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The Leisure Time Activity of the Lumberjack

Library shelves are replete with the mythic lore of cowboys in the U.S.A., but the literature on the lumberjacks, the men who cut back the frontiers in Canada, is rather sparse. At the NASSH conference last year I examined the Spartan lifestyle and physical exploits of the lumberjacks in order to demonstrate that the men truly were Canadian folk heroes. From that presentation one might have been left with the impression that lumberjacks were solemn men who stoically harvested the forests while rejecting all worldly pleasures. It is true that lumberjacks worked hard under difficult and frequently dangerous conditions and routinely performed acts of heroism, but when given the opportunity they also like to play. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the leisure time activity of the lumberjacks and to demonstrate that their leisure time activity gradually changed from the mid-1800s when the lumber industry began as an expansion from the earlier square timber trade up to the beginning of mechanization in the forest shortly after World War II.

Because lumberjacks typically worked from sunrise to sunset their opportunities to recreate were limited to workday evenings, Saturday nights, and Sundays. After supper the bushworkers relaxed for a few hours before going to be about 9:00 p.m. Some would prepare for the next workday by grinding their axes and filing their saws while others would retire to the bunkhouse to talk, tell stories, play cards, sing, or play their musical instruments. After the founding of Frontier College in 1900 some men also attended evening classes taught by an educated co-worker. Around this time Finnish bushworkers introduced the sauna bath to logging camps and this too became a form of evening entertainment.

Saturday night was, by custom, the social event of the week. Because Sunday was a big day of rest the men could stay up until midnight or even one o'clock, and the time was spent singing and dancing, playing cards and other games and telling stories. Since there rarely were any women in the early bush camp "stag" dances were held and some lumberjacks would entertain their fellow bushworkers with step dancing.

Sunday, also known as "boil up" day, was a day of rest in camp. Some ambitious lumberjacks would wash their clothing in a large pot of boiling water. The Sabbath was also dedicated to a variety of other tasks such as gathering fresh boughs for the bunks, collecting firewood, sharpening axes and saws, repairing clothing, shaving, cutting hair and letter writing, but very little attention was given to religion. Some men would go

fishing or blueberry picking while other would wander about the camp. Although fights in logging camps were rare, if they did occur, they usually took place on Sundays when the men were crowded together in idleness. Sunday was also an opportunity for the men to pursue their hobbies such as reading, wood carving and knitting.

Throughout the time period from the mid-1800s to the 1940s the leisure activity of the lumberjacks gradually changed. Up until about 1900 most lumberjacks were men who had been raised on Canadian bush farms and generally were a homogenous group with a common language (French or English) and common traditions in music, dancing, and folk lore. Therefore the lumberjacks' pattern of leisure time activity remained relatively stable up to about 1900. However, after the turn of the century many potential lumberjacks were opting for higher paying industrial jobs and were being replaced by European immigrants, especially Finns and Swedes. These immigrants introduced new songs, dances, games, and traditions into the logging camps. By the 1920s technology started to impact upon how lumberjacks were able to commute from the less telling of the earlier era. Finally, by the 1940s lumberjacks were able to commute from the less remote camps into nearby communities or even to their homes to spend Saturday nights and Sundays away from the logging camps. For most lumberjacks the traditional Saturday night and Sunday leisure activities had come to an end by the late 1940s when a new era of mechanization and technological developments was dawning in the forest industries.