LOGGING CAMPS

by John T. Labbe

Life in an old-time logging camp was a good deal like life in an army camp. Everyone got up at the same time, everyone hit the bathroom at the same time, and everyone headed for the cook shack at the same time. When it was time to "fall in," there was a dash to catch the train, and in the evening everyone got back aboard and headed for camp together. After cleaning up and eating the evening meal, your time was your own until the lights went out. The big difference, of course, was that you were free to choose your own camp, and you could pack up and leave when the impulse struck you.

Most of the men were nomads, and many of the more memorable characters were known throughout the Northwest. Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your viewpoint, this is no longer possible under today's working conditions. I enjoyed this freedom of movement, and there was a lot of satisfaction in being able to tell a boss what he could do with his job, knowing you would be welcome at the next stop down the road.

On the other hand, a few more stable workers would take a job and stay with it until the company went out of business. Those fortunate enough to be able to pick and choose their jobs based their decisions on the quality of the food and the working conditions, in that order. A good cook was the best assurance of a loyal and steady crew. Working conditions were usually based on the type of terrain, the quality of the timber and the character of the boss. Unhappily for most, they were usually driven to seek work through dire necessity. When the money ran out, and it was a long way to the big timber, a man had to take a job "off the boards." He would drop in at one of the many employment agencies, consider the assortment of jobs chalked up on the blackboards and try to guess which would prove most satisfactory. Having made his choice, he was usually handed a ticket to camp, and possibly a little spending money to make sure he didn't succumb to malnutrition along the way. This, of course, was deducted from his first paycheck.

It was in the nature of things that a certain percentage of the men never advanced much beyond this condition. When the camps shut down for the winter it was not uncommon for many employers to "winter" a few of the men. Some of the regulars, along with a few strays, would begin to show up after the first hard weekend, and many camps would provide a roof and meals until things started up again. There were always chores to do, and it was better to have the camp lived in than vacant.

Jennings & McRae ran such a camp on the Columbia a few miles below Clatskanie. Mr. Jennings had a big heart, and he always put up a few men through the winter. But he was a sharp businessman through necessity, and he required that the boys busy themselves cleaning up the down timber, thereby providing themselves with pin money and covering the cost of their keep.

The hero of our story was a fireman, and he was given the responsibility for handling the Shay, and thereby getting the production into the river where it could be converted into cash. Things went smoothly. The crew yarded a few logs and loaded out an occasional car, though it is doubtful if they made Mr. Jennings much of a profit.

On a certain morning, the man who was acting as brakeman signaled the Shay ahead, and then dashed across the track to throw the switch, which was out of sight of the engineer. He didn't quite make it, and the Shay dropped on the ground. Now, this was not an unusual circumstance, although it hadn't happened to this crew before. The unusual circumstance was that Mr. Jennings chanced to be hiking up the track at the time, making one of his rare appearances. He nodded to the men, frowned a bit, and continued on his way.

Once more things reverted to the usual routine. The men continued to send down an occasional load or two, and no untoward incidents occurred to upset the tranquility. Then one morning, when a heavy frost coated the rails, the Shay was dropped into a siding to pick up a load. She lost her footing at the last moment and hit the car just hard enough to shift the peaker. It slid forward far enough to bend the spot plate slightly. This was no big deal, but the

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Camp 6 of the Big Creek Logging Company clings precariously to the side of Nicholai Mountain on the Lower Columbia. The position of the camp cars accentuates the grades of the mainline.

log had to be shifted back before the Shay could be coupled to the car. And, of course, as they puffed and shoved, Mr. Jennings happened by. Once again he nodded, passed the time of day, and went on his way without further comment.

Since our fireman had to get out early to fire up his engine, it was his habit to stop off on the way and build a fire in the cookstove. There being no cook in camp, each man cooked his own breakfast, and this gave them a warm place to dress and enjoy their meal. Then, one morning in the early spring, there was a hard frost. A good hot fire was going in the stove, and our hero headed for his principal charge. Now, unbeknownst to anyone, the pipes to the hot water tank had frozen—and the heating coils were located in the firebox of the stove. Breakfast that morning was rudely interrupted by the disintegration of the kitchen stove. Luckily, no one was hurt, but with his impeccable timing, Mr. Jennings dropped by as the eggs were being scraped from the kitchen ceiling. It was the last straw for Mr. Jennings. He informed the men that they were welcome to stay in camp for the rest of the winter, but he would appreciate it if they refrained from engaging in any work.

Not long thereafter, our hero received an offer of a good railroad job in Canada, and he was asked to provide references. He grabbed the train for Portland and dropped in at the main office. There he informed Mr. Jennings of his good fortune, and asked for the required reference. Mr. Jennings sat back in his swivel chair agast at the man's effrontery. "My God," he exclaimed, "how could I recommend a fireman who can't fire a cookstove without blowing it up?" For those who may be concerned, I am happy to report that our man got his job in Canada without the reference, and served with distinction for more than twenty years.

Loggers had a well-deserved reputation as hard drinkers. If there was any way to acquire liquor in a camp, the loggers were quick to find it. If not, they were up to creating their own from anything that would ferment. Many a moonshiner made a good stake while camps were operating near his establishment. Generally, drinking was not condoned, but it was often tolerated, in part, perhaps, because the tradition of hard drinking carried right through to the front office. More than one official has returned from a "logger's conference" with some outlandish piece of equipment he didn't know he had bought until too late. And I have known engine crews who had to crawl out to their engines on hands and knees, and yet were able to put in a good day's work. Some bosses, of course, like R. A. Long, of the Long-Bell Lumber Co., were teetotalers. Others, like Frenchman John Yeon, of Yeon & Pelton, considered no meal complete without a bottle of wine. John Yeon provided it regularly.

August Olson, of Deep River Logging Co., was not above sharing a bottle with the men, though not during working hours. One weekend he invited the blacksmith to join him in giving his speeder a fresh coat of red paint. The two men, accompanied by a bucket of paint and a supply of "red-eye," left camp to find a secluded spot in which to vent their artistic talents. What happened thereafter remains a mystery, even to the participants. Suffice it to say that when they eventually wandered back to camp there was no evidence of fresh paint on the speeder, but the two men were a bright red from head to toe.

At the Wisconsin camp near Oak Pont, it was the custom for the train crews to bring fresh milk up to camp in large milk cans. These were lashed to the running board of the locomotive for the trip up the hill. About half way up was located a wood pile where the engines were wooded up. In the woods close by was a moonshiner's still, and there was an "arrangement" whereby an empty can left on the down trip was picked up well stocked on the return trip. This went on for some time without

This camp of the Pacific Lumber Co. lies along a ridge top back of Freshwater, near Eureka, California.

a hitch. But the boys knew they were in trouble when they returned one evening to find the cookhouse dark and cold and the cook unconscious. Needless to say, the camp was in an uproar. A furtive check revealed the worst. Their "stash" contained a can of fresh milk, while most of the moonshine was obviously transferred to the interior of the cook.

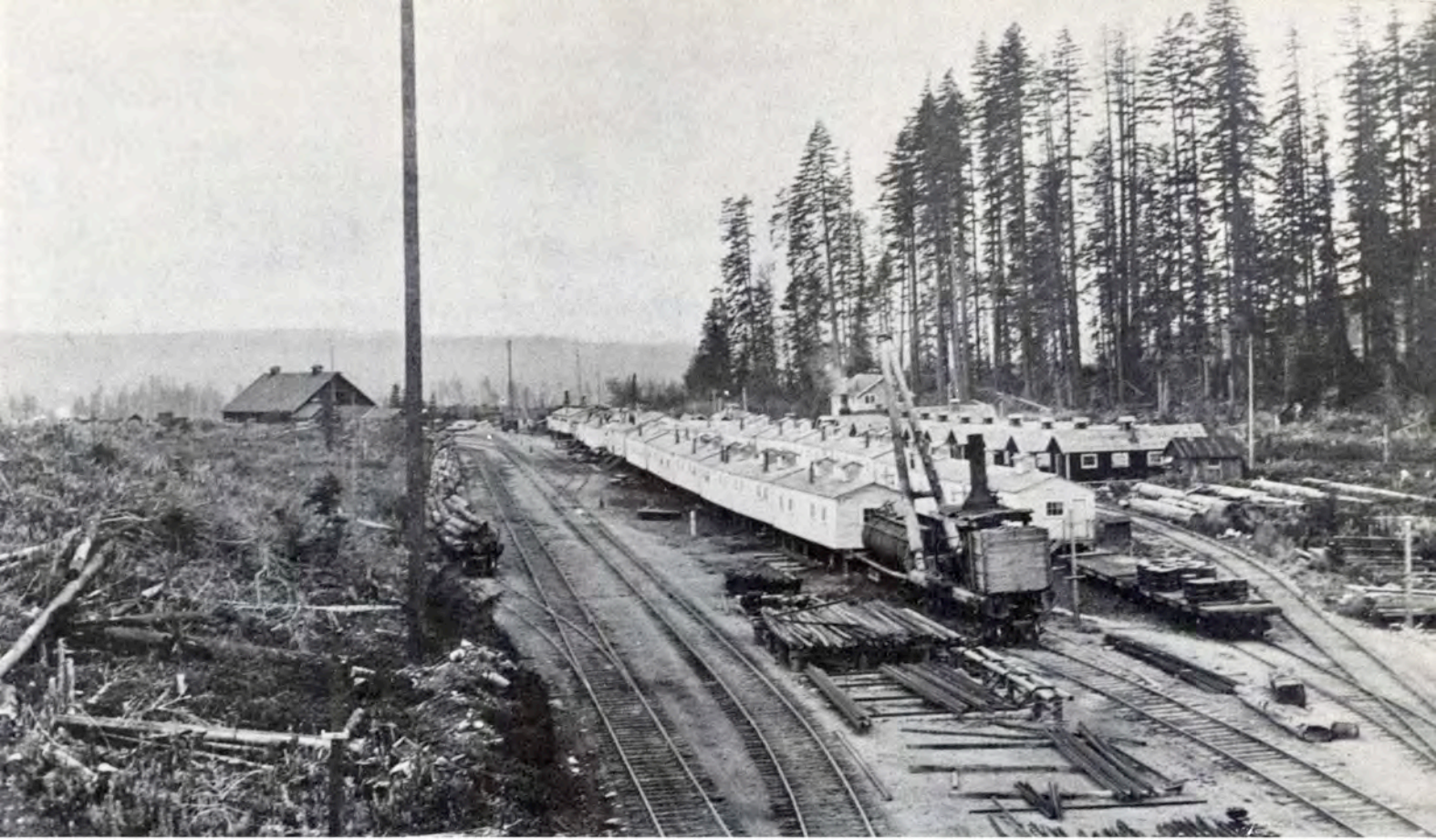
Another popular pastime in camp was card playing, but now and then these games would get out of hand and end in a knockdown brawl. A few fanatics would sometimes upset the routine in the bunkhouses, and the men who preferred to spend the full night sleeping would take things into their own hands. Such a situation developed in a camp in Coos County, Oregon. The card players would keep up their sport until well after midnight, ignoring the comments of those who found it difficult to drop off with the lights on and the voices raised. One night the players decided that they needed a bit more sleep in the morning, so one of their number climbed atop the cookshack and with a long stick rammed some rags down the stovepipe. Next morning when they rolled out of bed the sun was high and a small crowd was shouting encouragement to a bullcook on the roof, who was probing for the plug, while smoke drifted leisurely from the open windows.

The poker players thought this was a great joke, but others in the crew didn't share their outlook, particularly the fallers and buckers who were paid by the thousand feet, and not by the hour. That night the card game resumed, as usual, but one bucker took things into his own hands. Around midnight, as the party continued, he slowly rolled over in his bunk, and resting a large "45" carefully on the edge of the bunk, blasted the single light bulb with a deafening roar. In the moments that followed, not a sound could be heard, but the morning light showed everyone soundly ensconced in his bed, while the card table remained exactly as it was at the moment of darkness. And so ended the card playing at that camp.

In another camp, the cook was enamoured of green peppers. He seemed, in fact, unable to concoct a dish without them. The situation reached such a state that the locomotive engineer painted a green pepper on the side of his Shay and dubbed it "The Route of the Green Pepper." Eventually, the men could stand it no longer. They handled the situation in the same way that the Bostonians took care of the tea. They swarmed aboard the supply train and heaved the peppers overboard, much to the distress of the boss, whose food budget was thereby disrupted. No mention was made of the cook's reaction, but then, no one cared.

Women, naturally, accounted for many of the memorable camp experiences. Most of these stories, however, are better left unrecorded. But the loggers had their own methods of handling such things, and one story is worth mentioning. In a camp near Yacolt, Washington, two men became involved with a woman. One was the high-climber and the other was a donkey puncher. Which was the husband matters little. Eventually, there came a time when the donkey puncher was handling the pass line, letting the climber down after rigging a spar tree. Yielding to the impulse of the moment, he turned the levers loose and made a dash for his car. Someone had presence of mind enough to grab the brake lever just in time to save the climber from a sudden stop. Once safely down, the whole crew made a dash for their cars and took off after the donkey puncher. They followed him across the bridge into Oregon and almost to the California line before they lost him. This was probably fortunate for the posse, and it was most certainly fortunate for the donkey puncher.

THERE'S ANOTHER PHOTO ⟶



Camp of Bloedel, Stewart & Welch on Vancouver Island. This is what loggers would have called an "orchard show," with tall, straight timber on level ground.