

Community Profiles

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Koert Dieterman part of Nakusp's forestry legacy

by Claire Paradis
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Local logger Koert Dieterman has witnessed enormous changes in Nakusp and to the logging industry during his time living and working in the area.



Koert Dieterman thinks this time, the second time around, retirement might stick. The first time, an invitation in 2014 from Nakusp Community Forest's (NACFOR) Hugh Watt drew him back into forestry, work he has been doing most of his life.

Koert Dieterman started life in Nieuwa pekela, Gronnigen, in the Netherlands. When he was about 3 or 4 years old, the Dietermans sailed to Halifax and then took a train across to Sylvan Lake, Alberta, where Koert's dad cut ice for ice boxes.

"Everybody was friendly, helped each other," Koert recalled, "everybody left their keys in their car back then."

Chasing work as a baker, Koert's dad, Koert Senior, moved the family to Coronation, AB but the climate was hard on the Dietermans.

"It was hell, the winters were brutal, drought in the summer. Mom couldn't take it," said Koert.

An ad for a bakery that was for sale in Nakusp changed everything: Koert's dad bought the local bakery from Percy Williams and the Dietermans moved here one year after the Minto had stopped running. Although Koert made donuts on weekend and delivered to the 3 or 4 grocery stores, his dad never wanted his son to work as a baker, saying it was a thankless job.

Nakusp was the place to grow up, according to Koert: fishing, biking, and swimming with the friends he made in Grade 2 (and has kept ever since) filled his summers.

Back then, you could hardly walk on the sidewalk it was so busy during the 5 o'clock shift change at the mills, he remembers. When Koert moved here, Nakusp could only be reached by ferry and train, and no one went out of town to shop.

Over the past 60+ years, he has witnessed foundational changes to the area: the flooding of the valley for the dam projects along the Columbia, highways installed, and forestry jobs coming and going. In the summer of Grade 8 Koert had a small part in the historic High Arrow hydro project, clearing the land to prepare the valley for flooding. Back then, making \$3 an hour working ten-hour days was nothing to sneeze at.

He looked up to hard-working contractors who made good money, like Johnny Walker, and when he was 17 or 18, Koert signed up for the faller training program offered by Westar. Once he was trained up, he worked as a faller for about 10 years for Westar.

Things were a little different back in those days when roads didn't reach deep into the forests. Koert recalls a foreman waving in the direction of a piece of blue ribbon and telling him to fall all the trees behind it. When the foreman returned a few days later, he told Koert "I meant the trees on the other side of the ribbon." "So we moved the ribbon. It was simple in those days," said Koert, laughing.

Koert also did a stint shake blocking in his 30s, and he remembers getting a helping hand to support his young family from Johnny Walker who kept him in cedar, and therefore work, through the winter.

Dieterman said the industry really took off in Nakusp, and shake mills like Dick Jones' kept men employed in the area for quite a while.

The 2008 closure of Pope & Talbot was a defining moment for both Nakusp and Koert. When Pope and Talbot went under, many people moved to Alberta for work in the oil fields, changed professions.

Logging jobs have come and gone, but the biggest change Koert has seen in the forestry industry over the years is the increase in mechanization - three guys can now do the job 10 guys used to do; equipment has made all the difference. Once he bought his own skidder, he set up his own business "sanitizing" roads – taking danger trees and blow downs – at first. As he acquired more equipment, Dieterman was able to take out the blow-down and fire-killed wood on unfinished blocks that was easily taken care of by a small contractor.

Taking the wood and selling it to Kalesnikoff and Hamill Creek and other interior operations turned out to be very lucrative.

"I was driven, I would go out driving for days looking. It was my wood," said Koert, who teamed up with Pat McCrory in 2010 and worked on one of the first NACFOR blocks. After that, the pair worked on private contracts and salvage. Being an independent logging contractor was more complicated, said Dieterman, with all the marketing and paperwork in addition to the work out in the field, but it was worth it.

“We had a lot of laughs; we knew our jobs well. Hard work pays off. It was fun.”

When McCrory moved to the Coast to log, Koert decided to retire (he was 65), but that didn't last long. One day while out getting firewood on a block Hugh Watt asked him if he'd consider working for NACFOR again. It didn't seem like a bad idea: Koert wasn't quite ready to quit back then. He had collected all the equipment a contractor would need, and his son Gabriel was healed up from an operation and facing uncertain employment.

Koert enjoyed working as a contractor for NACFOR and having the chance to work with his son, Gabriel. “It was great, they're a good bunch at NACFOR. They're very progressive about community projects and employment,” noted Koert who appreciates programs like their firewood project as well as their attitude toward managing forests for the future.

“They're good stewards of the forest, they do what needs to be done,” said Koert, who is very aware that good quality environmental studies cost money and that NACFOR has made them a priority. “NACFOR plays a special role in how the community has changed. They've created ski trails, promoted being fire smart, supplied lumber for local projects. And they filled a big gap in the community by setting up a weigh scale for pulp wood instead of shipping it out to be chipped before sending it to Celgar.”



If this second go at retirement takes hold, Koert hopes to get out on his ATV exploring the natural beauty to be found through all the nooks and crannies on the western half of the continent.

Here's Koert with his son Gabriel in 2019 at NACFOR's Wensley operating area.

