Reminiscences

(Cont'd from P. 29)

Twenty years later I worked for a company that hadn't learned that trick but started working at the back of their timber plot, hauling their logs through the remaining virgin timber which kept the ground damp and moist and their roads were full of chuck holes in spite of the work they put on them in the warmer months.

We had one winter that stood out above all others that I remember. The snow was plentiful and the cold was intense during January and February.

One morning after a big blizzard and the mercury must have dropped from out the bottom of the thermometers, the boss finally dared stir out, himself, and turned out all hands with shovels to go down to the cut where the log train was with its snowplow had rammed itself solidly into snow, the engine completely covered. We stood in tiers on each side of where the covered track was supposed to be and shoveled solid chunks of snow up to the next tier until by mid afternoon we had the old train rolling again.

Many times that winter we put chest protectors on the horses and let pieces of sacking hang over their noses to keep them from having frosted lungs.

I have even seen the hibernating porcupines and other small animals roll out of the falling hollow trees, frozen solid, deader than door nails.

I entered one of the Stephen's Lumber camps one fall around what we natives always called Corner Lake. It is bordered on the west side by a steep slope and was then covered with virgin hardwood timber. They had chutes built down the slope and when the lake was frozen solid enough they iced the chutes during the nights and let the logs shoot down onto the lake, then we loaded them on our sleighs and hauled them across the lake to a railroad siding and the log train took them into Waters to the sawmill.

One gray horse, named Ned, had a very unusual experience one day. As they neared the top of the chute with a log he missed stepping entirely clear of the log and he slipped down on his haunches and slid clear down onto the ice of the lake. The look of dumbfoundedness he had was so human we had to laugh and he seemed as surprised as we were when he got up on his feet still all in one piece and could walk as well as ever. He climbed back up the slope to his work again at a lot slower gait than he came down.

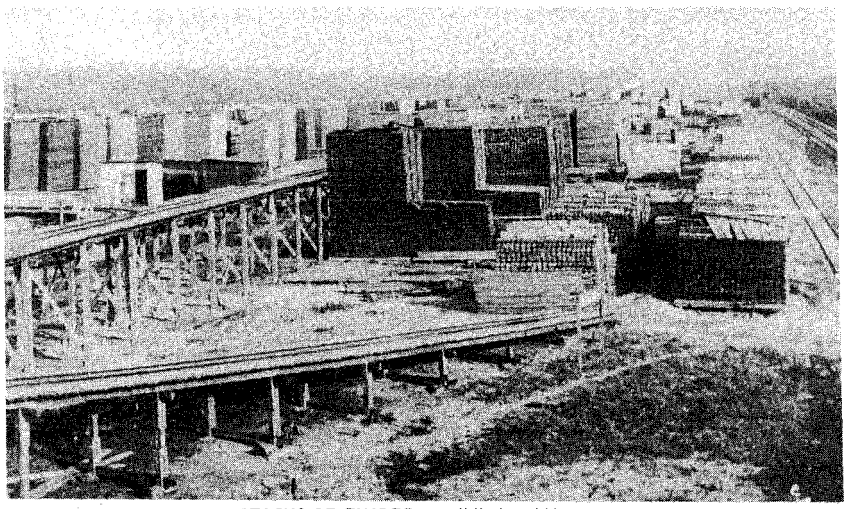
The following spring I happened to be driving the last load of logs to go across the lake before the ice broke up. Part across the ice began cracking under the load and the old timers started calling out, "For God's sake, keep coming. Don't stop. Pound those horses, keep them coming!"

I had a very good picture in my mind of myself, team, and load going down into the icy water through the ice, but felt better when I reminded myself that I very likely could save myself by jumping clear of the load onto the ice if worse came to worse, so I stood there whipping the horses and kept them hurrying until at last we were safe on the other side and I could still go on earning my one dollar and seven cents a day.

I remember an oldish fellow, Charlie White, who never wore anything on his head the year around but a straw hat. He always claimed, "To keep healthy, you should always keep your head cool and your feet warm." His health was somewhat impaired once from kicking one of his horses on its heel with his metal plated shoes and the horse retaliated instantly by kicking Charlie on the knee so he couldn't work for some time.

One forenoon a Russian known as Russian Mike was assigned to work with Dutch George to bunch logs for the big wheels. Russian Mike was a quarrelsome big fellow and he kept "chewing the rag" with Dutch George all the forenoon in a nasty manner until they came up to the cook shanty to wash up for dinner outside the door. While washing Russian Mike made one last crack that was just more than Dutch George could take so he cut loose with his fists and soon we were all out watching the grandest fight I ever did see and dinner waited for us a good half hour.

The fight seemed to be "nip and tuck" and we were so afraid Dutch George would get killed as it looked like they were in mortal combat, until Russian Mike turned yellow and turned away walking down the road out of camp not taking his clothes, nor stopping for his dinner or pay envelope.



STACKS OF TIMBER are all that could be seen in the Waters area in the late 1800's and early 1900's.

Swede John and his three cronies whiled away many an evening playing poker and having a jolly good time in general kidding each other. Sometimes one of them would tie the socks or other clothes of the others to the clothesline where they were hung up to dry out for morning and there would be a mad scramble to get dressed before the horn blew for breakfast.

One morning Swede John found his socks tied together with what he supposed of course, was cotton cord as usual and ripped down on it with his precious jack knife only to find his socks had been tied with hay wire. One glance at the once keen edge of his knife, then a murderous glance around to spot the guilty culprit that caused him to ruin that prized knife. No one dared to grin for fear, everyone quietly went about his business of dressing for the day's work, feeling the tension of murder on the prowl. It was felt even during breakfast and afterwards while at work in the woods but after a few evenings good fellowship was resumed around the poker table.

One fall just prior to Thanksgiving the cook mentioned that since we had been having such a steady diet of beef he thought some good fresh pork was in order for our Thanksgiving dinner. So the boss told Harry Frizzell to go with me to another camp two or three miles away to help bring back a nice big sow pig.

When we got ready to load the old girl we found we had a real job on our hands as she had ideas of her own and the main one was that she was not going to be coaxed into getting into that hog crate. We had worked so long that we were getting tired and so was the sow, I guess, as she began to get mad and bark and bite at us and it was beginning to get dark, so I used the club I had picked up and clouted her a good one across the snout and she went limp as you please and we dragged her into the rack on the sleighs.

Harry said, "Now we have killed her and we should bleed her so she will be fit to butcher when we get back."

We had no knife to suit the purpose so hurried the team along, but shortly she began to come out of her stunned condition and we got back O.K. with mission accomplished.

You should have seen some of those foreigners eat fresh pork at our Thanksgiving dinner. If any of us native sons had eaten like that we would have never arisen from that table.

Homer Smith was an old timer in camp who had a big blue wart or mole the size of one of his fingers, laid up over his right eye. He took a notion to go up to Gaylord one Saturday in July and get himself a good suit of summer clothes and look like a gentleman for once. Sunday, we saw him coming back, walking down the railroad track, carrying a jug of whiskey in each hand and a considerable amount inside, singing merrily off tune, but he was certainly not wearing a summer suit, however. It was a new "Soo" wool suit, and he had foot gear and a winter cap to go with it. The July weather was very warm. No wonder the sweat was pouring down his face.

He was one of the old time lumberjacks who did not die in the County Poorhouse. One day in the camp dining hall he choked to death on a piece of meat.

There were some unscrupulous saloonkeepers who would slip the jacks some knock out drops, "roll them" for what money they were carrying and drag them out the back door so they would go back to camp without the swell spree they had counted on.

Albert, newly from Poland, worked in camp as a swamper for five or six years and had no desire to try for any other job. He swamped out roads for my team quite a lot and was an excellent workman.

He saved every cent he could, with no thought of going out to town "on a bender" or other so called good time and finally he had it figured he had enough to go back to his family in Poland and when his money was changed into his country's currency he would be considered a man of considerable means.

One Sunday, two brothers from a Gladwin farm, Dan and John and I found a shot gun apiece and thought we would have some fun rabbit hunting. Although we had no dog, the rabbits were so thick then we were not gone so long before we each had a nice handful of the bunnies. The law didn't cover rabbits then as it does now.

When we walked into the men's shanty we threw our loot toward the big fat, lazy cats under the big heating stove. They woke up in sudden fright and each made for a window, breaking each one as they sailed through. I guess that broke the monotony of one Sunday afternoon as well as the windows.

One lovely spring day, a man and his wife and two nieces drove a livery rig into camp to show the city nieces what a lumber camp was like and likely to satisfy their curiosity about lumberjacks.

They entered the cook shanty and dining room and were cordially invited to sit up as was the custom in camps in those days. Mr. Ferguson was the cook then and a very good one. I always had a great weakness for the "Square timbers" he made, a sort of cookie cut in squares with melted brown sugar on top.

The lady herself was no slouch when it came to cooking but she had never seen anything to equal those cookies, so in her gushing manner, and he thought a little patronizing, she would so very much like his recipe. So he sat down to write off the recipe, put it in an envelope, sealed it up and handed it to the lady.

I fear she never tried making the cookies because of all incongruous ingredients called for, such as horse shoe nails, etc.

The lumberjacks were tickled when the party wandered around after lunch where pine was being cut. One of the nieces sat on one of the freshly cut pine stumps and when she tried to get up to follow her party the pine pitch held her and her lovely summer dress fast. It took a bit of doing to get the dress loose.