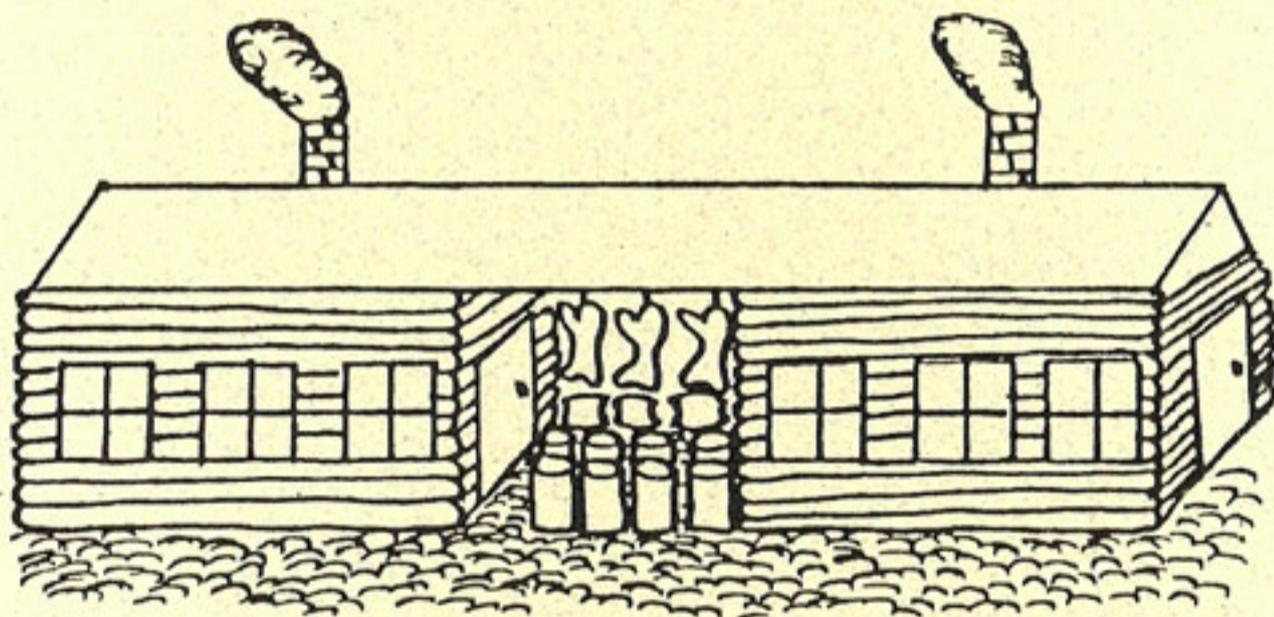


# Old Lumber Camps on The Miramichi



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Written and produced by Miramichi Literacy Writers, a Project of the Literacy Corps Program, Employment and Immigration, Canada, sponsored by Miramichi Literacy Council, New Brunswick

Readability Level 4.8

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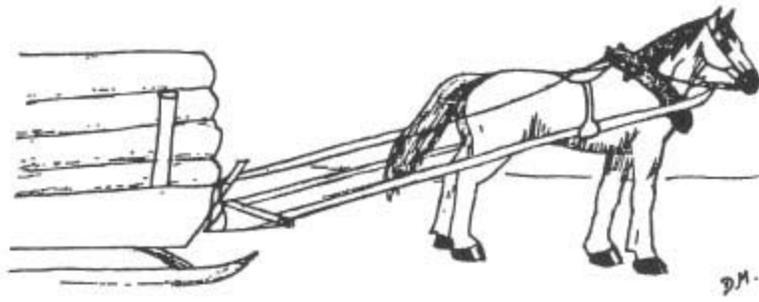
ISBN-0-920709-14-1

Miramichi Literacy Council - Miramichi Literacy Writers series

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Acknowledgements: We wish to acknowledge support funding from the Governments of Canada and the Province of New Brunswick, especially the Departments of Education and Continuing Education.



# OLD LUMBER CAMPS ON THE MIRAMICHI

## CHAPTER I

Oh the floor it was greasy, all covered with mud. The dishes were dirty, and so was the grub. The bed clothes were lousy; the straw it was damp; Give boarders consumption in Bruce's log camp.

—*From song sung by Clare Young of Boiestown in 1960 at the Miramichi Folksong Festival.*

This is a story about the days of the lumber camps on the Miramichi. One lumberman by the name of Tom Johnston from Newcastle tells his story of the lumber camps. He was just fourteen years old when he first went into the woods fifty years ago. In those days when a boy was big enough to use an axe and a cross-cut saw, he was a lumberman.

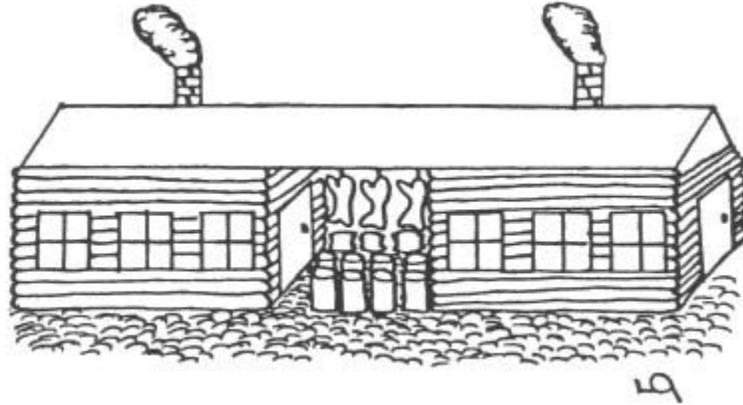
Most of the men in Tom Johnston's Camp took it easy in the summer. Many of the lumbermen owned a farm and a small piece of land which they farmed after the spring drive to Red Bank. But, most of them had their hearts and life in lumbering for the many saw mills on the banks of the Miramichi. Some of these mills were: Fraser's Mill, Burchill's Mill, O'Brien's, Sullivan's Ritchie's and Sinclair's Mills.

In the year of 1926, the men went into the woods fairly late. It was October 12<sup>th</sup>. Most falls, they would go in anytime after the first of September. This campsite, the one that Tom Johnston belonged to, had a contract with Frasers Limited. The late-starting date wouldn't hurt them. The woods was thick and cutting would be easy with a sharp axe.

The first thing the men would do after tracking through the bush was build a camp. This was done by clearing out a campsite with axes and saws. This was called swamping a campsite. "If the road leading to the campsite had to be swamped, and it did in 1926, it was swamped," said Mr. Johnston. Swamping was a rough clearing process. They used their axes to do the clearing. The real work of setting up the campsite came after the swamping was done. Trees were cut and cleared with axes, and two cabins were built. They were joined together by their roofs. One cabin served as a cookroom, the other was the main room with two rows of beds. A big round stove was set in the center of the room. Even though it was cold outside, the men were sure to be warm inside.

## CHAPTER II

The building of the main camp took nearly two weeks. The space in between the two roofs of the camp was called a dingle. The food and meat were kept in the dingle. The dingle had no floor, no walls, just a roof. The food stored here was kept in drums. The meat was hung from the roof of the dingle.

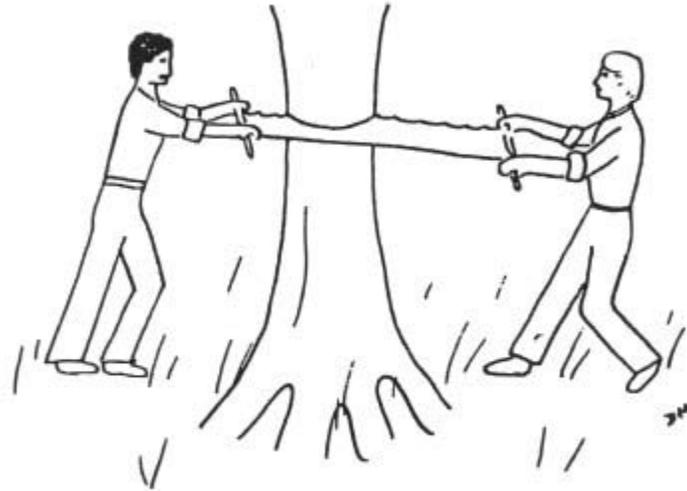


Picture of a Dingle

All the cutting of the trees to build the camps had to be done before they started to cut for the saw mills. The men got up at six a.m. for breakfast. Their breakfast was fresh bread and beans with lots of strong, hot tea. The meals were good but very simple. They ate a lot of potatoes and salted meat because it was easier to keep. The cooks also baked sweets like pies, cake and cookies.

Then the real work began for the men. The main road had to be cut, cleared or swamped right to the river bank. Once at the bank, the land had to be cleared to hold two million feet of lumber. From there, the men would start cutting.

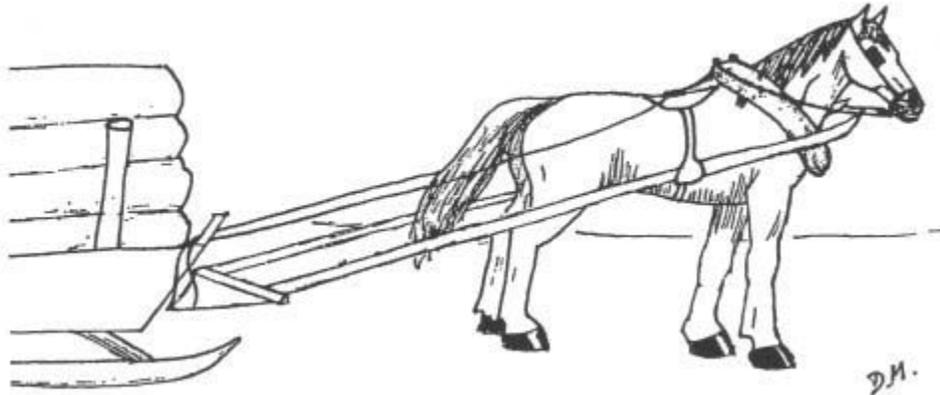
They were set up into teams of three, two men sawing, and a man driving the team of horses. Every morning the three men would head out of their cutting site along the main hauling road. "We'd wear the usual clothes you'd wear in the woods", said Mr. Johnston, long heavy underwear, a heavy cap that covered the ears and heavy coats."



Picture of men sawing trees.

### CHAPTER III

Usually, the men would cut seventy to one hundred logs a day. The logs they cut were fourteen to eighteen feet long. This was almost a yard of wood. The driver, with his horse, would pile the logs beside the main hauling road. This pile of logs was usually very high. The driver was called a yard-piler. The process of hauling logs out of the woods and piling them was called yarding. The yard-piler would tie a rope to a tree behind a yard of logs. He would use this rope to help lift the logs into a pile.



For the saw mills, only the best softwood trees were used. In the Northwest Miramichi, the land was rich with softwood trees. The men would stop two times a day to eat lunch. Their lunch was usually thick pieces of fresh bread and meat, lots of sweet strong tea, and cake and cookies.

“You’d never work after dark,” said Mr. Johnston. “We would stop work around five p.m. in the winter and walk back to the main camp for our meal. Some of the men were as far as five miles away.” Once back, the men would head for the cook’s camp. The meal was served on rough wooden tables. The cook would dish out huge servings of potatoes and meat. Strong hot tea was also served with the meal.

After supper most of the men were so tired they would go directly to bed. But some would play cards, while others played music. Nearly everyone was in bed by ten p.m.

The men sawing logs and the team drivers would go out into the woods six days a week right until Christmas. Sunday was a day to rest, but the men stayed in camp because they were too far from town. They spent the day washing their clothes and resting.



## CHAPTER IV

The cutting of lumber went on until Christmas or until the snow got too deep. One Christmas, forty years ago, Tom Johnston, his wife and two young children had to spend Christmas at the camp. “We were going to come out and spend Christmas Day with my mother,” said Mrs. Johnston. They didn’t plan to stay at the camp, but four feet of snow fell and no one could come and get them out.

The violent winds would blow and the snow would continue to beat against the cabin. The warm fire and soft lights gave them a feeling of security. The children watched the storm from the window. What was it like to spend Christmas Eve in the lumber camp? “It was just the same as any other Sunday”, said Tom Johnston. Mrs. Johnston added, “We didn’t seem to mind it. We didn’t have a Christmas because we didn’t plan on staying.”



The storm stopped by Christmas Day. They walked on snowshoes for about two miles to find out what had happened. Mrs. Johnston's father came and got them with his team of horses. They then spent a merry Christmas with their family.

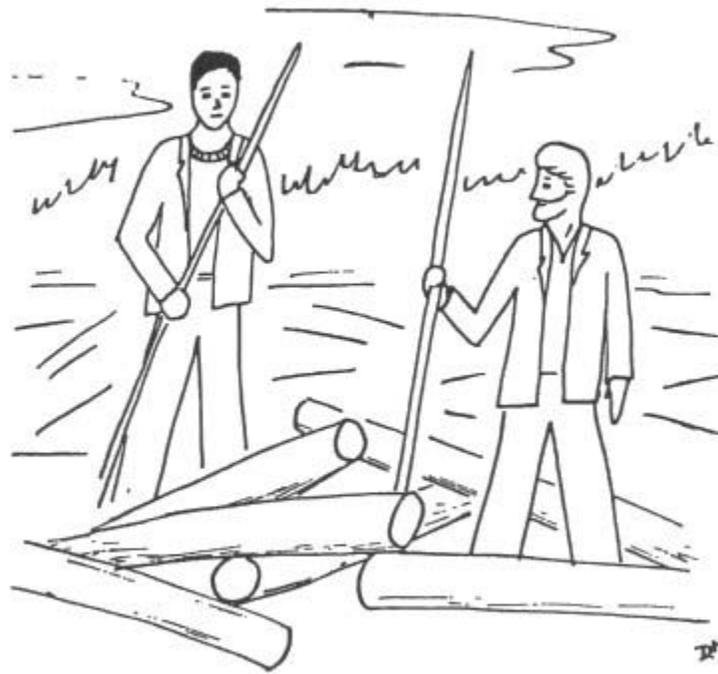
Most times at Christmas, the men would stop work and leave the woods for two weeks. Many of the men had not seen their families since they went into the woods in the fall.

With the wood all cut and the yarding done, the next job would be to plow the main hauling road and landing. This was done with two heavy horses hauling a wooden plow. Any side roads where yarding and cutting was done were also plowed. It took about a week to plow the main hauling road. Usually the road ran one to three miles. If the road was longer, they used water to ice it over.

Now it was time to haul the logs to the landing, wait until spring, and begin the drive to the mills. The hauling would continue one to two months until the end of March. Then it was time to store the food for the next year and take some time off until the drive started.

When the men returned, the first thing to do would be to clear the landing of all the logs. This took from one to two weeks based on the number of logs there were. After this was done, the peavymen would start to work. The peavies were long pointed poles with a hook on the end. The men were called peavyman because they worked with these poles. It was their job to keep the lumber moving along the river to Red Bank.

The peavymen were carried across the river in boats. The boats followed the logs as they moved down the river. The peavymen would work in groups of five or six. They would use their poles to keep the logs apart. The poles also helped to keep the men from falling off the logs into the river.



Peavymen hard at work.

## CHAPTER V

Most mornings in the early spring, the men would be on the river by six a.m. At ten a.m. they would break for their lunch, and again at two p.m. for their second lunch.

The cook's boat would usually arrive at the lunch camp one-half hour before lunch. The lunches were always bread and beans. People went ahead to set up a fireplace of stones for the cook and get the camp ready for the night. In 1926, the men still slept in tents. The tents were open at both ends and at the top where smoke was let out. Logs burned at the men's feet as they slept in a row of twenty. A man had to stay up to keep the fire burning. He would walk along and hit the men's feet if they got too close to the fire.

## CHAPTER VI

The spring drive took twenty to thirty days. It might take longer if the water was low, but it was never shorter than this. The drive was over when the logs arrived in Red Bank. Logs would gather here to wait for boats to haul them away to the saw mill. The job was done for most of the men. Some would go home to do their farming. Some would be employed by the saw mills.

Once all the logs reached Red Bank, rafting had to be done. What is rafting? It is joining the logs together until they make a raft. Then the logs are marked by each logging camp. Mr. Johnson's raft went to Fraser's Mill. Their mark was three green dots on each end of the logs.

After the rafting was done, the raft was hauled to Fraser's Mill by a boat. Fraser's Mill is now known as Boise Cascade.

Through the summer, the men would work hard to get the logs from Red Bank to the saw mills. "The last lumber drive was around 1947 or '48," said Tom Johnston.

Today, the lumber industry is still very important to the Miramichi. A number of mills along the river are still in business. Rayonier's Mill in Blackville, Anderson's Mill and Boise Cascade in Newcastle, and Acadia and Burchill's Mills do a good business.

Machines now do the same work that the men in the lumber camps used to do. These machines can do the work much faster. It takes fewer men to finish the work.

Also, it is easier to get the logs to the mills. Large trucks carry the lumber from the woods. The river is no longer filled with logs travelling to the mills.

The big lumber logs are gone. Whenever a truckload of logs go by, some old-timer somewhere must be thinking of how it used to be.

## WORD LIST

lumber

clear

mill

dingle

axe

yard

swamp

pile

site

peavy

roof

poles

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Tom Johnston for the information they have given us for this book.