

## Reflections on Disturbance and Early Succession

*Written by Steve Harrington*

I like to dwell on ways that forests and people reflect each other. Processes of change and emergence over time, characteristics like tolerance and resilience, disturbances and responses and the transformations they bring, succession. Conservative conifers with strong apical dominance contrasted with expansive, adventurous broadleaves; mercurial early successional pioneers and steady mid-successional stalwarts. I find it fascinating that humans can become so fixed and narrow, shortsighted, in their thinking and beliefs – how small they can allow their niche to become. It's hard for us to embrace the breadth of time over which transformation takes place. We don't like disturbance, we're often uncomfortable with change. How often we try and seize on where we've come from instead of where we're going to, or conversely forget where we've come from in the haste to chase something new. Guild members often struck me as refreshingly farsighted, forward and back.

The story is important and, looking back, it seems a lightning strike of genius, a brilliant sort of disturbance, to have initiated the Guild with a circle of personal stories that cut through any politics or professional posturing to a fundamental feeling. Like the sort of underground connection we are becoming aware of among forest trees. A resonance. Some called it passion. They were all fools for the forest - but they were anything but fools in the forest. Rather, there was a sense of wonder and respect, not only for the forest and its complexity, but also for the qualities of wisdom, experience and open-mindedness.

One of my favorite Guild memories is standing among huge Douglas firs in the Zena Timber forest in Oregon with Sarah Deumling and the forest's German owner, Hermann Hatzfeld and his silvicultural brain trust. After the long-term vision for the forest was presented – with a very diverse age structure, very large target diameters, marginal extraction impacts and so on – a couple of state forestry attendees questioned, somewhat scoffingly, the wisdom of the approach. Hermann reflected, without a trace of sarcasm, that after his family's 500 years of experimentation on their lands in Germany they felt they were achieving some degree of confidence in their efforts.

I am forever grateful to have been part of the early disturbance from which the Guild emerged - to Henry Carey, orchestrator of that initial lightning strike, and all those who helped ignite that early fire. You know who you are (and you know I know who you are!). We fixed some nitrogen, scarified a little soil, nurtured the microsites. Some of those early successional ones still loom large like venerable canopy emergent pines. Others of us, like red cedar or fire cherry, got to be part of the early magic and then gradually became part of the soil once again.

Current understanding holds that the human brain achieves maturity at around 25 years, so it's interesting to consider the Guild at this age and reflect on what – and who – went into it over time, appreciate where it is, and imagine where it may go. One of my hopes, something I like to envision, is the Guild someday succeeding in helping an increasingly disconnected mass of humans find their way back to a personal connection with the forest and chase the grail that is, to paraphrase Ross Morgan, to “get what we need from the forest while letting the forest continue to be a forest.” When they do that, they are going to have that sparkling I always loved to witness in the eyes of Richard Hart.