

Reminiscences of a lumberjack

(Editor's Note: Reminiscences of a Lumberjack was written by Mr. John Odlund who worked for the Stephens Lumber Company in the early 1900's.

Each time our Northern Lower Michigan deer season rolls around and we have the excuse to prow through our local deer country I always hark back to the forty or so years ago when I worked in this same area, which was then a virgin timber tract, lumbered by the Stephens Lumber Company, which had moved their operations up from Roscommon at the turn of the century with their sawmill and office at Waters.

This area was then composed of hardwoods, interspersed by stands of hemlock and magnificent white pine. Some large pine stumps, still standing, prove that the ordinary run of pine was as large or larger than the "Monarch" pine in the State Park of Hartwick Pines near Grayling.

My work was driving team, skidding logs out to skidways at the "princely" wage of one dollar and seven cents per day straight time with board and lodging, while other workers who did not have the extra work of caring for

horses got one dollar per day only for days they worked with board and lodging.

We put in twelve hours in the woods in summer and from daylight till dark in winter with time out for lunch.

When distance from camp and cook shanty warranted it the chuck wagon brought the lunch out to the crews at noon and we were always ravenously hungry and the food was the kind that "would stick to your ribs." Mostly, the main dish was a great kettle of stew with great chunks of beef floating in it. We native sons couldn't always get our helpings before the foreigners dived into it with their hands in their eagerness. Then there was a cupboard of several shelves filled with several kinds of pies. With my youthful appetite I could finish off with a half pie anytime.

One day a man, who seemed to be above the rank of the ordinary lumberjack, dressed as we all were and got a job at first one thing then another for some weeks. He fraternized mostly with the camp bosses and seemed to be interested in every new arrival as men were always coming and going from one camp to another,

looking for a change of work or just sponging. The cooks always fed everyone freely then.

We felt this man was a detective hunting a fugitive from justice, but he evidently gave up our camp as a hunting ground as one day he dressed himself up in his good blue serge suit and walked out and I never heard any more of him.

Sunday was our only day off during the week and I usually took that day to go home on the farm for a bath and change of clothes and as a usual thing, I had to go through a delousing routine to keep my home folks free from lice I caught in camps.

Sometimes when the sun shone nice and warm in the woods and our part of the work was caught up for the moment, and we did not have to seem busy for the benefit of the boss or his "straw push" a couple of us would sit at a stump and flip pennies, heads or tails, or sometimes each would take a louse from his body and put them together on the stump and watch them fight. Two lice from the same body would not fight each other.

The camps deloused the men's shanty, or bunkhouse, every spring to get rid of most of the pests before the warm weather.

One camp did the delousing by running the steam hose from the locomotive into the shanty and shutting it up tight. One day they forgot the cats inside and had steamed cats well done.

A young fellow, 17, my age, and I were assigned to bunk together and we were supposed to take turns making up the bunk each day, but he refused to make it when it came his turn and my turn never came again so by spring when they got around to changing the bedding and cleaning up in general our bunk was in a sad state and full of sand.

We had a cook one spell who seemed to satisfy us real well till one evening he served up a dish of meat that must have been just crawling with maggots before he cooked it. Everyone left the table, as hungry as we all were when supper was called, except some of the foreigners who ate it with seeming relish.

When the cook came into the cook shanty to get breakfast in the morning he saw himself hanging in effigy in the doorway and he straightway went to parts unknown without his breakfast.

The boss knew that Roy Burns, my bunk mate, was an excellent cook, young as he was, but that he detested the work and would much

rather keep on with his job of driving skidding team. The only way he could induce him to take over the cook's job was to promise him he would get another full time cook in two days.

Roy was such a good cook we all wished he could have enjoyed cooking as we all enjoyed eating his cooking.

One nice summer day Roy brought a nice, hollow pine log up to the skidway. He and his home town pal, Willis Thode, thought they would take this log up to the camp and work on it in their spare time, evenings and Sundays, and have themselves a canoe to use on the nearby lake.

Roy would shuck off his woods clothes and sort of dress up a little after work while working on the project. One day Willis had the sudden inspiration to snap Roy's good hat from his head and throw it into the canoe in the path of Roy's descending sharp axe. With sudden rage Roy tore after Willis with upraised axe down the camp road, and Willis was so convulsed with laughter he could hardly run but knew he must or his life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel, when suddenly Roy came back to his humorous self again and sat down in the road and laughed as hard as all

the rest of us were.

Willis bought Roy another new hat and everything was all right, but I don't remember if the canoe was ever finished or not.

One Sunday that I missed going home, a young fellow I knew as Valentine, and I were up in the hay loft when we saw Old John Troupe coming into camp from town. His furtive glances around caused us to stop our work and watch him closely as he could not see us. He was carrying a gallon jug of whiskey which he finally stuck into the snow beside a stump and covered it up.

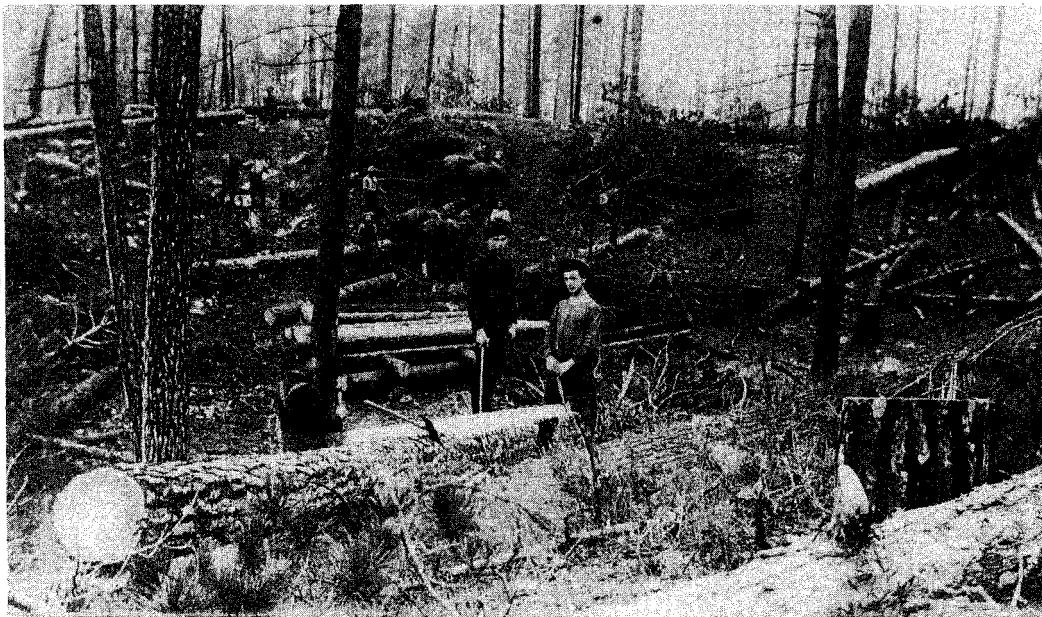
As soon as he was out of sight around the barn we had that jug sneaked into the barn and hidden before old John came back out of the men's shanty with three of the "side kicks" for a grand old treat, while back up in the hay loft we watched them frantically digging at the stump in vain, then going to another stump nearby as though not sure, he looked around that, then back again to the first. Then it began to dawn on them that some slippery cuss had "beaten them to the punch" and they went back dejectedly to the men's shanty with a wary eye out to see if they could spot the guilty party but never said a word.

One jolly Polish fellow we knew as "Irish" drove a team and one of the horses was called "Molly." When speaking to his team he always spoke to her alone, saying, "Easy Molly, easy Molly."

One day he was helping shovel the dangerously deep snow from off a shed roof when his feet slipped and he was sliding off the roof on his "sit down," shouting, "Easy Molly, easy Molly."

The camp bosses under whom I worked had the lumbering art "down pat," a real science. Their roads ran parallel to each other clear back through the tract of timber they were planning to cut off and each road was used to take off the timber halfway to each road on either side so the job was done clean as they worked their way toward the back. They found the roads were easier to keep in shape that way.

(Cont'd on P. 30)



A LOGGING SCENE shows lumberjacks hard at work. The photo

was taken by A. W. Brown between 1884-1896.