

THE SHANTY BOYS

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The Shanty Boys

That's what they call them, before "lumberjack" became popular. Life was tough and the work was hard. It still is. The real money went to a bank back east while the blood, sweat, and cooties were here. It's still that way—except, maybe, for the cooties. They walked tall, dove deep, swing a broad ax, and helped build a nation. They still do. There was "Moonlight" Johnson, Big Eric, Tom "Tin-Can" Sullivan, Silver Jack Driscoll, "Good Lookin'" Tom. They were a prod-

uct of the age they lived in. They'll not pass this way again.

The identity of the first people to pass through the Upper Peninsula of Michigan is lost in the dim dark past. The ice receded some 6,000 years ago. Let's say that 3,000 years ago (and who really knows when?) someone was here digging up copper. The Indians lived here off and on—they were a nomadic people. It wasn't until the early 1600s that the first white man, Etienne Brule, saw the mighty Lake Superior. After that, well, there went the neighborhood.

Early occupants didn't use the trees, the wood, for much but tools and campfires. The Indians might have used some

of the saplings as supports for their shelters. When the weather turned cold, they usually went south—at least as far as Bay de Noc.

About 1831, a small sawmill was built at the mouth of the Menominee River by a Mr. William Farnsworth. He was a little ahead of his time. The venture failed.

Around 1860, Mr. George Dawson began cutting pine in the Big Bay area just east of the Huron Mountains. He cut large timber, squared them, and shipped them to his brother, Thomas, at Sault Ste. Marie. Thomas transshipped the timbers to England, mostly for ship building, to help Britannia rule the waves. Dawson and his crew were restricted to areas near water—the lake or large rivers—as they had no other way to move the heavy timbers. Meanwhile,

Cabin men and teams in an Ontonagon County, Michigan logging camp, 1901.



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Above *Lunching in the woods, J. M. Paine Lumber Company.*

Right *Lumberjacks with two-man cross cut saw or "miserly whip", and oxen with the "go devil" sled in the woods, circa 1900.*

American loggers were chewing their way through the forests of Maine, New York, Pennsylvania, and on toward Michigan. By the 1870s, these eastern loggers were moving into the Upper Peninsula.

The ax was the primary tool in the early days. Saws had been in use one way or another since the Roman era but it wasn't 'til the 1880s that the cross-cut saw was modified with "rakers" between the teeth to carry the sawdust out of the cut, the saw kerf. The men came to refer to the long two-man cross-cut saw as "the miserly whip."

It was eastern money that financed the logging boom. Speculators bought and sold land. It was common to log "round-forties" buy or contract forty acres and cut all the forties around it too. Much government land was just cut off and nothing was ever done about it. There was a lot of wheelin' and dealin' and corner-cutting all up and down the line and most of the money went back east.

The fellows who did the actual work were the lumberjacks. Shanty boys they were called in the early days. They're popularly called a happy-go-lucky bunch who took the good with the bad. In real-



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ity, the life was hard, the pay poor, and lucky was the man who avoided injury. They took the good with the bad—mostly bad. They were up before daylight to be in the woods as soon as it was light enough to work. Lunch was brought to them. They didn't get back to camp 'til after dark. Sundays were "a day off" spent repairing clothing, mending and sharpening equipment, and trying to chase the cooties out of the bedding—such as it was. The men often slept two to a bunk. If they entered from one end it was called a "muzzle loader."

The men would be separated from one another by a "snortin' pole" down the center of the bunk. An intellectual discussion might concern the advisability of avoiding bathing on the theory that the smell would keep the mosquitoes away. They swore, they drank, they fought—one another if there was no one else—and they cut timber—for \$15 a month "and found."

As railroads branched into the area the reach of the logger increased. They'd lay track into a stand of timber, cut and haul it out, pick up the track, and lay it

Logging and hauling with oxen and horses in the Great Lakes forest.



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down elsewhere. Railroad cars were lined with bunks and a stove. Other cars were made into cook shanties. Lumber camps were now portable.

The 1930s and 40s introduced the “rubber tired loggers.” Trucks and automobiles were making it possible for some of the “jacks to live at home and commute to the woods. Logs were hauled out on trucks.

During World War II, German prisoners of war were sent to the UP to work in the woods. The government had to have special quarters built for the prisoners. The rules of the Geneva Convention considered the living conditions of the lumber jacks below the standards for prisoners of war.

Woods work was and still is considered a dangerous occupation: falling trees, dead falls—“Widow-makers,” they’re called—shifting logs, broken lines, all were part of the job. The food was plentiful and almost universally good—plain but good. Nothing would send a man down the road to another camp faster than poor food.

Operators often hired “man-catchers” to travel to the cities to recruit men to work in the woods. These new guys would show up in fancy oxfords and city clothes to work in the UP woods—in winter. The boss would gather the newcomer’s sacks, bags, suitcases “for safekeeping.” It was for “keeping” the re-

cruits “safe” and at work. They weren’t apt to leave if they had nothing but the clothes on their backs.

The mean would work all winter, collect their poke after the spring drive, and head for town. In a week or so they’d have gotten drunk, spent or had their money stolen, and head back for the woods. They’d be broke but with wild tales to tell and ready to start over. There were exceptions but not many. The cycle of a “Shanty Boy’s” life.

A German fella’ invented the chain saw in 1937 but it would be many years before it was made light and portable enough to be readily used in the woods. By the ’40s, the gasoline engine was replacing horses and oxen. The pulp wood and chemical wood market was supplementing saw logs and bowling pins.

Older lumberjacks would often sign on “for the season.” In the fall, a jobber would provide them with bacon, beans, coffee, a little salt, a little tobacco, and the ’jack’d live alone in a shack in the woods. Through the winter he’d cut pulp wood—and peel it—for 3 to 5 cents a stick payable in the spring—less the costs of last fall’s stake. These old-timers were a dying breed. The last of a tall walkin’, loud talkin’, deep drinkin’, hard fightin’ bunch. They were left behind like worn out tools, passed up by the move westward. We’re not likely to see their kind ever again.

A modern day logger has arisen, a new breed of “Shanty Boy.” The cross cut saw and the broad ax have given way to the feller-buncher, the hydraulic skidder, the slasher. The “Eastern Money” has become “The Corporation.” The jobber/lumberjack of today is self-employed or a member of a small crew. The jobber needs a quick mind as well as a strong back. He’s got be able to negotiate with a banker as well as swear at the crew. He can’t throw a Pettibone loading machine over his shoulder as easily as the old ’jack did his ax and head down the road. In addition to timber cruising, he has to estimate cutting time, interest rates, equipment maintenance, profit margin, return on investment, taxes, insurance.

Ah, but if you ask them if they’d do it again, they’ll look at you—kind of sideways, you know. They’ll rub the back of their neck, kick the dirt, maybe spit and swear a little, then they’ll admit it. “Yeah, yeah, I probably would.” They’ll sneak another look at you—see if your laughin’ at ’em. The thing is they love the woods, most of them. They really do. They’re out there every day. They’re their own boss. They can cuss, scratch where it itches, and they’re out in the woods where they want to be.

I guess that’s why I like them too.

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