for military airplane production. Crafted as a response to the IWW and continued on a voluntary basis until 1937, the Four-L solved most of the sanitation problems that led Wobbly loggers to strike, demonstrating the power of workers to force responses to environmental problems, even outside of unionization. Third, the book explores the International Woodworkers of America in significant detail. Organized in 1937, the Congress of Industrial Organizations-affiliated IWA was the first union to challenge timber-industry forestry policy, going so far as to hire a professional forester to lobby for its agenda of federal regulation over private forestry. The IWA built connections with environmental organizations from the 1930s to the 1980s, supported wilderness areas, and argued for forest protection based upon protecting members’ right to recreate after collectively bargained higher wages and shorter hours gave them the ability to play in the forests. In the 1970s, the IWA used environmental language to reinvigorate its workplace health program, pushing companies and the federal government for a reshaping of the timber workplace environment. However, the IWA was not the only labor union representing timber workers. Fourth, the book examines the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. The UBC opposed the IWA forestry agenda from the 1930s through the 1980s, arguing that real worker representation meant opening more forests to logging. Particularly in the response to Redwood National Park expansion in the 1970s, the Carpenters channeled worker activism in opposing greens as anti-worker outsiders. Finally, the book takes countercultural reforestation workers in the 1970s and 1980s seriously. It details how their experiences with herbicide poisoning shaped their life within the forest, built class consciousness among people who thought of themselves as independent operators in the forest, and created the potential for a new alliance between traditional labor unions and these new forest workers. The IWA, UBC, and reforestation cooperatives all created and adjusted to a radically transforming Pacific Northwest forest economy, one that laid off thousands of workers to increase corporate profits while the
region’s changing demographics meant that many forests had more economic value remaining standing than being logged.

Examining these five organizations helps elucidate three major themes in the historical relationship between work, unions, and the Northwest forests. First, life in the forest placed timber workers on the front line of environmental transformations and they acted to protect themselves from the worst effects of the new timber ecology. Limiting a discussion of loggers’ environmental activism to forest policy would sell short the loggers’ own understanding of the environmental impact of logging, which they also connected to the physical impact upon their bodies. It would also reinforce popular notions of environmentalism as “out there,” not in the workplace, home, and body. Rather, timber workers responded to the “workscape” created by the timber industry by organizing to moderate its impact upon their bodies. Environmental historians have developed a vigorous literature on health and the body in recent years that demonstrates the centrality of understanding landscape and protecting oneself from the impact of industrial hazards for environmental history, a literature to which this book contributes.

In their daily lives in the logging camps, timber workers faced a “slow violence” to their bodies, “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight . . . an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at

10 Thomas Andrews defines the “workscape” as “a place shaped by the interplay of human labor and natural processes,” a concept “that treats people as laboring beings who have changed and been changed by a natural world that remains always under construction.” Andrews, Killing for Coal, 125.