

Oral History Interview

with

J. A. MATHIEU

Fort Frances, Ontario

August 4, 1957

by Bruce C. Harding, Forest History Foundation, Inc.

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HARDING: Mr. Mathieu, could you give us your full name, your birth date and where you were born?

MATHIEU: James Arthur Mathieu. I was born at Alma, Wisconsin, August 21, 1869.

HARDING: That makes you how old to-day?

MATHIEU: Eighty-eight years old on August 21 of this year.

HARDING: Well, that's not very far away. You were born right on the Mississippi River then in the days when they were shipping logs down to Davenport and St. Louis.

MATHIEU: They went all the way to St. Louis.

HARDING: Can you give us some of your childhood experiences along the river there? Did they use the stern-wheelers to control those or did they float them down or what?

MATHIEU: They were rafted into small rafts and then taken out into larger water and made into larger rafts and towed by boats down the Mississippi River as far as St. Louis, Missouri.

HARDING: When did you first go to work for a logging or lumbering company?

MATHIEU: In 1885, at first on the rafting works, then on a raft boat for several years, then in the main office at Beef Slough. I worked on the raft boats two or three years and went to school in the winter time. Then I went to work in the boom companies at Beef Slough.

HARDING: This was after you graduated from high school?

MATHIEU: Yes.

HARDING: Do you recall anything about the type of person that was on those log booms? Were they a rough type of persons or was it a conglomeration of most everyone?

- MATHIEU: I would say they were the ordinary wild bunch of lumberjacks, but they by no means blew all their money for drink; many of them became farmers and business men who were very successful in many large undertakings. They were a mixture of many nationalities, some coming from Canada and down east. There were also Scandinavians who largely settled in Minnesota.
- HARDING: In securing a job there on the boom, was it a matter of getting a job with an employment agency referral or going down to the shack and signing up yourself or what?
- MATHIEU: I don't recall that there were any employment agencies at that time.
- HARDING: How about the general wage scale at that time. Could you give us an idea of about what the wage scale was?
- MATHIEU: During the time I was there it was \$1.25 a day, a ten hour day, and board.
- HARDING: Were there very many young fellows going to work for the lumber companies at that time?
- MATHIEU: Yes.
- HARDING: How many years' experience did you have there on the boom? When did you come up north?
- MATHIEU: I was on the boom, rafting logs, at first in 1885, then put in a couple of seasons on a raft boat that towed the small log rafts anywhere from Winona to LaCrosse. Then I went into the main office of the boom company at Beef Slough. Seeing the end of rafting on the Mississippi at that point I went to Minnesota in 1897 and went to work with the Crookston Lumber Company which had mills at St. Hilaire, Minnesota, and Crookston, Minnesota.
- HARDING: What was your job with them?
- MATHIEU: I had charge of logging and of the buying of timber, the two mills consumed 75 million feet of logs per year.
- HARDING: Where did you move from there?
- MATHIEU: After being with Crookston Lumber Company for five years I came to Canada. I followed the pine trees that were disappearing in Minnesota and came to Canada in the year

1902, and looked over the area just north of the Minnesota boundary with the idea of establishing a sawmill in the Rainy River district.

HARDING: And so you were more or less of a scout coming up here trying to find the proper timber and location?

MATHIEU: That's what I was at that time. I first built a mill at Rainy River, Ontario, and started sawing in 1905, started another mill on the American side which is now Baudette, Minnesota, and started sawing there in 1906. The two mills had a capacity of 120 million feet per year. Next I built a mill at Fort Frances with a capacity of 70 million feet per year. Then I organized J. A. Mathieu Limited mill of a capacity of 50 million feet per year. This mill is still operating on a reduced capacity.

HARDING: Were you looking for water power for a sawmill?

MATHIEU: Not so much for water power.

HARDING: Did you have any idea at that time that there would be mining going on in a few years?

MATHIEU: Yes, I did -- I didn't get interested in mining much until the last ten years. I'm in the mining game now, in a fairly large way, and I'm, as well, still very much interested in lumbering.

HARDING: I've been told that the basis of a lot of mining wealth was started in timber.

MATHIEU: That's right.

HARDING: What was the process of logging up to now?

MATHIEU: In the early days of my first experience, trees were largely felled by axes. The state of Maine lumberjacks were the most proficient in that; they were the best axe men. The trees were cut to logs by cross-cut saws; they were largely skidded and hauled to various landings with oxen. The skidding was done by pairs of oxen, hauling by pairs of threes and some hauling by four pairs. That was followed by the use of horses for skidding and hauling. Steam haulers then came into a considerable extent, mechanical skidders now largely take the place of horses. Truck hauling takes the place of sleds, and trucks pretty well take the place of railroad hauling.

Cross-cut saws and Swede-saws used in the early days have almost disappeared and have been replaced by power-saws. Mechanical logging has superseded the logging of the early days.

HARDING: Do you recall some of the conditions that the men were working under at that time? Do you feel that it was a type of life where a person had to be a little bit unusual to go out in the logging camps?

MATHIEU: In some respects that is true. It's nothing like it is to-day, of course. If you were pretty well versed in how to get along in the woods it wasn't particularly a hardship. When you arrived at camp you were given blankets and told what bunk you were to occupy. You made up your own bed of hay, straw or balsam boughs.

HARDING: Did the men furnish their own equipment and clothing?

MATHIEU: They furnished all their clothing but no equipment of any kind.

HARDING; How did you secure a foreman for a camp in those days?

MATHIEU: We hired someone that had experience and we were continually teaching young fellows.

HARDING: Did your company pay the men at all in due-bills or did they pay in cash?

MATHIEU: My men were always paid in cash. Some of the companies paid in due-bills, which were paid September 1st of the same year. Due-bills were usually discounted 25 to 30 per cent.

HARDING: Some of the fellows told me about the hospital plan they had in the logging camps where they paid a dollar a month and got pretty good hospital care.

MATHIEU: The hospital plan was usually arranged by payment of a dollar per month or five dollars per season. The men were very well taken care of, other than slowness in getting them to a hospital.

HARDING: In the matter of the change of logging methods, you mentioned that oxen were first used out in the woods.

MATHIEU: I can still recall a few oxen being used in Wisconsin, and gradually going over to the use of horses. Then we got the steam hauler. Of course, that was used largely on the roads. It's advanced very fast in this last number of years, hardly a horse in the woods, although there are a few horses here and there but not very many. We use caterpillars and trucks and power saws. There's scarcely a cross-cut or old Swede-saw in the woods now. It makes it very much easier but it doesn't reduce the cost as much as some people seem to think, although the number of men employed to do the same work has been reduced to half in the last fifty years.

HARDING: How about the matter of religion in the camps? Were there very many sky pilots around in the camps?

MATHIEU: I don't recall any camp where we didn't have a sky pilot or a minister come out two or three times during winter.

HARDING: How were those men paid?

MATHIEU: They took up a collection as a rule. They were pretty well taken care of. I'll say this for the lumberjack, he'll always dish out a little. They'd always take care of it in the office and give him a cheque for it and deduct it from the men.

HARDING: Do you know of any company that paid for the ministers themselves to go around on a circuit so to speak?

MATHIEU: No, I don't know of any.

HARDING: On the matter of railroad logging, was it quite expensive to lay those tracks?

MATHIEU: Not particularly, they didn't build a real good railroad. It wasn't any more expensive than an iced logging road that had to be made each season.

HARDING: When you located the mill, let's say in the early 1900s, what were some of the criteria that you used for selecting a site for a mill?

- MATHIEU: The logs were largely watered in those days so the mill was located on a river or lake. Naturally you located the mill where logs could be delivered cheapest.
- HARDING: So the water location was all-important. Were the early mills mostly steam operated rather than water-power operated?
- MATHIEU: Many of the mills in the early days were water power, then most of them turned over to steam. To-day many of the modern mills are electrical, which is, in many respects, superior to any other power.
- HARDING: What in your opinion caused this area to switch over from a saw log type of operation to pulp and paper? Was this a matter of cutting off the saw logs?
- MATHIEU: The sawmills invaded the timber in most instances prior to the pulp and paper mills. The smaller inferior timber which in those days was not usable for lumber was left standing, and it and the second-growth timber that came up are more suitable for pulp and paper mills. Most of the abandoned areas where a sawmill has been, is now superseded by a pulp and paper mill. By more careful cutting and reforestation they are working toward the idea of having a perpetual, sustained yield. Most of them are doing an excellent job in that respect. In many areas the sawmills are now working on the same principal and are successful in cutting and reforestation so that they too will have a perpetual supply, all of which is the best way of preserving timber for future generations.
- HARDING: Do you feel that the present operation of the pulp and paper mills is going to give us sustained yield over the years?
- MATHIEU: I'm almost positive of it. They're planting trees now, not as fast as they're cutting, but they're planting a lot and modern forestry is pretty much on a basis of sustained yield.
- HARDING: How do you feel about this argument I've heard from some people that the tree planting operation is a public relations angle rather than actual forestry?
- MATHIEU: My opinion is the other way. We're planting to perpetuate the forests.
- HARDING: In the matter of research, hardwood comes up faster than the spruce and pine?

MATHIEU: Yes, it does.

HARDING: Do you feel that through research you'll be able to find uses for that hardwood?

MATHIEU: I think we will. Probably make an even better product than the soft-wood.

HARDING: You've operated both in the United States and Canada. Have you found any difference in the government relationships between the two?

MATHIEU: Not very much.

HARDING: How about the matter of Indian reservations here in Ontario, for example. Do you log Indian reservations here?

MATHIEU: Yes, we do. That comes under the federal government, Indian Department.

HARDING: Rather than the province?

MATHIEU: Yes.

HARDING: How does the grading of lumber operate? Is there a lumbermen's association that grades itself or does the government here in Canada do part of it?

MATHIEU: Practically all lumber is sold on grades. The lumber associations are very efficient in looking after grading of lumber and disputes are usually settled by an expert grader. The government doesn't do very much, it's an association of the lumbermen themselves.

HARDING: What is the counterpart of the National Lumber Manufacturers Association in Canada?

MATHIEU: The Canadian Lumbermen's Association in Canada is operated on the same principal as the National Lumber Manufacturers Association in the United States. The Canada associations and the associations in the United States in many cases co-operate and visit back and forth and work together harmoniously for the good of the lumber business.

HARDING: What's your feeling on the matter of the forestry schools? Do they train a practical type of forester?

- MATHIEU: Their training is excellent. Their graduates need practical experience, of course, which they pick up very fast; they are a very good addition to forestry and lumbering. They are doing a splendid job particularly in regards to reforestation and working toward the idea of having a perpetual sustained yield in preserving timber for future generations.
- HARDING: Getting back to the operation of the mill in the early 1900s, did you have any experience with union organizations before World War I?
- MATHIEU: No.
- HARDING: Then of course the Wobblies came in during World War I and immediately after. Did you have any experience with them, the I. W. W.?
- MATHIEU: No, we didn't have the I. W. W. up here, that was just in the West.
- HARDING: When was it that organized labor started a campaign to organize first the mills and then the logging operations themselves here?
- MATHIEU: In the middle of the 1930s there was quite a struggle. First the AF of L came in, then the CIO.
- HARDING: On the eight-hour day, did that put a crimp in operations at first to adjust to an eight-hour day when the unions won that demand?
- MATHIEU: In some of the departments it did. For instance, on the drives when they used to work from daylight to dark, or particularly on the lakes where they towed logs, and all that kind of thing, it made a very vast difference.
- HARDING: Did you have to carry more men than usual to keep that drive moving?
- MATHIEU: More men to do the same amount of work, a lot more men, and as a result you didn't get your logs down as fast as you ordinarily would.
- HARDING: Could you tell me a little bit about the equipment that was used in the old days of logging? Do you feel that a man had to know how to use it properly in order not to get hurt or do you feel that there was an inherent danger in the logging operations?
- MATHIEU: Well, there's a very vast difference between the

equipment in those days and now. In the old days with the cross-cut saws and axes and peaveys and cant-hooks, the work was largely done by hand, almost entirely by hand. You sawed your log and you skidded each one by itself. I don't think the danger of being injured was very much greater than it is now. It has often been brought to my notice and I've been asked the question, "Are more men hurt in the woods since we have machinery than before?" and I have found very little difference.

HARDING: How about the medical care? As we said before, there was the hospital ticket and the medical care was pretty good. Do you think it's better to-day?

MATHIEU: In the early days it was fairly good and now the medical care is excellent and is largely taken care of by government compensation acts. So far as hospital care, I don't think there's very much difference; the big difference is in getting an injured man to the hospital. Now the injured are taken to the hospital for medical care by planes or trucks. Medical care of the woodsmen to-day, is almost as efficient as that in a city.

HARDING: How long have you been operating here in Canada?

MATHIEU: Fifty-three years.

HARDING: It seems kind of unusual to me that an American citizen would become a Canadian citizen. It's the reverse of the normal, let's say.

MATHIEU: It's partly an accident. I sometimes say that I left Wisconsin because the trees were getting scarce and when they got pretty well cut out of Minnesota, I just moved across the boundary to Canada where there were lots of them. That was partly the reason. We were looking for a new outlet and a new place to continue the cut of timber.

HARDING: Do you feel that the tariff has been of use to Canadian lumber?

MATHIEU: Not so much. I thought it was abused during Mr. Hoover's administration when they put four dollars per thousand on lumber.

HARDING: How about the matter of newsprint? I've been told that the American newspapers are dependent upon the Canadian produced newsprint. On the Canadian production, is the largest market the United States and then the United Kingdom?

MATHIEU: Yes, pretty much so, Canada is the largest newsprint producer in the world. The largest market is in the United States and we also supply Great Britain with a considerable amount.

HARDING: Do you ship your production mostly by rail to-day?

MATHIEU: Almost entirely, but truck shipments are increasing.

HARDING: Do you still maintain your contacts with the American lumbermen that you've known over the years?

MATHIEU: Yes. We have a Northern Pine Manufacturers Association. I've been president for many years, and we still contact and keep very well posted on the market in the United States as well as our locality.

HARDING: Do you maintain a headquarters for that organization? Do you have an office to maintain or is it just wherever you happen to be?

MATHIEU: We have an office, the main office of the proprietary association is the National Lumber Manufacturers Association with an office in Washington, D. C., and then the various regional associations have offices at the various places for various species of lumber.

HARDING: Do you think there would be a possibility of securing some historical evidence of that association's work?

MATHIEU: I think it would be well for you to call on Walter Ellinger, the secretary of the Northern Pine Manufacturers Association. He has it listed under his name because the office is right in his home now. You'll have no difficulty locating him. Tell him that I suggested you get in touch with him.