

Timber Town

A short story of historical fiction
about the Northern Spotted Owl controversy

by Susan Frederick

1988

It was Sunday afternoon in late September. Ian Asher and his friends Ruby Reynolds and twins Molly and Jake O'Bannon were hiking in the woods near their homes in West Fork, Washington, a small logging town located in the foothills of Mount Rainier. They planned to build a footbridge over a small stream that ran from the Nisqually River to West Fork Lake. Jake and Molly brought a hammer and nails, Ruby had a hatchet, and Ian carried a saw. They wouldn't cut any trees, though. Instead, they'd use blow down.

Ian turned the brim of his Chicago Bulls cap to the back of his head. "I bet you guys don't know what Jordan's scoring average per game is, do you?" he said, always happy to share fun facts about his hero, Michael Jordan.

"No, but I'm sure you'd be glad to share that information with us," Molly O'Bannon said, her voice cheerful. "Even though we're not quite as obsessed with Jordan as you are."

"Well, for your information, his scoring average is 30.1 per game, guys! He's only the most amazing ball player ever. I mean, he's a legend."

"Yeah, yeah, we know ... we know," his friends muttered good-naturedly.

Ruby's dog Rags led the way. Suddenly, he ran off the trail, stopped and began barking at something on the ground.



Photo from Wikimedia Commons

“Rags, get back here!” Ruby said, standing on the path with her hands on her hips. “Right now!” When Rags didn’t obey, the kids picked their way through the underbrush to where he was. On the ground, a baby owl stood in the dirt hissing, his dark eyes wide open and his wings flapping. Rags kept his distance.

“Hey, it’s an owl,” Ian said. “Lucky Rags didn’t try to eat it! I think the owl might have won the fight!”

“Rags would never do that,” Ruby said, her voice firm. “He’s a good boy, aren’t you, Ragsy?” she said, leaning down to pat her dog’s back.

“It’s so cute! Like a little stuffed animal!” Molly said.

“Looks like it might have fallen from that nest,” Jake said, looking up into the tree. “Maybe we should try to put it back.”

“I don’t think so,” Ruby said. “I just read about this somewhere. Baby owls are resilient. They can usually climb up trees when they fall out of their nests. I say we leave him where he is.”

“Okay,” Jake said. “But let’s tell Miss Fiskal tomorrow. She’ll love this!” Everyone agreed that they’d share their discovery with their fourth-grade science teacher. They continued down the path to the stream, collecting pieces of wood as they walked. Then they got busy building the footbridge. On their way back up, they checked to see if the owl was still there. There was no sign of it.

“I guess Ruby was right,” Jake said. “It must have figured out how to get back to its nest.”

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“Welcome, scientists!” Miss Fiskal said as students wandered into the room, talking and laughing. Miss Fiskal was everyone’s favorite teacher. She was perched on a stool at the front of the room, wearing her favorite long purple cardigan, a sharpened #2 pencil poking through her messy bun as usual. “How was everyone’s weekend?” she said as everyone settled into their desks. “Anything amazing happen?” A few hands shot up. She looked around the room.

“Ruby?”



Photo by Eric Harlow

“Okay, well we were in the woods yesterday and we found this little owl and . . .” But before she could continue, Jake interrupted.

“Yeah, Miss Fiskal! Molly and Ian were with us. This little owl had fallen out of its nest. Molly said we should leave it there.”

“Good call,” Miss Fiskal said, nodding and looking around the classroom. “It was probably a Northern Spotted Owl. Scientists, what do we know about owls?” Several hands shot up. “Ian?”

“They’re nocturnal.”

“Correct!” Miss Fiskal said. “Anyone else? Cynthia?”

Cynthia sat near the big bookcase at the back of the room. Reaching over, she grabbed the “O” Encyclopedia and turned to the Owl page. “They live in mature forests with dense canopies,” she read aloud.

“Very good!” Miss Fiskal said. “What else does it say?”

“Owls are not good nest builders. They either use vacant ones they find or use cavities found in trees.”

“No wonder he fell out,” Ruby said. Her friends nodded in agreement.

Miss Fiskal looked around the room. “I’m thinking it might be fun to study the Northern Spotted Owl. What does everyone think? Show of hands!” The class loved that Miss Fiskal often asked their opinion about subjects to study. Lots of hands went up.

“Great, we’ll get started tomorrow!” Miss Fiskal said.

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“Ian, no dribbling in the living room!” Ian Asher’s mom yelled from the kitchen. “You’re going to break something!”

“Okay mom, but have I ever broken anything?” At the stove, his mother shook her head.



Photo from Sparkman-Walters Family

“Just please put your basketball away and tell your dad it’s suppertime.”

Ian’s sister Gwen rolled her eyes as she set the table. She was a senior at West Fork High. She thought Ian’s obsession with basketball was ridiculous.

After everyone was seated around the table, Ian's dad said, "I talked to Miss Fiskal today. She mentioned that your science class is going to study the Spotted Owl." Mr. Asher was the principal at West Fork Elementary.

"I know, right? It's awesome," Ian said, taking a bite of macaroni and cheese, his favorite.

"Sounds interesting," Ian's dad said. "But it's not a subject that's going to go over very well with some of the parents."

"Why not?" Ian asked.

"Well, many of them are loggers, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering listing the Northern Spotted Owl as a threatened species. If that happens, logging could shut down in small towns like West Fork. That would mean that many of the men in town might be out of a job."

"Can't they just get a different job?" Ian asked.

"Most of them have been loggers all their lives. They don't know how to do anything else."

"But it's still important to study about it, right?" Ian asked.

"Yes, it is," Mr. Asher said. "It's very important to look at all sides of a subject."

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"Molly, time to set the table," Molly's dad called. Reluctantly, Molly turned off Full House, her favorite TV show, and walked to the kitchen. Her dad was at the stove, humming quietly as he flipped pancakes and poked sizzling bacon with a large fork. Molly's twin brother Jake wandered into the kitchen to help.

"Breakfast for dinner, dad? Smells great!" It was Jake's favorite meal. When the three of them were seated at the table, Molly said, "Guess what we found in the woods yesterday, dad? A baby owl!"

"Actually, Ruby's dog Rags found it," Jake said, stuffing half a pancake into his mouth.

"Hey Jake, smaller bites, okay?" their dad said, smiling. "You found an owl, huh? What'd you do with it?"

"We left it where it was," Molly said.

"It's not the logger's favorite animal," Mr. O'Bannon said. He was the Head Ranger at West Fork Ranger Station.

“Why don’t the loggers like it, dad?” Jake asked.

“There’s lots of talk about making the Northern Spotted Owl a threatened species,” their dad said. “That could have a big impact on small towns like West Fork that rely on logging as its main industry.”

“Like what kind of impact?” Molly asked.

“Well, if the loggers in West Fork lose their jobs, families would move out. Just like forests, towns are ecosystems. When something happens to upset a town’s ecosystem, it affects everyone.”

“Dad, what would happen to your job at the Ranger Station?” Molly asked, looking worried.

“Let’s not worry about that tonight, honey,” their dad answered. “Let’s get these dishes washed instead.”

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It was dinnertime at Ruby Reynolds’ house, too.

“Ruby, please call Dad and Grandpa to supper,” her mother called from the kitchen.

Once everyone was seated around the table, Ruby said, “Guess what we’re going to be studying in Miss Fiskal’s science class?”

“Can’t guess,” Grandpa said, smiling at her. “But I’ll bet you’re going to tell us!” Grandpa was proud, as always, that Ruby was such a good student.

“Yesterday, Ian, Molly, Jack and I were in the woods. We found a baby owl that had fallen out of its nest, or whatever they live in. When we told Miss Fiskal about it, she said it was probably a Northern Spotted Owl. So our class decided to study it.” When no one said anything, she looked around the table and realized that no one was smiling. “Did I say something wrong?” she asked.

“Those spotted owls,” her dad said, his voice sounding angry. “They’re going to shut down the woods. Put everybody out of work.” He jabbed his fork into his meatloaf. “They’re not endangered. They’re a danger to our jobs.”



Photo from Sparkman-Walters Family

Ruby's dad was a logger. Every morning she could hear him clomping across the back porch in his cork boots, heading to his job in the woods. Ruby's grandpa had also been a logger. It was a family tradition.

"I don't want you to get involved in that stuff, Ruby. It's nonsense."

"But dad, I have to! It's an assignment!" Ruby said, trying hard not to cry.

"Mary," he said, looking at Ruby's mom. "Would you call the school tomorrow? Tell Dave Asher to put a halt to this. It'll just stir up trouble in town."

"I'll call," Mrs. Reynolds said. "But I'm not sure how much good it will do."

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The next day in school, Ruby walked to Miss Fiskal's desk, her face looking serious.

"Miss Fiskal," she began, "My dad doesn't want us to study about the Spotted Owl. He says that it's not endangered at all, and that because of it, people will lose their jobs." She looked like she might cry. Miss Fiskal stood up and put her arm around Ruby.

"I know, it's very controversial." She turned toward the students. "Listen up, class. Ruby just mentioned that her dad isn't excited about us studying the Northern Spotted Owl. Who else has had a conversation about this at home?" Several hands went up. Some kids looked worried.

"Okay, so here's what I'm thinking," Miss Fiskal went on. "In logging towns like West Fork, there's lots of talk about the Northern Spotted Owl. Some people believe it's ruining the timber industry because it might be declared a 'threatened species.' On the other hand, there are people who believe that society has an obligation to protect animals threatened by extinction. What if we put together a presentation that would present both sides fairly? Maybe Mr. Asher would let us present it at a Town Meeting." When no one

objected, she continued. "Okay, we'll form two teams. One team will study the logging perspective, and the other team will study the environmental side. Any ideas for team names?"

"How about The Loggers and The Owls?" Jake suggested. Everyone agreed, but many kids

Kevin Schaffer / Alamy Stock Photo



wanted to be on the Loggers team, so Miss Fiskal had them count off by twos — the ones were the Loggers; the twos were the Owls. Not everyone was happy, but they knew it was fair. The teams immediately got to work gathering the data they would need.

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Three weeks later, the school gym was filled with parents and others to hear Miss Fiskal's class presentations. Mr. Asher and Miss Fiskal sat on the stage. The class sat behind them. First, the Loggers Team presented their findings. Molly walked to the tripod. She pointed to the first page of the presentation, looking nervous but determined.

"Does one Spotted Owl pair really need 2,200 acres of old growth forest to survive?" she asked. "The answer is we don't know. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service admits that adequate research hasn't been done." She flipped the paper over to a picture of a cow, a pig and a sheep. "We slaughter these animals to meet our needs. Why should an owl, who lives in trees we need for housing, be given special consideration?" Many people in the audience clapped.

Next, it was Ruby's turn. "Is the Spotted Owl really endangered?" she began. "No. There are many more owls than have been reported. Owls can survive many years with current logging practices." There was more loud clapping. "What is the impact if the Fish and Wildlife Service decides that the spotted owl is a threatened species?" She looked out at the audience. "The answer is that many jobs could be lost." The room was quiet as she took her seat.

After more students on the Loggers Team presented their findings, it was the Owls Team's turn. Ian was first up. He was wearing his favorite Michael Jordan t-shirt.

"Why are old growth forests important to preserve?" he asked. "They are not only home to Spotted Owls. They are also sources of clean drinking water and salmon runs. They provide a home for many rare animals and plants, some found nowhere else on earth." The audience was quiet as Ian sat down. Next, Jake walked forward and flipped to the next page.

"If cutting of old growth continues at its current rate of 125,000 acres a year, those forests will be gone within ten years. We can't just keep cutting and expecting that the timber industry will continue to thrive." Then he explained that the Spotted Owl was an "indicator species." That by looking at the success of these animals, scientists could determine the health of the entire ecosystem.

Then other students on the Owls Team presented ideas on different federal and state programs to retrain loggers to work in other forestry jobs.

At the end of the presentation, the students stood up and everyone applauded. There was a good feeling in the room as everyone talked and enjoyed cookies baked by the PTA parents.

As they walked home under a full moon, Molly's dad put his arm around her.

"You did a good job tonight, honey. I didn't agree with everything that was said, but I was proud of you and your classmates."

"So was I," added Grandpa.

"Thanks," Molly said, feeling happy about the class presentation, and relieved that it was over. Everyone had listened, and everyone had learned something.

Epilogue

In 1990, a year after this fictional story took place, the Northern Spotted Owl was listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act. One study reported that in the twenty years following the decision, more than 200 sawmills closed, and more than 40,000 jobs were lost.

It's important to remember, however, that as early as 1965 — long before the Spotted Owl was listed as endangered — logging jobs had begun to decline. It was inevitable that aggressive logging would end when there was little or no timber to cut. As logging jobs became less available, many loggers from small communities like West Fork were retrained and able to find more sustainable jobs.



Photo from sustainablepulse.com

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