Forest History Foundation, Inc.
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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
with
Julius Joel

Minneapolis, Minnesota

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by John Larson

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Interview with
JULIUS JOEL
June 30, 1953 - Minneapolis, Minnesota
By John Larson, Forest History Foundation, Inc.

My name is Julius Joel. I was born in Yellow Medicine County, the 8th of May, 1876. Father was a month old when he arrived from Norway; Mother was born in Fillmore County. My grandmother arrived by sail ship to Quebec and it was during the cholera period, so my grandmother's husband died there of cholera. She came down through Wisconsin to some folks and later homesteaded 30 miles south of Decorah, Iowa. She stayed there with her family till they grew up and then they went out in Yellow Medicine County to homestead. My father actually stayed with his mother as he was working out. He was in the army. You see, they were fighting Indians. He was also in a crew that went out that summer Custer was killed; that was the same summer I was born. He was out there at Black Hills at the time. So I was seven years old when they moved on the present homestead where my brother resided until his death. I went to school at Wood Lake.

Some other farm boys and I were threshing out there. That would be about the year 1900 because I think it was three years later that I went to Canada in 1903. I worked at home on the farm a while before I went to Canada. Some of the other boys wanted to go to the logging camps after we were through threshing, so I went with them. We were making roads to start with, cutting out the underbrush and dynamiting stumps, making sleigh roads through the coolies down to the lake for the teams. Then after the ground froze up more, we laid skidways along these roads to load the sleighs and then we hauled them up to, oh, not quite to where the camp was, where the railroad came in. But it was just a local road. They had a round house and engineer right in camp. That camp was 18 miles from Ironwood, Michigan - south, I imagine, southwest. The trains left towards the east, I know, when they left camp with the logs. They said they dumped the logs on a lake or some water there where the sawmill was.

After we got the roads made I got the job of following the teamster and rolling the logs; he hauled them out of the bush where the sawman was cutting down the trees and there were others cutting the limbs off. Then the team would pull them out to where we rolled them down the skidway - that's two logs that lay with the ends toward the road and we piled them full, that would make a load for the sleighs. The logs would probably be fifty, sixty feet long.

Then they'd load them onto the sleigh using the team. They had an expert team there, too, because it had been too old to use in the fire department here in St. Paul, I believe, so they'd retired. They were so well trained you didn't have to speak to them. You see, they put the chain around the log and then there were two poles that went up on top of the sleigh

and they just hooked the chain around the log and it rolled up. There was a man on each end to steer it with peevies and they loaded immense loads. I saw some loads down there at the Historical Society Museum today something similar to that, about 11 feet wide and 6 or 8 feet high. They hauled some awfully big loads on those sleighs, much bigger than they took on the railroad.

The railroad was there already, but they put in more branches because we had to make big yards to store logs in. You see, we could haul in many more logs than they could take away because we had probably twenty teams working drawing in logs, and there was only one locomotive taking out logs. He had a long haul, and he could only take three cars and only half as much at a time maybe, or less, than a sleigh could. So we gained on him nearly all the time.

Those who had the highest wages were called top loaders. My wages was $26.00 a month during the winter, and board. Fine board. We had no kick coming all winter on that. Splendid. The top loader got $40.00, but he was probably 50, 60 years old and had been at that for 20 years or more; he was an expert at that. Oh, it was dangerous work, too, to be on top of a load handling those big logs if they'd hit you or crush you or something. You jumped from one log to another. This team backed up to the sleigh and they just hooked a chain on and there were men on each side, you see, so the logs went up pretty fast, too. And he had to judge where to put them every time.

I imagine there would be about ten or twenty gangs, chopping down the trees, two men in a gang. Then there were swampers; they cut the limbs off and made a trail so the team could get to the logs. I imagine there were about an equa l number of swampers. Then these teams that I worked with would go in and they had what was similar to ice tongs, behind the horses. These just hooked into the log and dragged it out to the skidway, one log at a time. But those horses were so well trained too that you could say "haw" and "gee" and hang up the line. I had practically worked behind the same team all winter, but I remember distinctly we probably had twelve or fifteen different teamsters because they came and went all the time. They were harder to please, you see - how to take care of the horses; some misused them not only in driving them, but maybe in taking care of them at the barn and things. So they were changed quite often. Whether it was the teamsters' fault or the bosses' fault, I couldn't say, but I know they were misused because they were trained to pull, and I know sometimes they'd hitched their tongs to a stump that couldn't be moved and the horses would lean down and either break the harness or they'd almost scream in desperate fury, and they couldn't move it.

We worked pretty long days. We got up at 6 o'clock in the morning and had breakfast, and sometimes walked two miles, and then had to wait

a while because it was still too dark to see to work. You see, they had worked there before, so the surrounding timber close by within a radius of a mile or so was already cut. We cut all white pine, very nice trees, all winter. They varied, but I'd say the average would be about two feet in diameter, two and a half. But we had many that were three, four or five feet across the stump. And we worked at cutting out white pine practically all winter, but towards spring we cut hemlock for those iron mines up there for supports and posts. And later on they got orders to cut a lot of cedar telephone poles, so we cut quite a few carloads of them too before the spring breakup.

We had quite a few men that tried both the mines and lumbering. Oh, each has its advantages and disadvantages. Some of the Finlanders from the old country who were experienced woodsmen took jobs in the mines before the logging camps opened. They thought that was a terrible experience, but when then did begin working in the logging camps they found the cold weather pretty hard to put up with, too. One nice thing, of course, about the mines was that the temperature would be the same all the time. Where we were at the camps it got to be very cold, 50 degrees below zero sometimes, but we had lots of clothes, and you could get more at what they called the "wannegan" - the store there. I never suffered from the cold but I remember some old fellows that would be too stingy to buy them; they'd wear mitts with the fingers worn out or poor shoes, you know. They did freeze some that way, but it was more their own fault than otherwise. Especially some of those old-timers. There was an old Swede there with long whiskers; he had been in there for many years, I guess, but he had been through there in summer too, as watchman and he was foreman on the section gang, and they had a cold job looking after the rails. That was really the coldest job - standing on the handcars, running up and down taking care of the track. He was so saving that he didn't wear clothes fit to be out in cold weather and still when we came out in the spring, he had spent $50.00 a day then when he got out of camp.

We got paid at the end of the season. They gave us a check - well, I wouldn't be sure, but I think we got a check. We could buy things at the store and charge them. Oh, they had everything we needed, and the grub was especially good; at least, I never heard any complaints, and I gained twenty pounds when I was there. So I didn't suffer any. No, they had dandy meat, and quite a variety. They had pancakes practically every morning and fresh fish right from the lake. You see, the lake was two miles away.

We'd go down there some Sundays since we didn't work. It would freeze out ten or twelve miles maybe in the winter, and then when the high winds came it would smash the ice up on the shore and you could hear the racket up in the camp. It was a sight to see all those big chunks of ice - big as large houses - piled up along the shore. But fishermen came along and sold fresh fish and supplied them to the camp, so we had fish all winter.

In the evening in the camp they played cards and some would play violins, and some would sing. They were a jolly crowd. You see, we were over a hundred men in the camp. Of course, a certain percentage would go and others come in, especially those teamsters. I know they changed a number of times, but the others stayed pretty steadily. They told a lot of stories, when I come to think of it, their experiences in their work, threshing. Most of them went out to the Dakotas harvesting and threshing, and spent the winter in the lumber camps. But I don't know if there was anything worth retelling. You know, of course, they worked differently then and there were no hours set - threshing all day, and then maybe some wouldn't quit when it got dark, and somebody'd go around and either put a pitchfork into a machine to put it out of commission or throw a belt off or something to stop when they got tired. They'd tell stories like that.

(Did you ever hear any Paul Bunyan stories?)

Yes. There were, but of course, they were so extreme that it was ridiculous. I remember them telling he had a blue ox - of course, they'd make up their own color - so big it would take three ax handles to measure between his eyes or his horns. Most of the camp were Scandinavians - I was a Scandinavian, and so were most of the boys that went down with me. I remember distinctly one was a farmer's son in Wisconsin; he had come out west to Yellow Medicine County to harvest and he had been in the woods before, and some of the other boys were down too. Some came from the old country and some were born here. But the straw boss we had was from Norway and he had long white shiskers. He had worked for the company, I suppose, many, many years and was a very nice gentleman to get along with. He could tell you stories all day, if you'd just listen to him.

We had a fellow in Canada just like that Swede that was boss on the section gang. He had long gray whiskers too and was tall and slim. He came up to Canada to homestead on a corner of my land and he was a real roustabout too. He had been through that work, too, of course. We lived seventy miles from Moose Jaw. When he wasn't busy on his homestead and he wanted a job or to go to town, he didn't hesitate to walk to Moose Jaw, seventy miles away. We lived at Elbow on the Saskatchewan River in a small village.

I was looking over this list of questions. Well, I started to work in the woods about 1900, I imagine. And "what did I do?" I was skidding logs. That's what I did most of the time. And "what was life in the woods like?" Well, it was fine. I never enjoyed myself any better than I did there, both as to work, food, and I gained twenty pounds when I was there. I didn't make much money, though. And "what did we eat?" Well, I remember them bringing in lots of beef just in quarters, you know. Had them hanging up. And they had tubs and tubs of margarine, but it was very good, just as good as butter - yellow, too. I thought it was just as good as

butter, anyway. And "what utensils?" There were tin dishes, of course. Tin plates. And "what special clothing did we wear?" We had heavy woolen clothing, woolen shirts. We had three tiers of bunks, one on the floor, one in between and one right under the eaves. Mine was on the top story where it was warmest. You got in sideways. You had to step on one to climb up to the other. But it was just hay or straw and blankets in there; there weren't any mattresses.

And "were there any accidents?" Yes, there were a few that got hurt in different ways, though it wasn't bad. An ax would slip into a man's leg or something sometimes and there were some other small accidents, but nothing serious. Nobody was killed, anyway. I think a man took the logging train out if he was so bad he couldn't work. I don't think there was anyone in camp unless it was the boss that could fix him up. The boss was an Irishman. We never saw much of him, and he never said very much. He'd keep out of sight most of the time, and he'd probably be in the bush somewhere around, watching them at work. He'd never say antyhing to a man if he didn't like him. The reason there was such a change in teamsters was because when he saw how a man treated his horses, either out there where they worked or in the barn - I coulnd't say wich, he would just tell him to get his time, that's all, and get out. They didn't argue with anybody. No, I had no kick coming. Of course, we had this old fellow, this Norwegian straw boss, that looked after a local road gang, but the boss of the camp was that big Irishman.

I'm sorry to say that I cannot remember what company ran the camp. It might have been Weyerhaeuser, but I don't know. I don't think so. I can't remember any other company. And "did you use horses - what tools did you use?" I used the ax and a cant-hook. A cant-hook mostly. I had an ax but the only reason I had to use it that I can think of was if I felt cold or there wasn't enough to do to keep me active, I'd take the ax and start to cut at a stump or something just to keep warm. They usually brought dinner out with a horse and sleigh - the cook would send out one horse and a little sleigh.

And "how did you get the timbers to the rivers?" Well, first it was loaded on sleighs and taken out to this big yard where the railroad was. What was piled up there covered many acres. As I said before, we gained cutting logs and bringing them up there. The railroad, of course, could take them out even after the snow melted in the spring, but you see, we had to make ice roads and it was heavy going to get the logs up. It was uphill most of the time and men worked all night with a large water tank on these sleighs. They went down to the lake and filled the tank there. The tank was at least six feet wide and six feet deep. Like all the other sleighs, these were heavy and they didn't turn them around when they got down there, they just put the pole to the other end. To fill the tank two logs were placed from the sleigh to the hole in the ice. A bucket the size of a

barrel was filled and they slid it up on the poles until it got to the top of the tank where it was dumped in. Then they had to haul this water all night on the roads, and then a machine went over it with knives that cut ruts for the runners.

"How were the logs rafted to the mills?" Well, they dumped them on the ice up there. I didn't go to see where they unloaded, but they said it was on a lake, and then when the ice went out they just shoved them over to where they float out, you see.

The boss had a shack of his own, where he slept; the time keeper was there and the man that ran the wannegan store. "Were there lumberjack songs?" Yes, there surely were. Though not any more so than working about threshing because that was interesting work. "Did the employers treat the employees fairly or were there grievances?" No, I never heard any grievances. There wasn't anyone fired unless they had reason to be. And I didn't hear any complaints about food, clothes or anything else. And "how much timber could a good crew cut in a day?" Well, now that varies a little as to size. We called a crew two sawers, you see - two men with a long saw. And I think the record was two hundred logs. But they were rivals, you see; each crew had to make a report at night how many logs they had cut. And "how long did you work in the woods?" Well, I was there from early fall in October until in March. The fields were green when I came home out of the woods. And "when did this logging railway come in?" That was there before I came, but we extended it quite a bit. That was just a standard gauge road and a funny looking locomotive. I have never seen one like it before or since. Just a small old type; I don't know of any other place that I have ever seen anything like it. The logging cars were very simple; just a four-wheel truck on each end and a steel rail across each end for the logs to rest on. I don't think they had any brakes because the engineer had a few runaways coming back with empty cars. So the boss had us built a side track that circled around the camp and turned uphill again. Then when we heard the runaway train coming we could throw the switch at the camp and it would run around the camp and up the hill until it lost its momentum.