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NO WORK? NO WORKERS!

Local employers are beating the bushes for willing and able bodies
by Heidi Walters / North Coast Journal Weekly

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Vince Campbell, he just got sick of it. He'd worked for Eel River Sawmills for 20 years as the environment and safety director. A good job. But for years, it seemed, the wood products industry had been crashing around him. A mill closed here, another mill closed there. When it was Eel River's time to close, a few years ago after having gone from 565 employees to 60, Campbell asked himself, "Why work in an industry that's dying?"

He was nearing 50. But instead of trying to hire on at some remaining mill, he jumped ship -- to an engineering firm in Santa Rosa at first, working as a groundwater technician. "It was a good job, but I was away from home three, four days a week. It was hard on the family." He sought counseling at Humboldt County's The Job Market, and then a friend at the Redwood Harley-Davidson shop in Eureka told him to put in an application. He did, and trained for six months to learn computer applications. Now he works in the parts department. He loves it.

"Me, I've been a Harley rider all my life," Campbell says. "Personally, I'm very, very happy."

Yeah, he admits, the pay's "different" from the really good money he was making at the sawmill. "So, you've gotta do a lot of lifestyle changes," he says, when you switch from lumber to Harleys.

This is a story about jobs. So, for starters, raise your hand if you got one of those mailers. You know, the one from HELP -- the Humboldt Economic and Land Plan outfit -- with an inviting photo of an open door to a pretty house with a fat bundle of keys hanging from the lock and the big, bold-type question beneath it: "Will the Door to Jobs and Homeownership be Opened for Humboldt County Working Families?" Inside, it becomes clear that this message is mostly about housing -- or lack thereof, according to HELP, and how that is "driving young, working families out of Humboldt County."

But what's more intriguing in HELP's mailer is the bit about there being a "lack of jobs" here in Humboldt County. "Jobs," says HELP, "are hard to find." And it isn't just HELP saying it. "I hear it all the time, 'There are no jobs,'" says Randy Hansen, owner of Express Personnel Services.

It's just weird. Because, what we've been hearing? There are loads of jobs here. Including some really good ones. And employers are having trouble filling them. "Right now we at Sequoia Personnel are busier in job placement than we have been in the past four or five years," says Liana Simpson, who started Sequoia Personnel 28 years ago. "The job market is exploding here. We've had several requests for chief financial officers. There's a shortage of accountants in Humboldt County. And we are getting more six-figure openings than ever -- or, \$90,000 and up. I just placed a position, \$78,000, for a person licensed in the engineering field." She's also in the process of finding workers for a big nonprofit -- but she's not at liberty to talk about it.

Jacqueline Debets, director of the Humboldt County Workforce Investment Board, which among other things helps people find work, says some industries here are "starved for workers." Carlson Wireless, StreamGuys, Humboldt Creamery, Cypress Grove Chevre, Kokatat, Sun Valley Floral, Maples Plumbing: "Here are industries that have been growing and will continue to grow, and they need workers," says Debets.

It all sounds like part of the picture painted by that new report the county's touting, called "Targets of Opportunity," which identifies the industries that show the most promise for Humboldt's future, including

"specialty agriculture" and "investment support services." They indicate, in many instances, a trend toward more technical and professional jobs -- and Debets says students should take note, and study accordingly.

But this doesn't mean the traditional resource-based industries are dead. "Another commonly said thing is, 'There are no jobs in timber'," says Debets. "That's not true. About 12 percent of our payroll in Humboldt County is the forest products industry. Just because Pacific Lumber Co.'s going under, that doesn't mean others are. Talk to Green Diamond about their challenges in finding people."

That is a head-scratcher -- where are those 90-odd workers Palco laid off in December? Have they, too, gone over to the proverbial Harley shop?

And if you really want to hear a sad story, pop in to Richard Marks' blog (samoasoftball.blogspot.com) and you might read how he's just worked another gazillion hours nonstop at the Evergreen Pulp paper mill.

On Feb. 5, Marks posted this:

Where are the local hard workers?

We are still short of workers at Evergreen Pulp. I keep hearing of people being interviewed, but they do not seem to be showing up on the work floor. I just finished shoveling chips and sawdust at \$40 an hour because we are short handed. (I worked a 16 hour shift.) You would think that local people would be knocking down the doors for a Union job that pays around \$17 to start with benefits.

Hello? Anybody want to work for these companies?

But of course it's more complex than "Here's a job, take it." And here's where some of you will jab a knowing finger at that fun fact in the HELP mailer, the one about Humboldt's 30-39 age group shrinking 25 percent between 1990 and 2005. Well, how's this puzzle: Dennis Mullins, research analyst for the Labor Market Information Division of the California Employment Development Department, says U.S. Census figures and updates show Humboldt County's labor force grew, and the unemployment rate dropped (from 6.5 percent to 5.6 percent), between 1999 and 2006. Not that that answers the age group question.

Still others, not listening, will revive that familiar cry, "Our kids are leaving us!" Well of course they are, as they always have, everywhere from every hometown -- to see the world or, yes, for better opportunities. Heck, Richard Marks' kids left town, though they didn't really want to -- but what's an aspiring fashion designer and runway model like his son Jordan, for instance, to do in a folksy place like Humboldt?

Debets would say, people just aren't opening their eyes to the new possibilities -- or even, in some cases, the old ones. Simpson would add, it would help if more kids at least finished high school around here -- there are some pretty high-qualification jobs they're missing out on.

It turns out there are all sorts of other disconnects between jobs and the workforce in Humboldt County. We look at a few of them here. And -- with the exception of some hard-working souls who've had a tough break -- we're sorry to say one resounding theme that emerges is our job seekers are an undereducated, lazy, wacked-out, shiftless pack of scoundrels. And employers, in some cases, are casting their nets across the seas to find a few good workers.

PART I: Splintered timber

Mike Campbell, of Fortuna -- and no relation to Vince -- still gets up at 4 every morning, just like he used to when he had to be at work at 6 a.m. It drives his wife, Carolyn, nuts. But he likes the dark, quiet hours. He makes coffee, reads the paper -- and, when he had a job, waking early allowed him time to ease into the day "instead of racing out the door to work half asleep," he says. It's a nice habit.

It reminds Carolyn of what he's lost. Her husband was laid off from Pacific Lumber Co. on Dec. 1. And then Palco's subsequent bankruptcy filing threw Mike's and other laid-off employees' severance packages into indefinite cold storage. "He's such a good man," she says. "I had a lot of anger about this." She was so mad she got up in the middle of the night a couple weeks ago and wrote the Journal a letter to the editor (March 22) railing against the Maxxam-run Palco's abandonment of long-time, loyal employees. "On Dec. 4," she wrote about her husband, "you wake up in the morning feeling lost. What do you do now? You're 59 years old and you have a bad back from an injury that you sustained while working for this company. It feels funny not to be getting ready for work, because after all you've had the same routine for 34 years...."

Well, hey Mike, get over to Green Diamond-Simpson, they're hiring. But it's not that easy. For one thing, Green Diamond -- the woods part of the business -- is looking for foresters on the production side, and biological technicians on the "counting critters" side, says Debi Callahan, human resources manager for Green Diamond Resource Company. If there were any of those folks in the December Palco layoffs, Callahan hasn't see them. For another, the business has changed. "You hear people ask, 'Who works in the timber industry?'" Callahan says. "The folks we're hiring today are wildlife biologists, watershed technicians, herpetologists, botany technicians."

And finding them isn't easy. Since January, Green Diamond has gone through contortions to fill 26 positions, 23 of which are temporary gigs for the biological monitoring season, says Callahan. "In the past, we were able to post openings with the EDD and in the newspaper. And we used to send out notifications to universities. This year, it was not effective. We had one or two responses a day, instead of a couple dozen." But once she posted the job openings online, applications picked up.

On the production side, a serious worker deficit looms: no foresters. Fewer students are enrolling in forestry programs -- probably because they hear "there are no jobs in timber" -- and as a consequence college forestry programs are getting chopped, says Callahan. Meanwhile, she says, "60 percent of our workforce that's been involved in production over the long term will be retiring within the next five years. So now everybody's looking for foresters, because of the aging workforce issue."

If it weren't for his bad back, Mike Campbell possibly could find work over at Simpson Timber's California lumber division, which was acquired by Green Diamond in January and is the lumber manufacturing side of the duo. Except most of the jobs human resources manager Randy Robertson is struggling to fill these days are for electronic technicians and electricians -- highly trained, computer-savvy people. "We probably have, in the electronics field, about 10 jobs open," says Robertson. "It's not a lot of jobs, but they're highly paid -- well over \$18 an hour plus benefits, a 401k" and more. "So far one person has applied. So now we're advertising all over the West Coast. We've gone out of the area, down to Los Angeles, trying to recruit people who are exiting the military."

There was a bigger response to recent multiple job announcements for laborers at Simpson's Korb, Orick and Eureka sites. Not even a high school education required. "For Korb, we had about 35 applications for six positions," says Robertson. Still, they didn't fill all the positions.

Robertson, who's been in the industry for 30 years, says he'd love to hire North Coast people. But there are issues. "The younger generation is maybe more skeptical of physical work," he says. "They want to create their own hours. They don't want to get up at 4 in the morning. Also, the reality in Humboldt County is we do have a drug problem. We lose about 10 percent of our applicants because they can't pass the drug test."

He used to be able to regularly recruit experienced, responsible workers from other mills, before they all started closing. Picking up laid-off mill workers, on the other hand, is a one-time event. Even so, he was surprised at the meager response to the latest call for laborers. "We were wondering where all those Pacific Lumber Co. employees were."

In all, Robertson has only picked up about four workers from the December Palco curtailment. He suspects many are disillusioned. Maybe some retired. "Anecdotally, I've heard some of them have gone back to fishing, or into

hospitality jobs for \$10 an hour, or part-time work. But my goodness, don't people realize we have very good pay and good benefits? We are a very clean environment. We're very safe. We're good people. When people say, 'There are no jobs,' I say, 'Gosh, what more can we do?'"

Mike Campbell decided to go back to school. With his bad back, he couldn't look for work driving an overhead forklift, which is what he did for 30 years at Palco. "Who's going to hire me?" he says he asked the folks at the unemployment division. They sent him to College of the Redwoods to talk to a counselor. "The counselor said, 'What do you want to do?' And I said, 'Maybe something in computers.'"

He ended up in the two-year computer information systems training program. It isn't quite what he expected. "I didn't realize when I signed up for classes that I was getting into computer programming," he says. "It's a whole new world. They say, once you get through with this program, you'll be able to get a job." It's three to four hours of homework a night. The math, at first, was a foreign language. "Sometimes you get overwhelmed -- you gotta dig your way through it," Campbell says.

He sees a lot of fellow former Palco workers up at school these days. And it's kind of ironic, if you think about it. "For years I was telling kids there [at Palco], 'Go back to school, get an education,'" he says. "I could see [the layoffs] coming for years down there. For my wife and me, we've raised our family, our house is paid off -- we're not going to starve. But there's a lot of young people down there [at Palco] with families and house payments, and you feel bad for them."

PART 2: Lazy kids

Ah, Garberville. A day in March, sunshine bathing the town. Cue the chipper chatter of blackbirds massed in the pretty trees lining Main. Young folks, dressed gypsy, linger on corners. A young man ambles into his post at a dry goods store mid-morning and chuckles, beaming vaguely at a customer. "I am floating today," he says. He looks up at the ceiling and sighs. Laughs again.

Two miles down the road, at the venerable Benbow Inn beside the Eel River, proprietor John Porter is preparing, unoptimistically, for an upcoming "career day" for local people. "We're looking for housekeepers and dishwashers and cooks -- functional jobs to run a four-star hotel," he says. Maybe a few applicants will trickle in; likely not. The Benbow, which recently began staying open year-round, can employ 50 people this time of year, and more than 100 in the summer. Right now, Porter's 10 people short. "Last year, we were looking for an assistant maître d' for our restaurant. We placed an ad in January 2006 in the local paper, and in November 2006 I finally took the ad out. We did not get one person to apply. We're talking a \$10 to \$12 an hour job, plus tips, plus an employee meal."

So what's the problem?

For one, the housing inventory's slim. "And what is available is expensive," Porter says. He rents two apartments to employees in town. He purchased eight travel trailers and puts some workers up in the RV park the company now owns. And, he hires "work-campers" from within the RV park, mostly retirees or semi-retirees who stay at the park seasonally and are looking to pick up a little income.

For another, there just aren't that many people in Southern Humboldt, Porter says. And the ones who are here and able to work ... "Let's see," muses Porter, "would I rather make beds and wash dishes at the Benbow Inn, or do I want to sit in someone's barn trimming bud -- and stay stoned and make big bucks and not pay taxes?" Hmm.

"It's always been bad, but it seems to be getting worse," Porter says. "I mean, there's a mentality here. People don't want to work. One of these guys I hired from Moldavia came to me one day and said, 'Your American kids are lazy.'"

Moldavia? That's right. Instead of holding his breath for local workers, Porter has resorted to hiring work-travel college students through the Center for Cultural Interchange. "We actually hired three gentlemen from Moldavia last summer, for May to September. And we currently have on our staff two young ladies from Argentina. They're students. One is doing her master's thesis in psychology. The other is studying to be an attorney. They're here to travel, make some money and hone their English skills."

The three guys from Moldavia, also students, were especially intent on the money. One of them, an assistant waiter, was making \$100 a day. They're back at university now in their own country. But one of them, Denis Bogdanash, confirmed in an e-mail that he did indeed call American kids lazy:

I think that is partly true, i mean a big majority are lazy. Why? Because they don't want to work, they are not thinking about future. So there is another point that in America there are a lot of foreigners tons of every nation and the hardest work is going to be done by us foreigners. Why? Because for instance in our country a good salary (wage) per month is like 200\$. See that's why, and of course when i have this possibility to earn this money in one day in America, i am converting in a robot, money machine and its true. (yellow smiley face)

PART 3: The Polish connection

The next time he went back to the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw, vowed Zygmunt Nowak, he was going to bring a shovel. He was going to bring a shovel, and he was going to bash the crooked consulate's brains in with it. Bastard, making him travel back and forth from his village repeatedly -- three hours one way! -- and charging him 25 American dollars each time just to walk in the door and hear someone say, "Come back tomorrow, we don't have your papers." Every time, \$25, the same lie: No papers, come back tomorrow. All la-dee-da, business as

usual. It was outrageous. He had no money and he'd already borrowed hundreds of dollars from everyone he knew back in his village. And all just to pick up a work visa that John Gierek, president of Humboldt Moving & Storage in Eureka, Calif., had already obtained for him and that was waiting in that embassy.

Errrrrk. OK, that was a year ago. Now take a detour back to 1995, in the United States. The truck driver shortage is just beginning, as long-term drivers leave the trucking business because of increased government regulations -- too much paperwork. The new drivers replacing them, meanwhile, don't want to do any loading. But everyone has to load and unload, crew members and the driver, at least if they want to work for Humboldt Moving & Storage, says Gierek.

The driver shortage continues to this day. Worse, a lot of driver applicants can't pass the drug tests -- the hits used to be marijuana, but now are mostly for methamphetamine. Gierek, who operates three warehouses in Eureka/Arcata and one in Crescent City, loses a couple of local drivers a year to drug testing. "And Del Norte's worse than Eureka," he says. "Unbelievably worse." It's frustrating, because it takes a year to train a person to drive a local truck and run a crew. (On the bright side, long-haul drivers -- who take three years to train -- rarely have drug problems.)

Gierek's short 10 drivers. And these are good jobs. "Drivers are kind of the top echelon, and long-hauls, even more so," Gierek says. "You have an hourly driver who might be making \$16.50 an hour, with full benefits, profit sharing, 401k -- the whole shebang. And our long-haul drivers that contract, those guys will pull down close to a quarter million a year."

If Americans aren't interested in such jobs, well then, maybe Poles are. The Polish connection actually goes back to the 1980s, when immigration attorneys and big van lines started bringing Eastern Bloc workers into the United States. "We started seeing Polish drivers coming in," says Gierek. "And I'm Polish, and they'd recognize my name as being Polish, and so I'd talk to them. Well, about three years ago I got a call from an attorney out of Pittsburgh, Penn., a labor attorney, immigration attorney, and he said he got my name from someone and said, 'You might be interested in bringing in some very high quality Polish drivers.'"

Of course he was, Gierek answered. "Poland has an extremely skilled workforce that isn't working," he says. "I mean, the guys have economics degrees, advanced degrees in many cases. And all they were doing was trying to find work, and selling wallpaper on the street corner. And their licenses are much more sophisticated than what we have in the U.S. Top-notch. So you have a guy that's willing to do the manual stuff, and he's smart."

It took three years to prove to labor officials that Americans didn't want Gierek's driving jobs. He posted the announcements near and far, in Humboldt and all over the Western U.S. He told his drivers out on the road, and local crews, they'd get a \$2,000 bonus if they referred a long-haul driver to him and the driver showed up -- that offer still stands, actually. "We get three applicants: two women who have Class C -- it's the wrong license, they're not qualified. And one Mexican national who didn't want to load and unload the truck."

Finally, he was OK'd to hire his Polish truckers.

Which sends us back to Poland, 2006. Nowak and the eight other Poles Gierek had hired were trooping back and forth to the embassy, trying to get their visas -- which were, in fact, sitting in there waiting to be picked up. "But there was a lot of graft in that embassy," says Gierek. The per-visit \$25 fees racked up to shocking totals. "The least of them was \$300. So, it was a good way to make money."

It turned into a big fight. The immigration and labor attorney, Eric Wafer, who'd initiated the connection between Gierek and the Poles, was threatening "to send them all to Czechoslovakia to the U.S. Embassy there to get their visas." Nowak was ranting about the shovel. "We ended up having to have one of the other Poles we hired get ahold of him and calm him down, he was so upset," says Gierek. "We were worse than Russians, he said. And he was old enough to be there when Russia had control of Poland."

By March 2006, the Polish workers had made it to Eureka. They took English lessons from a teacher the Eureka Day School sent over to Humboldt Moving & Storage's Eureka office, and threw themselves into their new jobs. Everyone was happy. Gierek was pretty confident their temporary visas would be extended come September and October when they expired -- that's how these things had come to pass in other states, the labor attorney Wafer told him. Then they'd get green cards, take their U.S. Class A driving license tests, and he'd finally have some great drivers.

Homeland Security refused to renew their visas. "They said it's all after the terrorist deal," says Gierek. "They don't want 'em here, essentially. And the guys, they start getting nervous -- because, of course, the United States has a reputation in the world -- that Homeland Security will have the police come and get them. So almost all of them, all but three, left Sept. 19. And that was devastating. These guys were really good workers."

Nowak was one of the three who stayed. "He told me, 'John, if we don't have visa renewed by December, I go home. You call me. I can't stay, I'm very afraid.'" In December, he left.

The remaining two are on their sixth appeal with the Homeland Security Department. One of them, Andrzej Lopag, says he is on his second attorney. Lopag is 42, a stocky man who still speaks halting English. He seems to have a joke lurking in his blue eyes -- if only he could convey it in Polish, or French. He lives in an apartment with a little kitty that the folks at the gas station, on the lot next to Humboldt Moving & Storage, found wandering around lost one day. He thinks Humboldt County's beautiful, "the coast, the mountains." He really wants to stay.

"Coming to the U.S., always, it's my dream," he says. "I remember the time, during the communists, everybody wants to come to U.S., for freedom. I wanted to come all the time, to come to U.S. and drive the truck. Since a little boy. You remember the movie Convoy? Smoky and the Bandit?"

Gierek says maybe he'll try to get a new round of Polish workers. Oddly, Homeland Security doesn't seem to have a problem with that -- as long as those guys go home, too, after their short visas run out. Which doesn't help Gierek, actually -- he needs drivers. And they take time to cultivate.

As for the rest of the employers out there, looking for workers, and all those job seekers who say there are no jobs? Well, maybe it's true what Jacqueline Debets at the Humboldt County Workforce Investment Board says: People need to open their eyes to the opportunities under their noses. And, in other cases, both parties might need to adjust their expectations, adds Randy Hansen at Express Personnel. Employers could pony up better wages. And employees could shape up. "The work ethic of yesteryear," sighs Hansen, "has gone."