

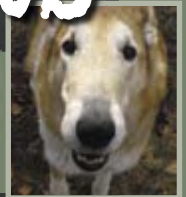


# Cell Phones & Sap Buckets

Six Years on Sapsucker Ridge

by Neil Campbell . . .

*Illustrations by Charlie Teljeur*



# Foreword

In this first week of May, 2010, I stop my truck beside a roadside beaver pond filled almost to overflowing, its water lapping at the edge of my only way into town.

Painted turtles bask on a floating log. A mallard drake and his wife float nearby. Partridges drum in the distance. A fresh green world opens up all around us.

In the pond, beavers busy themselves with topping up the dam that threatens my road. Back and forth they swim, pushing branches or carrying handfuls of mud.

They will drown the whole world if we let them. Another good rain, and the road will be awash. Another good rain, and a dozer or a backhoe will show up and the dam and most of the water will be gone. The beavers will have to start over.

It happens every spring at that bend in my road: the dam, the turtles, the ducks, the drumming, the greenery, the dozer, part of the cycle of my years.

It is in this month that my year begins, not as a winter celebration of some pagan bachanal imported from Europe. Nature yawns and stretches in a Haliburton County April, but May is when the year gets down to business.

It is a month when new life begins, even new life like the first of the

series of newspaper columns in this book. So it is that my recollections of my life on Sapsucker Ridge begin not in January, but in May.

The first column I wrote for the weekly Minden Times in May, 2004, is also the first in this book, a story of an encounter between my great pal The Brown Dog Jiggs and a snappish snapping turtle.

That column, and the 300 and more that came after it, have been labours of love. After 40 years of making a living from newspapers, I am writing for the sheer pleasure of it. In a sense, that's what motivates most journalists; you write for fun and get paid for the aggravation.

My 40 years began in an era of typewriters and headlines set by hand. It included stops at newspapers in Richmond Hill, Oakville, Owen Sound, Edmonton, and The Canadian Press news agency, and finished with 26 years at The Globe and Mail.

The columns in this book are a narrative of my retirement years on Sapsucker Ridge, which I named for a woodpecker called the yellow-bellied sapsucker. The bird's name tickles my sense of humour.

To get to Sapsucker Ridge, you drive directly to the middle of nowhere and, once you get there, you just keep on going.

From the air, Haliburton County appears almost more liquid than solid, its landscape dotted with rocks and with the creeks, ponds and lakes that hold the water its shallow soils can't absorb.

Once its people scraped out a living from the land, from logging, trapping, hunting, perhaps from a few hens and a couple of milk cows in the barn.

Just when time ran out on that old, hard-scrabble existence, the spillover from neighbouring Muskoka turned Haliburton into an anteroom of Cottage Country. The place where I live is about a hundred miles north and east of the Toronto jobs that pay for those cottages. Miss a turn and you might wind up in Algonquin Park.

Sapsucker Ridge sits on the southern edge of the Canadian Shield. The valley of the Gull River, just south of my 50 acres, is said to have been the bed of a prehistoric lake. The river may be the place where the Shield begins.

That's my setting. My central character is The Brown Dog Jiggs, who will be eight years old on June 1, 2010. He was only Jiggs until I started writing about him and then I greased the prose by adding The Brown Dog to his moniker.

What Jiggs likes most is people, which is a good thing for me, because I like him. He aims to please.

Everything that follows started out as newspaper columns, but the originals have been modified to suit this book.

In some cases, they may have been updated to reflect new facts I have learned, but no attempt has been made to correct the ages and circumstances of the people and places I describe.

Or animals, for that matter. Jiggs may be four years old in one column and six in another because that was how old he was when it was written. In this book, and in memory, he will be both ages forever.

# October

## A graveyard for trees

The old woodshed sitting just where Jehoshaphat Hill begins its descent to Horned Grebe Lake somehow manages to lean in all four directions at once without ever falling down.

The boards that sheath its walls have been weathered and moss-covered for longer than the memory of any man living; its roof is covered with bits and pieces of roll roofing in assorted colours and sheet metal rescued from the dump that together somehow keep out the rain.

A two-man crosscut saw barely held together by rust leans against the north wall, bowered by thistles; and a buzz saw squats abandoned by the driveway.

It is a picture of decay, of a Haliburton that time forgot, but it still is part of the economy of the old white farmhouse that sits beside it.

Each fall the folks who live on that hill deposit firewood in it until it is full to bursting, and then they make daily withdrawals all winter long to keep themselves warm.

When The Brown Dog Jiggs pays a summer visit with his master, he lets the humans go into the house while he heads to the old shed to hunt mice.

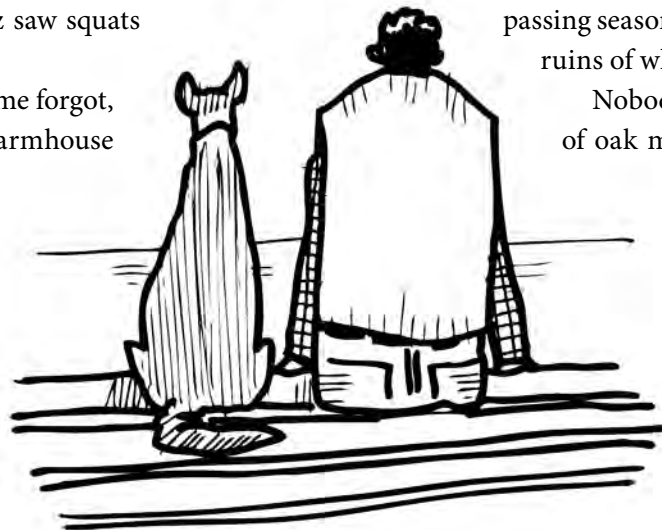
On hot summer days, the slatternly old building is redolent with the smell of them. The mice have a kind of condominium in the single row of dry oak piled along the back wall; red squirrels scurry among the rafters.

That pile of oak must be only a few weeks younger than the building in which it sits. The man who put up the woodshed started filling it with fuel as soon as it was built and the back row has been there ever since.

It has been sitting there so long, getting drier with each passing season, sitting there since just after time began in the ruins of what used to be Haliburton farm country.

Nobody will ever know for sure but those old pieces of oak might be the oldest human artifacts left in the neighbourhood, other than the spear points the man who built the woodshed kept turning up when he still had fields to plough.

Of course, there is no woodshed on Jehoshaphat Hill. Or no Jehoshaphat Hill, for that matter. And Horned Grebe Lake exists only in my imagination.



But here and there in Haliburton County there must be woodpiles almost as old as the imaginary one on Jehoshaphat Hill; stacks of hard maple or yellow birch that are all that are left of the lives of men whose grandsons are old men now.

There are old farmsteads where now there are no farms, where families still put up wood each fall and are indifferent to the price of heating oil.

The row of ancient firewood along the back wall is a lesson in mathematics, in thrift, in the value of being provident, in earning more than you spend.

It all began in the first year of life of that woodshed. Its builder calculated that it would take, say, 20 face cords to keep him warm all winter and then played it safe by putting up 25. The extra wood could always burn another year, and no use running out in March.

And, of course, he had planned so well that he never got to the wood piled along that back wall. When he refilled his shed that fall, the old wood would still be sitting at the back, and so it has sat for all of the refills since.

You think of the continuity of lives lived outside the marketplace when you put up your wood each fall, or at least I do; of the comfort of providing for yourself.

The Brown Dog Jiggs and I work away together. This fall has been spent on a stand dominated by red maple. Jiggs will lie watching for a while and then get up and chew on a sapling for a while, helping with the harvest.

Red maple doesn't come close to being as good a fuel as the sugar maples that dominate my 50 acres, but the red maples will keep me warm and it is their time to be cut.

We work away on October afternoons, Jiggs and I, working on days it is supposed to rain and doesn't, looking up at layered clouds racing through blue skies, listening to neighbours felling other trees, building sheds and hauling gravel on all sides of us, to dogs barking in the distance.

We drop trees with a chainsaw and with trepidation in an area so crowded with undersized junk trees that hang-ups are routine, then

buck them to firewood length and split them on the spot, and haul the chunks home behind an ancient ATV.

For two years they will season outdoors and then they come indoors into a woodshed than is considerably younger than the imaginary one on Jehoshaphat Hill.

In my woodshed, the back row has been there for 20 years, will be there forever, I hope.

2005



By now I must have murdered four hundred trees and more on Sapsucker Ridge, and all that is left of them is a small mountain of wood ashes just down the hill from my cabin.

The heap, which has been building since I built my first, one-room shack wouldn't even fill the trunk of your Oldsmobile. It is all I have to show for all the trees cut down, often in the prime of life, and now what is left of them all looks the same.

Beech trees and ash trees, maples soft and hard, birches white and yellow, ironwoods and basswoods, all turned into a soft gray powder, leaching in the November rain.

The pile was handy to the first cabin and somehow, somewhere along the way, it became a memorial to all of those downed trees; the carrying of the ash bucket down the hill a ceremonial ritual.

Hundreds of hours of labour sit there, long days of bucking and splitting, carrying and hauling, piling and piling again, all diminished to this mere trace of what it once was.

If all that went into that ash pile could somehow be reconstituted, the front few acres of Sapsucker Ridge would be chin deep in tangled trunks and branches.

In moments of weakness, The Brown Dog and I feel all warm and fuzzy and much too pleased with ourselves for drawing on our own resources to keep our winters warm.

But that is all delusion, and not just because it takes the tools and fuels of an industrial economy for us to turn standing maple into firewood. We are not much more independent or self-sufficient than the household whose heat arrives in a tanker truck.

In a consumer society, ours is the ultimate act of consumption; the manufacturing of a product whose sole end use is its destruction. It waits, first in an outside woodpile and then in the woodshed, to be vaporized in slow motion.

There might be a century of living in that chunk we feed into the wood heater. If it is an outside piece, the ragtag skin of the yellow birch or the smooth surface of the beech are its pedigree.

Sometimes, but not nearly often enough, I weigh a chunk of maple in my hand and recognize it, see a reminder of just what tree it came from, even more rarely the reason for its death sentence or some detail of its harvest.

It is a life that I took that I now send up in smoke. The Brown Dog and I come in from a brisk morning to a warmth that wraps itself around us, a warmth that seems more like an object than a condition.

And yet something had to die so that we could live through winter. There is no alternative to heat in a cold climate, its source a matter of choices that are both moral and economic.

On Sapsucker Ridge, our moral choice is wood. Another tree grows in place of the one we killed; young trees released from the shade of a downed giant flourish in its place.

We are latecomers to a cycle of life and death that has been going on since time before memory, since before the first human laid eyes on Sapsucker Ridge, since before there were humans

We kill that we may live. We kill as surely as the hunter kills, and the world goes on.

Trees are temporary. The forest endures.

2009



But for the sound of gunfire off in the distance, this early October evening would be as perfectly quiet as a photograph.

The Brown Dog Jiggs and I are on a neighbour's dock on the south side of Nine-Acre Pond. The only movement is the ripple over an underwater spring that feeds it.

To our north across the pond are two horizons of hardwoods all dressed up for autumn, the second of them the pond's mirror image of the first.

Dazzling maples reach vertically into the air and horizontally over the pond's surface, the reflection a perfect duplicate of the real thing.

The guns of October are silent now and somewhere, perhaps way up on Bobcaygeon Road, a dog barks. Replies come from all around us; there is a stirring in the air. Jiggs barks and an echo barks back and that goes on for a while, and then it is still again.

After a soggy September, this is a rare good evening before the splendour that will be the Thanksgiving weekend. The air is tepid and a gray cloud hangs low in the northwest sky, shrouding the sunset.

A jet too high in the western sky to be heard pulls a vapour trail behind it, so far away that it, too, seems motionless and we turn away at a duck's soft quack.

When we turn back, the plane that seemed to be still has crossed the cloud and climbed off to the east.

It is as though its vapour trail has hooked the tab on an aerial zipper, parting a seam in the cloud. The sunset bursts through the opening, painting a thin, bold, yellow line across the gray.

The stripe stands out against the cloud, too exact for any human hand, the best thing of all in these best days of the year, better even than the full moon that arrives just in time for the holiday.

Falling leaves strip the treetops bare, opening up the night sky on Sapsucker Ridge. On a clear night, The Brown Dog and I are drenched in moonshine and we walk the woods roads without a flashlight. The Brown Dog lifts his muzzle, plucking scents from the air, lips wrinkling as he drinks them in, and then he is off in a noisy crinkling of dry leaves, the fallen foliage sounding an early alarm for whatever he is chasing.

There is a frantic woof and then more woofs mark his progress,

then silence and in a moment more crinkling nearby and something pants beside me. Jiggs grins up at me and his teeth gleam white in the moonlight.

On another night in Owen Sound, Jiggs keeps watch over the four humans watching a baseball game on television. He seems oblivious, stretched out on his side, eyes closed, paws twitching in a dream.

But he keeps moving himself like a pawn on a chessboard. Somebody changes chairs, goes to the kitchen, answers a phone, or takes a bathroom break, and The Brown Dog rises, studies them carefully, and then flops down in a new place that fits his sense of order.

Looking through an Owen Sound window between innings, we see a moon that fills the night sky. When our eyes go back to the television, the camera in St. Louis is looking at our moon, too.

The great orb seems to be textured, blackened here and there with the shadows of distant valleys and ridges. We are looking at topography; the man in the moon has gone out for the evening.

It is the best thing about that baseball game. The moon looks about the same in St. Louis and Owen Sound – the same, I imagine, as it did that night from a canoe in a Haliburton lake, the same as it looked to millions more of us, the same moon for everybody.

We are moonstruck.

2006



Time was, as I remember, it was said that new Canadians came ashore expecting streets paved with gold, simply there for the taking.

They might have found them last weekend on Sapsucker Ridge, sunlit woods roads not so much paved as layered with gold, simply there for the raking.

Gold not for trinkets or Wall Street bandits, gold botanical not mineral, gold to crunch through, gold to amplify every chipmunk scamper, gold of death and rebirth, gold of fallen leaves.

It is a commonplace that golden brown is the true colour of our Haliburton leaves; our green hills of summer a masquerade, a chlorophyll curtain to be pulled back when summer's work is done.

Trees are corporations, leaves their factories and roots and trunks their warehouses. Red anti-freeze keeps the factories alive while head office sucks out the last of their energy and then casts them aside like last year's frocks.

Maple and ash, beech and birch, basswood and cherry, hunker down in October only to be born again in April.

There was little need for anti-freeze when the first hard cold showed up so late for our autumn party, few brush strokes of scarlet on the horizon before wind shrugs stripped branches bare in great wooshing clumps.

Now the trees of Sapsucker Ridge are garbed in tattered rags, if they are garbed at all: sartorial hangers-on. The wind sighs its regrets and leaves blizzard down outside our windows.

Rain stops and sun comes out and even a curmudgeon's heart soars a dozen times on the swoops and curves of the road to Haliburton through hills of bronze and gold marching in ranks off into infinity.

A pond mirrors a resort so perfectly it is as though two extra storeys have been added to its bottom. Upside-down forests rim the ponds of Sapsucker Ridge.

The Brown Dog Jiggs barks at the reflections and then barks again at his own echo and sound bounces back and forth across the water. Reflections of sound and echoes of colours. I can see my breath in the air. Geese on a sleepover gabble over morning travel plans and ducks quack softly at twilight. Muffled gunshots sound in the daytime distance and the evening air is filled with dog barks and owl queries.

It is time for a long underwear inventory, for adding a sweater layer under a mackinaw, for tossing gloves for The Brown Dog to chase and capture and then shake to death. Jiggs leaps to snatch a mitt held at hand level and races off with it.

Now a stand of weeds separates the dog and me, a screen of weed stalks breaking his sunlit coat into moving bands of brown and white. The racket of crunching leaves fills the stillness.

The crunch beneath my feet near a woods road puddle is felt, not heard. Ooze turns solid and ice crystals show up like tiny white jewels against the black mud.

Morning light spreads cracks in the glaze of ice drawn over the puddle in the night. The softest toe tap shatters it. When breaking it takes a heel stomp, it will be November.

A broad lawn is two-toned in the stark light of early morning: green in the sunshine, frosted gray in the shade. Ironweed stands mauve and resolute against the cold as mist rises off a lake.

2009



The Brown Dog Jiggs and I have been so busy with committee meetings it is a miracle we had time to write this column at all.

It all started innocently enough when a young buck stopped chasing Jiggs long enough to ask him to serve on the board of directors of a nursing home the deer are building on the first ridge south of Nine-Acre Pond.

When a partridge Jiggs flushed asked him to become a trustee of the Ruffed Grouse Welfare Fund, he declined and suggested I might be willing to serve.

Now every species with a cause is trying to enlist our help and it's wearing us out. Just last week we were up late every night as official observers at the Pine Marten-Flying Squirrel Joint Task Force On Rules of Engagement.

The reality for animals on Sapsucker Ridge is that there are no nursing homes or welfare funds or rules of engagement, but you'd think there were, the way some people carry on about hunting.

There are city neighbourhoods where a man would be better off confessing to being an arsonist or a journalist than letting himself be seen in hunter orange.

Just about everybody has an opinion on hunting.

The majority position is taken by those who let somebody else do the killing for them.

They feel morally superior even though the meat they eat may come from a creature that lived a wretched life in a warehouse for animals and then died a bewildering death on a killing floor right out of Dante's Inferno.

Not all domestic livestock endures that brutal a life and death, but that's not for want of trying by the so-called market forces. We're talking modern industrial agriculture here, not farming, but that's an argument for another day.

The minority position belongs to those who do their own killing.

They are made to feel morally inferior even though the meat they bring home to their families comes from a creature that lived its life wild and free and then died abruptly in the time it takes to pull a trigger.

This is not to romanticize hunters, who have their share of rascals among them. Not all hunters shoot well enough for a quick, clean kill and some of them care not a whit for the law or the rules of the chase.

But most of them try to do things the right way and should not have to apologize to a world of feedlots and hog factories, of antibiotics and genetic manipulation.

Of all the creatures on the Ridge, only Jiggs and I have a reasonable chance of dying of old age. There are no retirement homes for raccoons.

The Brown Dog and I wince at the sound of gunfire and we'd rather keep death at a distance, but we know that reaction is a form of denial, a failure to respect the natural order of things.

The natural order of things is that we humans are predators. Most of us are meat-eaters, which means that some lives must end for ours to continue; we are not so different from wolves and hawks and five-lined skinks in that respect.

The anti-hunters will call themselves environmentalists when what they really are is squeamish. They will argue that killing dehumanizes the hunter when what it really does is reaffirm his place in the chain of life.

Death is part of that chain, whether it is brought about by a bullet or in the ordinary way of death in the Haliburton woods. Individuals die so that species can live on.

The ordinary way of death on Sapsucker Ridge is lingering starvation and the disease that starvation brings on. The lucky ones will be eaten, the luckiest of all killed before the eating begins.

A deer shot on the old Stamp farm just across the road from us will make room for some other deer to live through the winter at the same time as it puts healthy meat in a family's freezer.

There should be exactly as many deer alive in Anson Township next spring as if there had been no hunting at all. Given half a chance, nature will always find a balance.

2004





THE AUTHOR - *Neil Campbell*

While this book was being edited, The Brown Dog Jiggs and Neil celebrated with champagne and liver treats when one of them was declared Ontario's best weekly newspaper columnist.

Neil retired to the Haliburton woods near Minden, Ont., northeast of Toronto, after a 40-year newspaper career, capped by 26 years with The Globe and Mail.

He found a new life with Jiggs on Sapsucker Ridge, where he makes maple syrup, cuts his own firewood and works to preserve the Haliburton landscape as a member of the Land Trust.

When the Minden Times gave him a chance to write anything he wanted about any subject that interested him, he chose to write mostly about himself and his life in the woods. This book is the result.

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THE ILLUSTRATOR - *Charlie Teljeur*

Charlie Teljeur has a degree in classical animation from Sheridan College and his visual material has been featured in such places as The Hockey News, CBC Sports Online and Sun Media.

He is also a writer whose work has appeared in Urban Male Magazine, Canadian Living, The Toronto Sun Spring Golf Guide and The Writer Magazine.

Despite having lived most of his life in smalltown Haliburton, Charlie still insists on pronouncing his G's. He shares accommodation, food and the occasional movie (her choice) with his insatiable 11-year old dog Toto.



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