Young Naturalists

By William Durbin

Sweat Pads, Logging Berries, and Blackjack

Lumberjacks in the late 1800s worked hard and fast to fell trees to build America's cities. The hungry jacks counted on logging camp cooks to keep them well fed with stacks of sweat pads, buckets of logging berries, and pots of blackjack.

Dan Bell, born on a farm in Ramsey County in 1876, worked in the north woods for 20 years. This story imagines what life was like for 19-year-old Dan during the winter of 1895 when he worked as a cookee, or assistant cook—an important job in a logging camp. Dan's biography shared what it was like to work in a camp where they used "150 pounds of flour for a day's cooking."

Back then the United States of America was a bustling,

Workers gathered for a photo in 1887 at the C.N. Nelson Lumber Company logging camp on Stoney Brook near the town of Cloquet.

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Lumberjack Lingo

Use the logging camp vocabulary below to decode the sentence in the red box.

Lumberjacks, teamsters, bull cook, pencil pusher, wood butcher—everybody showed up for the logging camp company photo.

Teamster: Person who drives the teams of horses that pull loads of logs

Bull cook: General maintenance man, also in charge of keeping the bunkhouse clean, assigning bunks, and seeing that bunkhouse rules are followed

Pencil pusher: Camp clerk and accountant, who calculates payroll, orders supplies, and manages camp store

Wood butcher: Carpenter who also does harness work

A couple of cooks posed with a violin and a Gabriel horn in front of the cook shack at the Bill Landahl Camp in Beltrami County in 1917.

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Blow the Gabriel horn and the lumberjacks will come running from the boiling-up shack, but you better be ready with plenty of sweat pads and logging berries and hot blackjack and swampwater.

Gabriel horn: 5-foot long tin horn to call lumberjacks for meals

Boiling-up shack: Rarely used place to bathe and do laundry

Sweat pads: Pancakes

Logging berries: Stewed prunes

Blackjack: Coffee

Swampwater: Tea

growing young nation of 44 states. To meet the demand for wood to build cities and towns, logging companies set up camps in Minnesota's north woods and logged giant, old-growth red and white pines. At the end of the winter logging season, they transported the logs by railroads or by river drives to sawmills throughout the Midwest and southern Canada.

Oct. 15: Dan reported for work at the Cross Lake Logging Company Headquarters. He had taken the train from his home in Little Falls to Brainerd the previous day. Then to save the dollar wagon fare, he walked the 25 miles from Brainerd to Cross Lake, where he signed on as a cookee at a north woods camp for a salary of $25 per month.

Along with 20 lumberjacks, Dan boarded the company train for the camps north of Cross Lake. The steam engine, which was fired by green popple, puffed out black smoke as it chugged up a hillside charred from fires set by the sparks of logging trains. In the distance Dan saw a large cutover area at the forest's edge. It was littered with waist-high stumps and piles of *slash*—pine tops and branches.

Dan was the only man to get off at the Black Creek siding, a short sidetrack for loading trains. Carrying his clothes in a flour sack tied with a rope, Dan started walking east on a rutted tote road, which was used by wagons carrying supplies to the camp. After crossing a tamarack swamp and a narrow log bridge, Dan reached the tall timber. Then he walked three miles through white pines that towered more than 100 feet overhead. Many were too big around for three men to encircle with their arms.

Late in the afternoon, Dan reached the logging camp—a clearing with a bunkhouse, horse barn, blacksmith shop, and cook shack, all built out of freshly peeled pine logs. The cook shack, about 75 feet long with a tarpaper roof, had logs so big that it took only four of them to make 8-foot-high walls.

Get to Work. Stepping inside the cook shack, Dan saw a man and a teenager busy making dinner. The windowless shack smelled of wood smoke and raisin pie. Dan's eyes were still getting used to the light from the kerosene lamps when the broad-shouldered head cook, Mac Carlson, stepped up and handed him an apron and a paring knife. Without even saying "hello," Mac pointed to a big pail full of potatoes and told him to peel the spuds.

Dan stared at the potatoes for a moment, and Mac started yelling about "greenhorns" and "gazebos" who did not know which end of a knife to hold.

Glen, who was an experienced cookee, helped Dan get started. Dan

peeled potatoes as fast as he could, nicking himself twice on the knuckles. While the spuds were frying, Dan and Glen hustled to load bread, baked ham, stewed prunes, beans, and pies onto serving platters. As they finished, Mac stepped outside and lifted a 5-foot-long Gabriel horn. Except for a few dents, the silvery tin horn looked like something an angel might blow. Mac blew the horn to call the lumberjacks for the evening meal.

Three toots later 40 men came running from the bunkhouse. The men crowded through the cook shack door. Dan gagged at the smell of damp wool, boot grease, sweat, and stale tobacco.

Dan wondered how they would ever feed so many hungry jacks. Glen told him half the crew hadn't arrived yet.

Daylight in the Swamp. The next morning Dan woke up to Mac hollering, "Daylight in the swamp."

In the yellow lamplight of the little bunkroom at the rear of the cook shack, Dan peered at his pocket watch and saw that it was four o' clock.

As Glen hopped out of the lower bunk, he explained that they started cooking breakfast two hours before the jacks got up. Glen slipped on his pants and boots and headed into the kitchen before Dan could climb out of bed. Dan could see why the clerk who signed him up at the headquarters called this logging "highball"—based on the railroad signal for "full-speed ahead." Everybody in the logging camp moved fast.

When Dan stepped into the kitchen, Mac mumbled something about "laggard gazebos." As Glen washed up and toweled off his face, he told Dan they had to prepare eight loaves of bread and four dozen buns for baking—before they could start making breakfast. And later that morning, they'd be baking 10 pies and a half a keg of molasses cookies.

Mac hollered at the boys to stop jawing and get cooking.

Once the bread dough was set aside to rise, Mac began boiling oatmeal and frying everything else: spuds, donuts, side pork, and pancakes, also called *sweat pads*. Dan got the job of warming up the baked beans and *logging berries* (stewed prunes). Glen brewed big pots of *swampwater* (tea) and *blackjack* (coffee).

A blast on the Gabriel horn brought the plaid-shirted lumberjacks piling through the door again.

The hungry jacks chowed down twice as much food for breakfast as Dan ever had. And they ate four times as fast! Dan and Glen ran among the long tables, refilling platters and bowls nonstop.

Mac didn't allow the jacks to talk during meals, except to ask for more food. If the men didn't finish eating

Lumberjacks paused between bites in the cook shack at a logging camp near Bemidji in 1908.

ARTHUR A. RICHARDSON, MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

If you're a cookee, you better keep the stove lids coming for the hungry jacks. And they might want a nice piece of Shoepack pie for dessert.

Cookee: Cook's helper

Hungry jacks: Loggers or lumberjacks

Stove lids: Another word for pancakes

Shoepack pie: Pie made out of vinegar, cornstarch, sugar, and sometimes lemon extract or vanilla

Lumberjacks from Alger Smith Company Camp No. 6 had a hot lunch delivered to them by a swingdingle in the woods in Cook County in 1916.

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Here comes the swingdingle! Tell the sawyers to put down the misery whip, because it's time for lunch.

Swingdingle: Sleigh for hauling food to loggers in the woods

Sawyers: Pairs of loggers who worked together felling trees with a crosscut saw

Misery whip: Crosscut saw used by two men (sawyers) for cutting trees

in 12 minutes or less, Mac accused them of lollygagging and wasting company time.

Hectic Mealtime. The lumberjacks left the cook shack as fast as they'd arrived. Before Dan and Glen had started washing the big pile of dishes, Mac began fixing lunch.

Serving lunch and dinner was just as hectic as breakfast. By the time Dan and Glen had finished the day's final cleanup, the lumberjacks were all in bed. Dan was exhausted and ready to hit his bunk too, but Mac told the cookees to set the tables for breakfast.

The boys set out 40 tin plates, each one upside down with a cup face down on top. Then came the silverware, syrup pitchers, salt and pepper shakers, and sugar bowls. They finished at 9:30.

Dan and Glen worked 16 or 17 hours a day, seven days a week. Along with their daily cooking duties, the boys had to scrub the tables and floors, stoke the cook ranges, and load the heating stove with wood. They filled the lamps with kerosene and polished the glass globes.

The cook crew had an easier time on Sundays, because Mac cooked smaller meals. The jacks were allowed a day of rest on Sunday, and sometimes a traveling minister called a *sky pilot* conducted services. But Mac made up for the lighter workload by having Dan and Glen launder towels, aprons, and dishrags in washtubs in the boiling-up shack, where they heated the wash water on a wood stove.

More Jacks. In November more lumberjacks arrived, including the *pencil pusher* (camp clerk), *iron burner* (blacksmith), *wood butcher* (carpenter), *dentist* (saw filer), and, to the relief of Dan and Glen, a third cookee. The actual logging didn't begin until the *saw crews* signed on and started felling the pines. Along with the saw crews, teamsters known as *skidders* were hired to drive horses that pulled the logs to the side of the road.

Once the weather turned cold, *water-tank crews* worked day and night, driving teams that pulled a rut cutter, to make a double track for the sled runners, and a water tank, to fill the ruts with ice. These ruts of ice made loads easier to move and kept them from sliding sideways.

Once the ice roads were ready, *top loaders* were hired to load the logs on the hauling sleds. Then *four-horse teamsters* drove the giant sleds back to the railroad siding, where the logs would be loaded on rail cars and then delivered to Cross Lake.

By mid-December, logging was in full swing with 85 men in camp. Every single day Dan and the cook crew had to bake 16 loaves of bread, eight dozen buns, 20 pies, and a keg full of cookies!

Swingdingle Ride. Since the saw crews were working two miles from camp, the foreman didn't want them to waste time walking back to the cook shack for their noontime meal. So Dan and Glen took turns delivering the food on a *swingdingle,* a long wooden box mounted on sled runners and pulled by a horse. The box had covered compartments for a stew kettle, a bean pot, bread, pies, and dishes.

Dan enjoyed driving a horse and getting out of the cook shack. Once he neared *the cut*, he could hear the sounds of the jacks at work: *skidders* whistling to their horses and *notchers* chopping out neat Vs to direct the fall of each pine. *Sawyers* in pairs pulled crosscut saws back and forth, creating a zinging rhythm as curls of white sawdust piled up on their boots. The sawyers called "*Tiiiimberrr*" to signal the shudder and crash of a big pine, which shook the ground like an earthquake.

With winter temperatures below zero, Dan blanketed his horse and served the meal next to a big fire. The men set their axes and saws aside and ate even faster than they did back in the cook shack, because if they dawdled their beans would freeze to their plates.

The cutting and hauling continued through January and February. A four-horse team typically hauled about 5,000 to 6,000 board feet (a board foot measures 1 inch by 12 inches by 12 inches), or 25 tons of wood on each load (the weight of 15 modern cars).

As Dan watched the loads heading for the railroad siding, he imagined the huge pile of timber that must be building up at Cross Lake Landing, where logs were dumped throughout the winter. The log drive would start there next spring and continue down the Pine River to the Mississippi. He wondered how many homes and grand hotels would be built from the camp logs once they'd been floated downstream and turned into lumber at sawmills.

In early March the ice roads began to soften with the warm weather and sunlight, so the teamsters switched to night hauling. When the roads finally "broke down" or melted, the company closed the camp until the next logging season.

Mac asked Dan and Glen if they wanted to sign on with the "river pigs" and help him cook on the log drive down the Mississippi. After thinking about being cooped up in a floating cook shack with a crabby fellow like Mac, Dan and Glen decided they'd rather walk the 25 miles to Brainerd and catch the train back home. V

A NOTE TO TEACHERS

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Top loaders, teamsters, and groundhogs piled logs on a sled at the Magnuson and Lindell Logging Camp in 1890.

BURKHART, MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Groundhogs and top loaders piled logs on the sled, while the water-tank crew and road monkeys got the ice road ready for the load to be pulled to the railroad.

Groundhogs: Men who guide logs onto hauling sleds

Top loaders: Highly paid and skilled men in charge of loading the hauling sleds

Water-tank crew: Men who use a sled-mounted water tank to build up the ice roads

Road monkeys: Crews that handle road maintenance, such as shoveling road apples (horse manure)