



Logging and Our Ancestors

Sue Lisk explores the logging industry

“WHEN I HEARD THEY WERE HIRING UP AT A PLACE CALLED Timmins – cutting wood – I couldn’t even sharpen an axe. But according to the people paying my way up there, I was just a crackerjack lumberjack.”

With these words, George Ramsay described how he came to work for a time in an Ontario logging camp. Some Canadians might have referred to it as a “bush camp”, or a “shanty”, the latter term derived from “chantier”, the French-Canadian word for such a camp.



Some men travelled on logging railroads to reach remote bush camps. (Photo courtesy of Kathleen Ramsay Buso)

But whether in Canada or the U.S., many of our male ancestors and relatives would have spent at least some time working in a logging camp, primarily in the winter. And their jobs and the logging industry itself would have affected the lives of their families and communities.

Let’s explore a bit of the history of logging, the camps where the men worked, and their experiences there, through several websites devoted to the subject.

Timber Trade History in Canada

Perhaps logging in North America is most strongly associated with Canada, even though logging was also carried out extensively in the U.S., particularly in the northern regions of the country. The Canadian Encyclopedia, published and operated by Historica Canada, offers an overview of the history of the timber trade there at www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/timber-trade-history.

The article provides background information related to the industry

and explains the basic logging methods employed. Winter was the preferred season for logging because, at this time of year, there was no shortage of men willing to work in the logging camps. They could more easily fell trees when the sap was not running. And snow also facilitated the movement of logs.

Men constructed logging camps, or “shanties,” in the fall. They also created rugged “snow roads” to enable them to transport supplies to the camps and move logs or timber to streams prior to the timber drives in the spring.

Initially, loggers depended on oxen, and later, horses, to assist them in hauling logs. Although other solutions for transporting lumber were introduced early in the twentieth century, as late as the 1920s, horses were often still used for this task.

The timber of British North America supplied masts for the British Royal Navy and generated the majority of the industry’s



Sometimes horses had huge loads of logs to pull, ca. 1928. (Photo courtesy of Ken Turcotte)