A Night With Paul Bunyan

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Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester/vol12/iss1/11

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I was sitting one night in one of those lumber camps so rare nowadays but common in northern Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota in the early days of logging. Pipes were all lighted. The air was getting heavy. The wind moaned and shrieked outside. A loose piece of tarpaper flapped against a window. The gang was in a thoughtful mood. As I looked about I studied their faces. There was Pierre, the crack teamster. Over in a corner sat Ole, the top loader of track ten. Near the stove was Mike O'Malley, bullcook and handy man around the camp, blasphemous as a sailor's parrot, as religious as a Saint of Dublin. Mike was the first to speak.

"Be jabbers and this is a fearful night. Reminds me of the night we had the wake for Tim. He was a square cuss. Tim and me grew up together."

"Oui, he c... the bad night," Pierre was speaking. "She make the wind tonight. Not so bad like time I work for Paul. Paul, she make big cut over on Turkey River. By Gar she get cold that winter! Every morning we get up three clock to thaw out harness. Cookee she come round with grub ten clock and make big fire to thaw out grub. One night big wind come in sout east. Look pretty bad. Paul have big chains to hold camp down down. Sacre! she blow. Paul she goes out to look roun'. Wind pick up two lakes ice water and all and drop them on section of best white pine. Next day wind not so bad. Paul stick head out of door and wind take off all his whiskers, Paul she gets verr verr mad. He make big think. All of sudden she say boys we fix him and sure enough we put big sail on all sleigh and for three days we don't use the horse."
Big Ole stretched himself, yawned and then spoke in a voice that would have caused Michael Angelo to drop his paint brush and dive for the catacombs. "Wan winter Aye ban work for this har Paul. Paul had a big fish for his pet. That fish followed him aroun' for days like a dog. One day Paul cut big hole in ice to get drink and by golly that fish fall in and get drowned. Paul make official mourning for six weeks and all camp eat black bread for month."

And so the stories went around. All had worked for Paul or had had dealing with him. I could not begin to tell all that was told that night and the following nights but will attempt to tell a few of them.

Paul, it seems, had literary yearnings for he started a newspaper. Paul was very much in favor of education of the lumberjack. So we find that in between times when he wasn't breaking log jams and taking soundings in the cook's coffee pail, he edited this newspaper which gave to the crews the latest news of the day. It also contained a society column giving the favorite brands of tobacco enjoyed by the elite of his camps. There was also a column on self education. This endeavored to give the Jacks a chance to pick up in their calculus and their etiquette. Paul was very formal and no one was allowed to make any more noise than was necessary at the table. To gargle one's soup was the sign of a gentleman and to be able to strain one's coffee thru one's whiskers until it sounded like an aeolian harp was the ambition of all. Static was not allowed. Perfect harmony was the word.

Once when Paul ran out of F's he called the crew in from the woods to cut the lower part of the E's away so as to be able to use them in the place of the F's.

His press was a rotary affair run by Axhandleson, the famous squirrel. The squirrel was in a rotary cage covered with mirrors. When the squirrel would see the images in the mirrors it would become so angry that it would run to beat six band saws. Paul fed this squirrel antelope flesh to keep it in condition. Every evening six masseurs would rub the squirrel down and then put it to bed on a suspended bed of eider-down.

The pulp for the paper, that is for each edition, came from three sections of spruce. It required ten carloads of ink to print the paper. The paper was printed in appropriate colors and was used for scarecrows by the farmers after the men had finished spelling out the words they could not understand. Paul had ten strapping newsboys each over 300 pounds in weight and over seven feet tall to sell the papers. They were known as the ten newsboys of the Round River.

The poetry section of the paper—and this was a large
section—was filled with quotations from the famous poets of the day such as Salome Jones, Beerkeg Mary and John Bearskin, the Indian poet of the St. Louis, whose melodious sonnets brought tears to the eyes of the boiled potatoes. These the boys read and memorized and on Sunday afternoons they would stand in the bunkhouse and recite between sips of Old Crow.

Before any man could work for Paul he had to demonstrate that he could handle a knife and a fork in a crowd. He couldn’t take any chances of having any of his men crippled at the dinner table. So Paul took all precautions possible. Those who failed to pass such tests were given a paper and given two days to pass the test.

Paul had all his men wear magnetic hobnails and provided them with blankets which had a few strands of steel wire drawn thru the ends. Then when they went to bed there was no danger of the men kicking off their blankets and catching the Flu. The blankets just stuck to the hobnails. This worked to a disadvantage once and almost lost Paul his best cook. The men were coming home one night and all tried to walk the rails of the logging railway. The minute they stood on the rail they were caught. The whole gang were late for chow and that made the cook so mad that he swallowed half a bale of Climax which he had chewed off in his anger, and almost died of indigestion. Paul doctored him with Sloan’s Liniment and Tanlac for two weeks before he showed signs of his usual appetite.

Big Babe, the ox, became very shabby looking and Paul decided that something was radically wrong. Keeping watch one day he discovered the boys were stropping their razors on the ox and using its horns for hones. Paul soon put a stop to this and Babe once more grew in favor and stature.

It was quite a problem to provide all the dainty necessities of life for Paul's husky boys. Paul would plant several townships with potatoes and when the bugs came he sprayed the plants with arsenic from large balloons. One year there was a drought. Everything was drying up. Paul was sure that his potatoes were gone. One night he thought of a scheme and the next morning he sent for two train loads of onions. Paul shoved an onion in each hill whereupon tears came to the eyes of the potatoes and they watered themselves.

Many and long are the tales of the way Paul fed his men. Among these were the use of giant grain elevators for mixing the pancake batter in; employing colored boys to skate around the griddles with hams tied to their feet to grease the griddle. Those are but a few of the facts of the case. At on time Paul's favorite teamster broke thru the
ice with a load of split peas. Paul couldn't think of losing all those peas so he put some steam pipes under the lake and served his men split pea soup all that winter.

In order to save time in the morning Paul had the cock make some pancake blankets and each man was provided with one at the time or retiring for the night. In the morning they were eaten with great gusto by the men while they were dressing. It saved time and blankets.

One of the sawmills had a large stack and Paul sent Big Ole up to clean it. Ole had taken an extra large Chew of Copenhagen and when he reached the top he became very dizzy and fell into the stack. The fit was perfect. After falling a couple of hundred feet the air became compressed and shot Ole almost up to the top again. Then he dropped and again the air was compressed and again he was shot to the top. This would have continued almost indefinitely had not Ole's clothes become worn and allowed the air to escape thus allowing Ole to land safely.

Ole said that he was not so much afraid of falling as he was of starving to death.

It was a large and irksome task to keep the bunk houses warm. The main house took 36 cords of wood to heat it for a day. Paul had his efficiency expert, Copper Boilerson study the problem. One cold night he hit on a plan that saved Paul from worry the rest of the year as far as the heating problem was concerned. He fired up the stoves and got them red hot. Then he froze them that way and thus preserved them red hot for the entire winter.

This new scheme pleased Paul very much. He decided to use it in another way. One night when it was very cold he went out and gave the commands for the spring drive. The words froze as they left his mouth and when the spring came and it came time for the drive there was no need of giving any commands for the drive. The words that Paul had repeated in the winter were thawed out and the men heard them as clearly as when Paul gave them himself.

The good old days are over. Wine, women and song are gone and with them went the pine and the old time lumberjack. No longer does Paul and his crew cut timber. No longer does his cookee sound his call for chow. Where once the majestic pines ruled we find desolation. Paul lives only in myth and song and yet on a winter's evening when the gang is in the bunkhouse, the spirit of Paul comes over the hills and permeates the air. Men light their pipes and go back to those days of yore in the tales of Paul, his ox and his famous crew.