5.8 Life in the Logging Camps

Lyal Campbell
United Counties of Prescott and Russell

Note: The author was involved with the logging industry from 1940 to 1949, in the Parent and Clova area on the upper reaches of the Gatineau River for the E.B. Eddy Company.

Getting Paid for Your Work - The Scaler

The lumbermen acquired timber limits or vast tracts of land on which they had the right to cut trees. This right was granted by the Crown and they remitted a certain amount of money to the Crown for this privilege. This was known as stumpage fees, because in the beginning a Crown employee was dispatched to determine what had been cut by a certain limit holder. Counting stumps was the only way to tell. The limit holders were assessed at a given amount per tree, depending on the type of tree. The scaler was required to provide the government with an accurate certified document divulging the "foot board measure" count of all timber cut on Crown lands or limits. The limit holder paid a certain amount per MBM (thousand board measure) for the privilege of harvesting timber on Crown lands. If the logs cut were used for pulp and the production of paper, all scaling was done in cords of 128 cubic feet, and the limit holder was assessed accordingly.

In the early 1900s, scalers were required to be licensed after being tested for proficiency. If there was a shortage of licensed scalers (as during the middle 1940s), an assistant scaler could apply for a permit that would allow him to measure logs. Quebec would grant a permanent license if you had worked as assistant for three seasons and you completed successfully a written and practical test. This practice was discontinued after a few years, after which the Quebec Government required a couple of sessions at the Duchesnay Forestry School before graduation to scaler.

Nowadays, logs for pulpwood are sold by weight converted into cords, and there is no need for the services of a scaler. However, this does not apply for logs destined for a sawmill. One might think that the day's work was done when the scaler had entered all his numbers from the tally sheets, having converted diameters and lengths to Feet Board Measure or cords. This was not so. These lumberjacks, in most cases, cut by contract: they would be paid a certain amount for each MBM or per cord. It was the scaler's responsibility to ensure that each cutter got his just dues.

Some cutters worked by the day. At the end of each day, the scaler and assistant had to enter all the figures on a specification sheet, balancing material cut by contract plus material cut by the day. In addition, the scaler had to issue what was known as a scale bill to each contract cutter certifying his production for that particular day's scaling. Scale bills were handed out to the various cutters.

When all operations for the year were over or when the lumberjack decided to leave, he would be paid according to the total denoted by the scale bills. In most cases, there was a deduction for board of $1.00 per day in addition to what he may have purchased from the clerk. These articles could be socks, cigarettes, tobacco, or writing paper. Money rarely changed hands in the shanties - everything was charged against wages. At the end of the season the scaler had to balance the season's daily recordings for each contractor, cutter, etc. to agree with his grand total. Sometimes this could take a week. All these calculations were done without an adding machine, calculator, or mechanical device of any kind and by

the light of a coal oil lamp or a Coleman lantern. The specification sheet consisted of the original plus three copies in 4H pencil. In cases where mistakes were made, a lot of erasing was accompanied by some very nice language.

There was also a check scaler and assistant who would appear unannounced and would re-measure what a scaler had done, to ensure that the process was impartial and not awarding too much to any individual contractor or cutter. Even with this second verification, the Provincial Government usually sent their own employee to check on all of these people. Failure in any of these inspections meant a loss of scaling license on Crown Lands.

The original and three copies of the specification sheets were distributed as follows: the original went to the Pulp and Paper Company, the first copy to the contractor, the second copy to the Provincial Government, and the third copy remained in the scaler's file. The scaler was never the most popular person in camp as every lumberjack, cutter, and hewer was a scaler in his own right. Most of the time their figures were way above that of the licensed scaler, and in their minds they were always being robbed.

The Camp Set-Up

Camps were set up beside a lake or a creek and consisted of a cluster of buildings composed of a men's camp, cookery, stable and an office where the contractor, foreman and clerk resided. A small blacksmith shop was also a necessity. In the first half of the 19th century, the men's camp and cookery were combined in a low log building. Beds lining the walls were made of saplings lashed together and covered with spruce, pine, and balsam boughs arranged in as comfortable fashion as the lumberman could design, and covered with a blanket.

The cooking area was in the centre of the building and would be in a square of around six feet covered with six inches of sand over the floor - if there was a floor. The sand was held in place by small logs with rocks here and there to complement the fire in the centre. All the cooking would take place in and around the fire. Clothing hung to dry around the fire. Directly above the fire in the centre of the roof was a hole to allow the smoke to escape. All buildings were made of logs and except for mornings and nights, all men and animals ate outdoors except, of course, the cook. In the beginning the boss would also be the clerk and sometimes the scaler. The first men's camp cookeries were called caboose shanties and were mostly used by the hewers of square timber.

Eventually wood stoves came into the kitchens, sleep camps and all other buildings. Camp stoves were what we would call box stoves, and the kitchen or cookery stove had a flat top and six or eight lids. A seven-inch diameter stove pipe usually ran through the gable end of the building – there were no conventional chimneys. The cookstove had a large metal ring on each corner allowing it to be carried by four men if necessary.

The old "bull beds" were later replaced with double decker metal beds in the men's camp and each man was given a tick that he could fill with hay from the stable instead of spruce and pine boughs. The ticks were eventually replaced by a thin mattress and three blankets.

Eventually the Provincial Government established rules for the camp size and space allotted to each man, as well as for the cook house. These rules were enforced by inspectors, who rarely checked the more remote camps.

The outhouse or biffy was the one small building common to all campsites. Outhouses were built out of small logs and measured around eight feet long and four feet wide. They were half floored, with the other half being a hole in the ground around 24" or 30" deep. Across the hole there was a small log or pole extending the length of the building which could support the weight of four men at a sitting. This piece was not debarked for its end use, and after being in use for a month or so was as smooth as a baby's bottom, the bark having all ended up in the users' pants. When it was –20 degrees Celsius no one lingered. A Saturday night bath in camp was optional.