FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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Hap Puotinen--Narrative  
July 9, 1973

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Good evening Oral History fans! If you though that you would escape further exposure to "Watergate" by switching off the boob-tube you shall shortly discover just how much you have miscalculated because I do intend, indeed, to subject you to more watergate-pressure, although of a somewhat different nature and origin. More or less directly you shall here of the "watergate" whereof I speak.

Before looking into the history, traditions, and lore of logging in Ontonagon County, and western Upper Peninsula in general, it behooves us to get a glimpse of the "big picture of logging in America at its source in New England over three hundred years ago. We can only, for now, extract a few of the most pertinent details from our eastern benefactors' contributions to the Lake States Logging History, particularly in what is referred to as the "Green Gold Era". For more details on Eastern logging I refer you to the book "Holy Old Mackinaw" or its later version entitled "The American Lumberjack", by Stewart Holbrook, who as a logger and riverdriver, knew the loggers who migrated to the Lake States after the peak of the eastern timber-harvest had slowly ground to a halt, bringing with them the know-how, the tools and implements which their fathers has invented and developed in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Pennsylvania, New York and other eastern states. These latterday-loggers and landlockers cruised and surveyed the midwestern timberlands and natural flowages, which they then adapted to their use to move the logs to the sawmills and lake ports via the most economical and the only means available at first--the river-drive.
by building a variety of dams in the basins of specific flowage systems. In other words they created by the strategic placement of various types of dams, a system of reservoirs and controlled flowages, beginning with the impounding of the waters of the spring freshets behind large reservoir-dams constructed from logs, stones, and dirt-fill dikes. With such systems they were able to control, store and distribute the water from the spring run-offs into late summer. The water thus impounded belonged to the company which owned the dams, and which was known as the "Boom Company" because at the discharge terminal for the logs at the delta of the river-system, the logs were re-captured by a cable strung across the river. The cable with its boom-logs strung necklace fashion through holes bored in each end of the logs was called the "boom". Other cables or booms were strung parallel to the river banks, forming sorting bays into which which logs of specific ownership were sorted. River-hogs were as much at home on the logs bobbing in the water as waterbugs in their natural element, as they hopped about sorting the into their respective bays—- a clear case of "waterbugging, don't you agree?

The logs were claimed by their owners on the basis of log-marks stamped on both ends of each log by a marking hammer that looked much like a cattle-branding implement, the cattle brands were, however, burned in rather than struck. These marks were placed on the logs by the scaler who tallied the logs in the woods---the tally at the sorting booms was the basis for the billing by the boom-company. Understandably, all the logs put in did not reach the mills. Some are still being recovered today.
After the initial drives on a system, additional dams were built in critical areas to concentrate the flow of water into narrower, hence deeper and more powerful channels. A dam which angled into the river but did not cross it was called a swing-dam. In some areas a simple "roll-dam" was built across a shallow to raise the water-level several feet, thus preventing the logs from dragging-bottom and causing a jam.

River-hogs have told me of log-jams thirty feet high with thousands of logs jamming the critical area. The river-men, at great risk would climb the "living-wall" of logs, seeking the key-log. Usually the jacks were able to get back to shore when the jam broke--often some of them never made it.

I mentioned earlier that this session has something to do with "water-gates", and it does------every system of this sort had water-gates for the purpose of releasing water as it was needed below on the drive. These water-gates were raised up so that water could flow out underneath them and they had to be capable of closing lest precious water be lost. Water could also be released by removing planks from the spillways on top of the dam. Some dams had sluiceways where men were stationed to "sluice the logs through, water and logs being released simultaneously.

It took me a long time to understand what a river-hog meant when he said, "I was working on the 'beat-crew' when this here "school-marm" snuck under me and throwed me ash over tam'rack!" I knew "school-marm meant a log with a crotch, but 'beat' had me beat. You see, the river, in the course of a drive is divided into 'beats' and the men are assigned to work a certain 'beat' jus as a policeman works his beat.
4.

By far the most versatile tool the eastern loggers brought with them was the "peavey", named after Joseph Peavey of Bangor, Maine, who invented it in 1858. It consisted of a hardwood handle five or six feet long which had a split metal band force-fitted about 18 inches from the bottom end of the handle. This split band, by means of a bolt passing through it formed the basis for attaching and hinging a "J-shaped" iron hook. A double-ended long steel point was driven into the handles bottom, the end having previously been force-fitted with a re-inforcing iron band. The handle of the tool was tapered upward of the hinge and downward as well to make it light yet to have strength. The upper end had a knob turned on it to prevent it from slipping out of the user's hands. The steel point increases the utility of the peavey a thousandfold. It can be jabbed into a log to pull it forward, or to push it, or in extreme emergency, as the late Wesley Rice of Wakefield did, it can be used in the absence of any other tool to splinter the key-log of a jam until the force of the water caused the log to buckle and break, thus opening the blockage.

A cant-hook is similar to a peavey, except that it has a shorter handle and has an iron band force-fitted on the tip opposite the handle, the band having a serrated projection which bites into a log when the user manipulates the handle.

The "pike-pole" has a slim handle about twelve feet long, more or less, with a two-headed tip force-fitted on the end, and it was mainly used at the sorting booms and at the sluiceways to push and pull the logs into the channel. To increase its utility one point is at ninety degrees to the pole.
In the Ontonagon area, logs coming down the river were processed at the Island Mill, and probably other mills as well. The late Del Woodbury, at the age of fifteen, was at work on the "bull-chain" of the Island Mill, feeding the insatiable monster, whose appetite ceased only when the town and the mill burned, in 1896. Del, when he learned that disaster was imminent, left his station and sped home to rescue his mother and two sisters, leading them to safety.

I don't know where one could find, in a simple convenient package, detailed reports on the millions of feet of logs which were floated down the Ontonagon River. I do have some information about a portion of that total, which I shall present later.

In the Menominee River basin, which consists of flowages in Iron, Dickinson, and Menominee Counties in Michigan, and Marinette, Forest, and Vilas Counties in Wisconsin, there is a great deal of information available in a book, entitled, "Logs On The Menominee" which was written by a book-keeper for the Menominee River-Boom Company. This book should be available in the Michigan and Wisconsin State Libraries.

CATERING, PAUL BUNYAN STYLE

Lumberjacks harvesting timber, or driving the logs to the sawmills, needed supplies in huge quantities——food for men, horses and oxen; plus Peerless tobacco and Copenhagen Snuff by the carload. Suppliers materialized, sometimes spontaneously to supply the hardware——tools, implements, harness, etc.
I met Bob Solberg in 1959 and learned how he got into business. A log jam had formed at the Genesee Street Bridge over the River in 1903. The lumberjacks, after a half-hearted try at breaking the jam, succumbed to the lure of the sounds of revelry emanating from a nearby saloon where off-duty jacks were whooping it up. The drivers threw their peavies into the river and joined the merrymakers. After another crew had cleared the jam, Bob, then fourteen years old, salvaged the drowned peavies thus was born the "Solberg Supply Company" The business grew and prospered, supplying river-drive and lumbercamp contractors for thirty-seven years, until Bob's retirement.

THE WANAGAN

The name "wanagan" has several meanings (1) Commissary or store-room on shore or on a raft. (2) Cook-shanty and food storage on a raft or boat. A typical wanagan was a barge-like vessel sixteen feet wide by thirty feet long.

The river-drive cook with his equipment, utensils and supplies was capable of serving up to a hundred men, four meals a day up to fifteen days, or so, at which time the wanagan would rendezvous with a "tote-wagon" supplier at a specific place and time, by pre-arrangement

The meals were cooked aboard the wanagan but were served at previously-constructed feeding stations along the river-drive route. Tables and benches sometimes were found intact, sometimes not. The food was carried to the tables along plank walkways from the wanagan. Men who were assigned to critical potential log-jam areas had their meals brought to them--this was know as "feeding from the nose-bag", after the common
practice of feeding horses and mules their oats from a canvas attached to their halter like a muzzle.

BEN OLSON
Last of the Lake States Wanagan-cooks.

I don't know if wanagans were used on the Ontonagon River, or on the Sturgeon, but we have in Ontonagon a man, Ben Olson, 92, who is the "Last wanagan-cook of the Lake States Pine Drive Era. He is still quite active and only recently he told me that he did not intend to re-new his automobile drivers license this year. Several years ago I interviewed him on the subject of his experience as a cookee, and then a cook in lumbercamps in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, and in particular, about cooking on a river-drive wanagan for Weyerhauser Company on the Whiteface River and the St. Louis River, St. Louis County Minnesota.

The wanagan, fully-loaded with galley-stove, utensils and supplies to last 100 men fifteen days, hit a submerged rock less than a mile from the point of launching and sank, "drowning all the supplies. They were able to salvage all the supplies except the sugar, and after repair and a more auspicious second launching, the vessel completed the rest of the trip to the St. Louis River without incident.

There were wanagans in use until recently (circa 1970) on the Clearwater-River in Idaho, but their cooks and lumberjacks are not of the era which Ben Olson represents.

LOGGERS

I have never met a former river-driver who was not quite a character of unbelievable physical stamina in his youth, and even into his late 70s, 80s------some into their 90s. A river-driver pounced onto the logs in the spring with ice still
mixed with the logs. If he fell he did not go ashore to change—he never changed—he wore his clothes until they fell off, or until the drive ended. Since drives could last into late summer, the lumberjacks smelled quite gamey and for that reason they earned and deserved the name "river-hog". Once in a while they would remove their hobnailed boots and pour out the water, to air out their stinking feet, giving them a brief respite from the continuous soaking. I have even heard them tell of pouring white lead into the boots to counteract an disinfect the nearly gangrenous condition. By the time I met up with some of these river-hogs they had been aired out for many years and lost most of their gamey odor. They had mellowed considerably with age—some even married and became quite domesticated, but all of them could still give men 30 years their junior a run for their money.

ED LAFRENIERRE

When I met Ed at his last address he was living in a cabin at the Triangle Ranch Corral in Amasa, Michigan. Ed was over 90 and had been blind in one eye since the turn of the century. His hunting partner an fellow lumberjack from a logging camp north of Crystal Falls, got a glimpse of the deer Ed was dressing and shot, getting Ed instead of the anticipated deer. The bullet gouged out an eye and passed through one hand and a leg. Ed's partner took off when he saw his victim and was never seen again. Ed made it back to the logging camp, four miles away, falling into a creek on the way, the cold drenching saving his life by stanching the flow of blood. From camp he was taken by horse and cutter to Crystal Falls twelve miles away. After emergency treatment
there he was sent on to Milwaukee where they repaired his skull with a silver plate. His other wounds were not too severe and on the rebound Ed was back at camp in less than three weeks, working as a cookee during his convalescence. Later he went on to become one of the most nimble and skilful top-loaders in the business. As a river-hog he was light as a jockey due to his small stature. He became a legend in his own time and as "One-Eyed Riley was reputed to be able to ride a chip, or a bubble. He acquired the nickname from his favorite song, the ribald "One-Eyed Riley's Daughter" of which he would demand encore after encore.

Nuns of a certain order would make the circuit of the lumbercamps every year selling "Hospital Cards" for $5.00. These cards provided admittance into a hospital for treatment upon the presentation of a valid, currently dated card. In Ed's case the card covered all the medical expenses.

Later in life Ed became a trapper and a camp watchman. He was also well-known for his ability at building dams. Ed kept a very tidy camp, according to everyone who knew him. He had not lost his touch when I interviewed him in his 90s.

ROGER JACKSON

Roger was born in Door County, Wisconsin, November 25, 1872, "Ten o'clock before noon" "My mother told me, and she otta had knowed!" Roger would add if anyone questioned his remembering back to the date and hour of his birth.

Roger came to Iron River, Michigan at the age of 13 and found employment as a swamper with his brother Frank. Within two years he was a skilled river-driver, working for MRL Company, Bannister river-drive Superintendent.
Here we have a slide of Roger as he appeared in dressed in his finest German Worsted Cutaway suit tailor-made for him by Fred Hartley, Tailor, Iron River, Michigan in 1895. The price was $30.00. After Roger's river-drive days were over he ran a livery stable in Crystal Falls and also traveled as a drummer, selling Horse Liniment, Colic Remedy, Blue Salve for Gall Sores, and other remedies. He traveled to Otonagon via railroad and the cutaway suit made him quite presentable to the public.

Roger drove most of the tributaries of the Menominee River System, The Old Mississippi up to Canada, streams in Canada, and many others. He worked on the next-to-the-last drive on the Pine River in Florence County and recalled that four men were killed on that drive.

In 1902 Roger was on a drive on the Menominee River. The drive was nearing its end when at the Wausaukee Flats, a swampy area, they were attacked by every insect from miles around who came to feast on river-hog well seasoned with Peerless Tobacco, Copenhagen Snuff, plug tobacco seasoned with rum. The bugs caused infections which festered to such an extent that when Roger arrived in Menominee he was arrested on the suspicion of carrying a contagious disease—smallpox. Roger demanded a doctor’s examination of the Sheriff who was delivering him to the “pest-house” which was routine for suspected contagious and mental diseases. The Sheriff took Roger to a doctor who, according to Roger stated as his official diagnosis, "This here man ain't no pox-carrier, why he's jest bug-bit!" After a confirming diagnosis from another doctor the officer reluctantly released Roger immediately went to Bailey's Harbor, Wisconsin to visit his
mother after an absence of 17 years. He was refused admittance by his mother who was unable to recognize him due to the bloated, festered condition of his facial features, and the fact that he was a lad of 13 when he left home. In due time Roger recited enough family history to convince her of his relationship to her. In passing I might mention that Roger had kept in touch by mailing her half of his pay every payday.

MANUEL, "MANNIE" KRANS

Mannie was a former river-hog from Iron River, Michigan. He loved to tell lumberjack tales like: "There was the time our camp got real lousy and it got to be quite a chore to pick the lice outta the seams of our underwear every night. Then I got wised-up----I took off all my clothes and rubbed salt into the seams of my long-johns. Then I walked up to the creek a halfa mile put the underwear on the ground, and snuck behind a tree to watch. By and by the lice got real thirsty and came outta the underwear and down to the creek to drink. I grabbed my underwear and ran!"

OUT OF THE PAST

"The Diamond Drill" published in Crystal Falls, Michigan, runs quite regularly a feature, "Out of the Past" column which turns back the pages of history to 75 years ago. And also quite frequently the column contains, or consists of, choice bits of memorabilia borrowed from the Ontonagon Herald, its contemporary newspaper—for example—-The Herald, circa 1895—"Never before in the history of this upper peninsula, and probably never again will be witnessed such extensive logging operations as are being carried out in Ontonagon County this winter. Just think of it says the Herald last week, for the 48 camps now in operation for the Diamond Match Company put in 13, 188, 342 feet!"
much is 13,188,342 feet? Can you picture in your mind, realistically, just how many logs or boards that would represent.

Here is a slide of the famous "World's Fair Load" of logs which was loaded in Ewen in 1893 and later unloaded onto nine flatcars along with the sleighs and shipped to the World's Fair site in Chicago where it was re-loaded onto the sleighs, just as it was loaded in the woods. One team of horses pulled the load from the woods to the railroad. The load scaled 36,055 feet, six times the size of the average two-horse-team load. Going on the basis of 4500 feet for a railroad-carload of that day it would have taken around 3000 cars to move the 13,188,342 feet. Or, on the basis of 10,000 feet for an average home, the thirteen million plus feet would have provided the lumber for 1320 homes, complete with the "little house out in the back"

LANDLOOKERS

A landlooker, or cruiser locates, by map and compass, plus an educated step or pace, the perimeters of specific properties, namely timberlands. A "pace" averages 2½ to 3 feet and in practice by an experienced landlooker is stepped off with rhythmic uniformity so that the measure of distance is quite accurate. Starting from an established "corner" or surveyor's mark the landlooker maintains his heading by compass and locates the next corner by pacing the distance. The landlooker as well as his present-day counterpart, the cruiser also records mentally, or by notebook the specific quantities of the several species of trees contained in the forty acres or larger parcels being measured.
The late Edson Ogell "Del" Woodbury was a landlooker, learning the trade from his father. Together they cruised timberlands for the Diamond Match Company, here and in Canada. At the time of his death early in 1973 Del still had his landlookers gear and maps intact, including a reflector-oven and a four or five-piece set of nested cooking and serving utensils, pup tent and lightweight ax and other gear.

My father Elias Puotinen, came from Finland before the turn of the century, finding employment in the Cadillac-Jennings area pine camps as an axe-man(swamper) and later in the Upper Peninsula as sawyer and eventually as a logging jobber and then a contractor. Thus it became expedient for him to become a skilled landlooker.

A contemporary landlooker of my father who knew Dad only by repute came upon Eli's footprints on a mutual boundary line. As he contemplated the steady, straight-as-an-arrow trail marked by my Dad's boots, the other landlooker was heard to remark, "This man I gotta meet!", and so saying he followed the trail half-running until he caught up with Eli. And so it was, as a woodsman, logging contractor, farmer, groceryman, store manager, farm implement dealer, charter member of churches, Temperance Societies, a Kaleva Lodge local, Historical Society, and very much in politics without becoming a politician; and whatever he put himself to, that he left his imprints along the way with firmness and integrity. A measure of his rapport with the community at large can be observed from the fact that this anecdote was told to me by a saloonkeeper who was well aware of Eli's activity in the Finnish Temperance Society.