



MY WORK IN THE WOODS

Before I was a priest in the thirties, poverty was common. Not far from our home, I was told of an old lady who had nothing to eat for a whole winter except vinegar and buckwheat pancakes. We paid buckwheat flour five cents a pound, we had a few chickens, vegetables from our garden, we would buy a quarter of beef and catch a lot of rabbits. We would catch them with snares or traps baited with salted onions. For shoes we had moccasins homemade by a relative.

Dad managed to get a contract of 2000 cords of pulpwood from the Fraser Pulpwood Co. in Edmundston. My brother and I had 200 cords to cut and haul four miles to a brook. We were paid \$2.50 a cord for the best; no long knots and no rotten centers, not even the size of a nickel ... the place was six miles from home and during the work days we lived in a sugar camp belonging to a cousin of my father. Just the two of us, we were batching (cooking our own meals). Two other camps were occupied in the area by relatives, cutting pulp too. Sometimes in the evening we would visit, especially on weekends when we did not go home. The way we did the work depended on the forest. If the trees were thick, close together, we would clear a road through the forest, cut the trees on both sides of it and pile the four foot pieces on either side of the road. Then go about 60 feet from that road and clear another one and do the same.

When the trees were not so close together, my brother Willie would cut them down with his axe and I would drag (twich) them to a pile along the hauling road. Later, when the snow was too deep to cut the trees down, we would cut those logs in four foot lengths before they were hauled to the brook four miles away. We had to pay \$0.75 a cord for the hauling so we had only \$1.25 a cord for the cutting. My brother, Willie, had worked in the woods before, cutting logs. Now it was pulp. We did not quite average two cords a day.

The other crews were making better. Two experienced cutters close to our work area did not work as hard as we did and were cutting four cords a day. Further down the (broo) valley, they were four working together. Two in the woods cutting the trees, one hauling them to the road with a horse and one cutting the logs in four foot lengths and piling them. They averaged five cords a day. The young man at the road had his hands full cutting and piling five cords of pulpwood a day, but he did it. Another crew of three, one man cutting the trees, another hauling the logs to the hauling road and the third cutting and piling them, did about as well.

At noontime, we would come to a little lunch ground where a fire had been lit a few minutes before, usually by me, while my brother kept cutting trees. I would light the fire, then fill a half-gallon pail with clean snow and set it over the fire. When the snow was thawed out, I would clean the rabbit droppings if any and throw the tea and sugar in. By that time, the beans were thawed out and ready to eat. I would yell to my brother and we would down our food, wash it down with hot tea and go back to work until dusk. Then we would walk back to our camp that was about a mile away, start the fire and cook our supper. Willie would file the saw and we would go to bed so that we could be back on the job at dawn the next morning.

In late April, about 30 men came, stayed in a big camp near the brook, threw those little logs in the brook and kept them moving until they reached the mill in Edmundston.

A couple of years later I was back in that district but not on the same brook. This time it was the Sesson. A group of settlers had gone there and built camps on what they hoped was their land. The Fraser Co. had a right to the trees and sent somebody to cut them and get them out. I was working for my Uncle Ernest who had a horse. He was cutting the trees with another man, his son was hauling to the road and I was cutting them and piling them with another man. I was paid \$15.00 a month. That winter was one of the coldest that I have seen around the St. John Valley. We were working one day when it was - 50°F. When we were working it was not too bad but it was not much fun eating our lunch around a small fire. The beans were freezing in our tin plates and our forks were sticking to our lips. We did not hang around the fire very long, you can imagine. There

was also a lot of snow in the woods that year. We had to shovel trails for the horse to get the logs to the hauling road. The trail was about 30 inches wide and about that deep. And still the horse had plenty of snow under his feet. By March, I was out and back home.

That winter Dad was cutting logs along the Upper St. John River. He came out in the middle of March as usual. He was looking for a man to go spend the spring and summer at his depot where some supplies were left for the drive and the coming winter. I offered to go and he sent me with my younger brother, Adrien. I was there until the end of June. Dad had his depot at Savage Brook, about four miles above Castonguay Settlement. At the settlement the Cunliffes had lumbering equipment and Mr. Sam Noble was watchman. A few weeks before we went by, he had burned his camp with his dog in it. So we brought him another dog but he did not like him and gave it to us. We played with him but we could not rely on him for a watchdog. After awhile, the procupines were giving us trouble but the dog never let us know when they were around. He had a good nose for deer, though, and once when we were walking on a trail he disappeared and we heard him barking at deer and we called him back.

It is there that I witnessed a fearful display of the force of nature and the power of water. It was when the ice went out. It was during the day and it would have been very exciting if it had happened during the night. An ice jam built up about ten feet high before it started to move again. When it did I cannot imagine what could have stopped it. Big trees were breaking like matches. Big pieces of ice weighing maybe a ton stood on edge for awhile, and then crashed down. All that ice moving and the trees breaking made a roar that really scared us. The fact that our camp was built between the river and a brook did not increase our sense of safety. The ice did not back up in the brook but the water was too high there for us to wade to safety. We had a canoe ready. If the water had come a couple of feet higher, we would have been in trouble. After the jam broke and went, it was good to see the river free of ice. The water was not very high but it did come up later to clean the big walls of ice left on its shores. A short while later, John Clair came up the river to start the log drive. He had about a dozen men with him. They were staying in the lumber camps along the river but they did not stay with us. They were pushing the logs along the shore and kept them moving down-river. We had the telephone; we were six on the same line. When it rang everybody on the line listened, that was the only news we got. Later on in June, I used the canoe to visit those brave neighbors. I went as far down-river as Ouellet's Brook where Lee Mullins was living with his family. Of course, I visited old Mr. Noble and his close neighbors, Didime Jandreau and his family. His wife, Annie

Castonguay, had been born and brought up on that farm. Didime died but his wife is still living in St. Francis with her daughter. Her sons are living in St. Francis too. Above the Big Rapids nobody is living near the river anymore. In 1934, when I was at my father's depot, George Ouellette was living at the fire warden's camp at the mouth of the Big Black River, about 11 miles up-river from the depot. I had talked with Mrs. Ouellette on the phone many times and I was invited to their place. So one sunny Sunday morning, I poled my little canoe up to their camp. I got acquainted with her son, Wilmer, who was about 15 years old then. Her daughter and her husband were down-river. We had a good lunch and in not much more than an hour was back to the depot.

When I went to Moosehead Lake to help Fr. David Surette with his summer visitors, he let me know that he did not make enough money to keep me all year. He suggested that if I would visit the lumber camps that could give enough to allow him to keep me so that he would not have to find help every summer. So I went to the woods.

The first camp I visited was Willie Giroux's on Socateen Brook. He was cutting pulp for the H & W. I had met him at the little church in Rockwood and he had invited me. It was on All Saints' Day. A young man from Greenville took me there in his car. It was just a short visit and I was welcome and invited to return and preach to his men. Snow had started to fall and by the time we left his camp, there was enough on the road to cause trouble. We had no tire chains and no shovel. We had to use our bare hands to throw gravel under the wheels so that we could reach the top of the only hill in the road.

The year before, Fr. Surette had visited that camp and the snow blocked the road so much that Mr. Giroux had to call a plane to bring the priest back home. He was quite nervous even about the plane ride. "What would you do," he asked, "if one of your men fell sick?" "It would depend," said Mr. Giroux, "If the man is a good worker, we do our best to save him, but if he is not, we finish him." Of course, he did not mean that, but he wanted to break the tension and he did.

On my second year, I moved with those people for two or three months. I would visit the other camps in the district but come back for the weekend to give them their Sunday Mass. Mr. Giroux kept a few pigs and horses, of course, because the skidders were not invented. Occasionally, bears would come to eat with the pigs. I wanted to shoot a bear and told them so. When I came back to their camp one weekend, they told me that they had seen some bears around. "Good," I said, "I may have a chance to shoot one." That evening, when I was getting ready to go to bed, a man burst in my camp and said that there was a bear behind the stable. It was dark but he had a flashlight. So I took my gun, put a few shells in it, and we

went to the barn. Coming to the corner of the stable, he turns the light in the direction where the bear was supposed to be and behold, a pair of red eyes are looking in our direction from about 50 feet. I bring the gun up and bang! The eyes disappeared. "Let us go get him," he says. "Not me," I reply. "If that bear is still alive, I don't want to tackle him in the dark. If he is dead, he will be there tomorrow morning." And we go back to my camp. A couple of minutes after, two men come in with a bag full of hay on which they had stuck two reflector buttons ... I had hit the bag but I was the victim of their friendly teasing for months after.

My next camp was Odilon Belanger's near Pittson Farm. He had 60 men and I was very welcome. He had even picked me up in Greenville and brought me back. After that, I was hitchhiking on the tote trucks of the Great Northern Co. In the spring, I bought a Dodge Coupe and that fall, I visited about 2000 men working around Moosehead Lake. Pete and Adelard Gilbert had a big operation at St. John Pond. They had a contract for 60,000 cords. They were cutting near Baker Lake on the Upper St. John River and hauling their wood up to the fifth St. John Pond on an ice road with a huge tractor hauling 30 sleds loaded with five cords of pulpwood. When they came to the pond the ice could never have carried that big monster so they stopped, broke the train in three sections and a smaller tractor hauled them on the ice where the wood was dumped. A dam had been built at the lower end of the pond and a canal had been dug to connect it to the north branch of Penobscot River. That way, the wood could reach the mill at Millinocket. Jos Bolduc had a big camp on the slopes of White Cap Mountain near Kokadjo. He was working for the H & W. Adelard Nadeau had a big camp on the north branch of the Penobscot and Willie Caouette had one around there, too. The Miranda brothers had a camp near Brailey Brook. They were working for the International Paper Co. It is there that I saw where a man had been killed and buried. Around Jackman Leon Pinette had a camp not far from his home in Long Pond. There were a couple more near the Canadian border. A Mr. Gilbert had one near Enchanted Mountain and there was another one not far from there at an old prisoners' camp. Along the C.P.R. west of Jackman, the Beaudrys had a couple of camps which I visited too.

In Baxter Park, my uncle, Rene Levesque, had a big camp. He was cutting 60,000 cords a year and had 125 men on his payroll. I was welcome in all of the camps. I did not mention Fred Gilbert and Jim Aucoin who are cutting hardwood for the veneer mill in Greenville and my old friend, Jos Poulin, who was cutting pine near Russell Mountain for the Augusta Lumber Co., who had a sawmill at West Outlet in Rockwood.

When I would come to a camp it was usually in the afternoon. I would get acquainted with the boss, the clerk and the cook. At supper, I would announce the evening program arranged before with the authorities and the cook. Usually, it was a sermon at seven followed by confessions, Mass and communion. The collection was taken during Mass or if I stayed overnight, it was done during breakfast. It averaged around \$50, a few giving \$100; some around \$60 and the others around \$40. One year Jos Redmond had a couple of hundred men working around Indian Pond clearing the land for a dam. I was very welcome there. After awhile I got a projector and I could give movies which they liked. My work with the lumberjacks kept me busy during most of the year, it kept my finances above the red line. I hope I did them some good because they were good to me. Like all those who preached to them, I realized that they are better than we usually think they are. As a rule, the pulp cutting would start in September, but there were camps who were busy in July and August. I visited one of those on Misery Stream. Bears were a problem there. There was a big clearing in front of the cookroom. On the far side of the clearing there was a brook. Across the brook was the kitchen dump and nearby the backhouse. In the evening and all night, bears came to the dump and it was not fun for those who had to go to the backhouse. When I came to that camp, they had shot one bear but there were quite a few more. That evening, it was still daylight when I was stopped during my sermon: There was a bear outside. The boss told the men to be quiet and he went out by the back door, got his rifle and killed that bear with his first shot. We all ran out to see it and came back after a short while to finish the sermon!

In early September one year, at Willie Caouette's camp on the north branch of the Penobscot, when the clerk came to prepare for the cutting activities, he noticed that a bear had broken into the kitchen. He was alone but he had a rifle and knew how to use it. During the first night, he heard the bear going into the kitchen. So he got up, took his rifle and hid at the corner of the kitchen to shoot the bear when it would come out. It looks like the bear heard him or smelled him. So it broke a window on the opposite side of the building and ran back to the woods.

