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The Lumberjack: A Canadian Folk Hero

Library shelves are replete with the mythic lore of cowboys in the USA, but the literature on the lumberjacks, the men who cut back the frontiers in Canada, is rather sparse. Few people realize that one hundred years ago the favorite game of young boys in the Ottawa Valley town of Renfrew was not “cowboys and Indians” but lumberjacks. In particular, youngsters glorified the exploits of the river drivers and aspired to becoming lumberjacks, just as young boys today might dream of becoming professional hockey players. In this paper, the writer demonstrates that lumberjacks truly were Canadian folk heroes—men, who with very little recognition, endured extreme hardship and danger in order to cut down trees and transport them from the bush to sawmills and pulp and paper mills.

These men called themselves by many names—lumberers, shantymen, timberbeasts, lumberjacks, loggers (in British Columbia), and *forestiers* or *bûcherons* (in Quebec), but for convenience in this paper they are referred to as lumberjacks. Basically, lumberjacks were any workers in an eastern lumber or pulpwood camp. The logging industry began in Eastern Canada in the early 1800s as the square timber trade, but this paper focuses on the lumber industry from around the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of mechanization in the forest industry just after World War II.

The greatest lumberjack of all was Paul Bunyon, an American mythical hero whose legend originated in the Papineau Rebellion of 1837 in Canada. French Canadian strongman, Louis Cyr, also attracted attention to the lumberjack when he worked in the forest near his home in Saint Cyprien, Québec. However, the average Canadian lumberjack was a man of much more obscure origins. For most of the nineteenth century men born on Canadian bush farms and apprenticed to the camps were the key personnel in the logging industry.

Regardless of the origin of the lumberjack, he was a man who was willing to work long hours under extremely difficult and often dangerous conditions. Typically, the lumberjack’s work day lasted from sunrise to sunset which meant that he was on the job from approximately nine to fifteen hours per day depending upon the season. After a strenuous day of sawing, chopping, lifting, and hauling logs in the deep snow he had a ravenous appetite and consumed as much as 9,000 calories daily. Logging camp conditions were primitive and, until the appearance of Finnish lumberjacks, camp sanitation was unacceptable by today’s standards. The men rarely ever washed their clothing and, consequently, lice, bedbugs, and other parasites were common problems in the lumber camps. The treatment of injuries and illness was equally primitive. Serious injuries frequently occurred in the forest and injured lumberjacks did not receive any compensation but usually had to leave the camp to seek other forms of employment.

River driving, performed by the more experienced lumberjacks, was the most glamorous and yet most dangerous job. Many river drivers perished while breaking logjams and they endured extreme hardship while working. They were accustomed to working chest deep in the ice cold water from daylight to dark and were prone to chilblains, arthritis, and rheumatism. At the end of the day, they went to their tents exhausted and jumped into bed with wet clothing and steamed themselves dry. Unheralded acts of bravery and heroism were performed regularly during the river drive and were so commonplace that the lumberjacks hardly thought them worthy of mention. The lifestyle of the lumberjack appealed to many men and drove them back into the bush year after year. They took pride in their work and seemed to thrive upon the hardship and danger associated with their job. They truly were Canadian folk heroes!