Hello, and greetings from the Central Office! Spring gets earlier and earlier every year here in the Pacific Northwest, and my nose has turned into a faucet. It doesn’t matter how much I blow my nose - it’s never clear, and basically honks like a trombone. My eyes itch, my ears itch, and the only thing that makes it worse is cottonwood trees and Scotch broom.

As staffing has shrunk in the Central Office, I am tasked with all sorts of random things that I didn’t used to be tasked with. Today, it was my job to take an inventory of new wireless equipment installed in a few towers leased by The Company. “But it’s new equipment!” you might say, “Why not take an inventory at the time it’s installed?” And yes, you’d be right, and this would totally make sense, which is exactly why management decided not to do things that way. Instead, they wait until a vendor claims to us that it’s done (which they do when their subcontractor claims it’s done). It’s then my job to drive out to the tower, validate the installation, and affix Company Asset Tags to each piece of equipment. A Company Employee must do this important job; vendors cannot be entrusted with it. And that’s how I got to spend the day driving through cottonwood forests and hillsides covered in Scotch broom.

I started the day at eight in the morning, and was out of the door by nine - just in time to hurry up and wait in horrible Seattle traffic (it’s worse than L.A.). My destination today was the abyss outside of Olympia, for the most part a sparsely populated rural area. The Company doesn’t own its own towers, but leases them from a variety of partners such as Crown Castle, American Tower, and even public utility districts. Most towers are located on private land, and many of the landlords are not friendly. Some of them will even shoot at you if you don’t notify them in advance that you’re coming (“Posted: No Trespassing” is taken very seriously here).

Also, we are not the only tenant at most of these towers; numerous other companies have equipment there, so it isn’t unusual to run into crews working for competitors.

Today, I had three sites to visit. All of them are in the middle of nowhere. GPS isn’t reliable in these parts (mountains and trees block the signal, which is generally low to the horizon) and phones, which usually work better than satellite-guided GPS, often don’t work in the shadow of a cell tower (many of them have to be approached from behind while driving on dirt roads). This means that it’s essential to print out directions. Today’s directions involved driving on an Interstate highway to a state highway to a county road to a dirt road. And - I kid you not - once I turned onto the dirt road, the directions stated “After 4.3 miles, bear left at the big cottonwood tree.”

After 4.3 miles, there was no big cottonwood tree. There were hundreds of small ones. I drove another mile, then doubled back and investigated. There was Scotch broom, and a big stump. And beyond the Scotch broom, there was a rutted dirt track. After letting out a giant sneeze, I hopped in the truck, drove over the Scotch broom (sending up a cloud of yellow pollen and another paroxysm of sneezing), and drove another 1.4 miles more or less straight up a bone-jarring, anus-clenching dirt road, only to arrive at a gate. Naturally, I didn’t have the key. “Key located in lock box next to big tree” said my directions, which I’d neglected to thoroughly read. Of course, there was nowhere to turn around, so I carefully backed the truck 1.2 miles down the hill until I was finally able to turn it around for the remaining 0.2 miles. I parked next to the stump and investigated, the Scotch broom practically laughing at me while sending up another cloud of pollen, in turn sending me into another sneezing spasm.

Through itchy, watery eyes, I saw a lock box peering out at me from inside a Scotch broom shrub. It’s possible that I may have said a few bad words. I set the code on the combination lock, opened the lock box, and... no key.
Time to call Rick, the area manager, except... even though I could see the tower and there were cellular panels on it, I was in the shadow of the tower so there was no usable signal. I got 4.2 miles back down the dirt road before I was able to make a call. “There were contractors out there, but they were supposed to be done,” he said. “Go to WA123 and see if the key is there.” Our sites all have a unique identifier; the site I’m at is WA125 and WA123 is a nearby site. By “nearby,” it’s 22 miles away with another several miles of dirt road involved. I also didn’t have directions, but Rick was able to look them up for me and I wrote them down. A little over an hour later, I was there, but the results weren’t good. There was no key, and Rick wasn’t happy. “These keys are impossible to get. It might take weeks. Forget it, do the next one on your list.”

OK, onward to the next site. This one was in an exurb area on the outskirts of Olympia, so at least I didn’t have to contend with dirt roads. No gate, no problems with access, this was almost too easy until, as I approached the battery cabinet, there was the unmistakable sound of buzzing. Wasps, and a lot of them! Fortunately, there was wasp spray in the truck, and I was not sparing in its use. After emptying three cans into the battery cabinet, the buzzing stopped. I opened up the battery cabinet, and the new equipment was there, exactly where it was supposed to be. One asset tag placed, scanned, and logged into the system - mission accomplished! It was time to proceed to the next site.

This one was in Belfair. Actually, it was above Belfair, directly up a dirt road on a mountain abutting Hood Canal. The equipment was mounted on a water tower. This one didn’t have a gate blocking the access road, but the site was surrounded by a high fence. The gate had a shared access lock with chained padlocks, 26 of them, to be precise. It’s designed such that if you remove any of the padlocks, you can remove the chain and open the gate. That was fine, I had an instruction sheet, the lock was helpfully described, and the combination was there.

It was a Master lock.
There were eight of them.
It was pouring rain. Coming down in buckets. This is a rain forest.
And naturally, the very last one is the one I managed to open.

Once I had access, I hopped in my truck, drove around the water tower, and discovered the equipment that was supposedly installed isn’t actually there. The old gear had been removed and was stacked on pallets, but the new gear was missing. This happens all the time. Contractors are penalized if they don’t deliver on time, so they fudge the numbers, try to skate, and hope they don’t get caught. This time, they got caught. There is a procedure for this, so I followed it - took pictures of everything, emailed them to management, and headed back down to the highway.

Lunchtime! Except I’m in the middle of nowhere. Lunch is a dodgy gas station sandwich. The local mini mart isn’t friendly, and they wouldn’t let me use the restroom. Instead, I met Bella’s porta-potty cousin down at the local fishing pier. I thought nothing could be worse than Bella, but this one smelled like sewage and fish guts. Nastier than my lunch.

Time to hop in the truck for the final job of the day. That one was behind a gate that only took 30 minutes to get past; the combination was wrong, but Rick called a guy who knew a guy who had the correct combination.

This one was a repeat visit. There had been a recurring hawk problem. Hawks build giant nests on cell towers, and it’s illegal to disturb them. Six months ago, a crew brought in new equipment, but a hawk took up residence before it could be installed. Wildlife specialists monitor the sites until the hawks eventually fly south. That happened some time ago, but it was now spring and hawks would soon be returning, so the priority of this site was suddenly urgent.

This time, the equipment was there. It was hooked up. And it was... sitting at crazy angles on sagging, rotting wooden pallets. This stuff was all supposed to be bolted to concrete, but that obviously hadn’t been done and, also obviously, nothing was to code. I couldn’t attach an asset tag unless we were accepting delivery and, in this state, I couldn’t accept delivery. More pictures, more emails, more cursing.

It’s getting dark, so I’m really glad to leave. As I approach my truck, there is an unmistakable sound of hissing. My left front tire is going flat, and I’m parked on a steep hill. At least I get paid overtime for the two hours it’ll take me to change the tire.

And with that, I’m going to need to loosen some rusty lug nuts. In the dark, in the rain, alone. Next time you use your cell phone, know that the equipment processing your call has been properly logged with an asset tag affixed. This, my phriends, is work that truly matters.