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Timber Cruising a la Francais

By E. M. Davis

Private Edward M. Davis, 17th Co., 20th Engineers, will proceed from Castets, Landes, to La Chaise Dieu, Haute Loire, reporting upon arrival to District Commander of 20th Engineers for duty under Captain John D. Guthrie.

Equipped with the above traveling order, a ticket slightly smaller than a daily paper, and with all his worldly goods jammed into pack and barracks bag, one of Uncle Sam's buck privates was wedged (by an M. P.) into a third-class compartment of the Bordeaux local. For company he had three returning French 'Soldats', three peasant women of ample proportions and several children of assorted sizes and sexes. There was also a unique collection of boxes, bundles, baskets, canteens, musettes, packs and miscellaneous junk. Under these circumstances, an addition in the compartment was not particularly welcome, but by the judicious use of a sack of Bull Durham, he was able to establish friendly relations with the military element, and soon all were agreed that Sherman was right.

Passing through Bordeaux, Perigueux, Luinoges and Mouthien, the train drew into Vichy twenty four hours after the start. All the way east from Bordeaux the land had become more rolling and hilly, orchards, vineyards and grain fields frequently giving way to upland pastures and woodlands. South of Vichy the change was even more marked, and as the railway wound up the Valley of the Allier, the percentage of woodland steadily increased and villages were less common. The hills became low mountains covered with fir, spruce, larch and Scotch pine.

Toward noon, La Chaise Dieu was reached. Here a village of about two thousand people was clustered on the crest of an isolated, flat-topped hill. A view for miles in all directions showed only wooded hills and low mountains with scattered pastures and farms.

At headquarters, a typical small French hotel, I learned that a new logging district for the 20th Engineers was being established, and that the dozen men at La Chaise Dieu were to be members of the headquarters company. Six forest school graduates were assigned to the timber acquisition crew for the district including the departments of Haute Loire, Puy de' Dome, Cantal, Loire, Rhone, Ardeche and Lozere. A day or two passed before

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the other members of the acquisition crew reported for work: two men from Yale, one from the University of California, one from Penn State, and George Hartman and myself from Ames.

As soon as the crew was complete we moved several miles to a village which was within easy walking distance of our work. The following day we were introduced to our job and to our future associates, several members of the French Forest Service. A third rate road climbed up from the valley along the side of the hill, passed a few farms and dwindled to a path that entered the Forest of La Sarre, the first scene of action. It was here that the Frenchmen were waiting, and lengthy introductions followed. They wore dark blue uniforms, and made a very soldierly appearance with their brass buttons, gold braid, leggings and military caps. From the start, the French and Americans were sources of great mutual interest and amusement. We were the first Americans to reach that section of France and they were the only French with whom we had become well acquainted. Of course a knowledge of French on our part was a decided help.

Their names were so long and inconvenient that we had a nickname for each before the day was over. First there was the Walrus; his mustache won him that title. His position corresponded to that of ranger in America. As chief of the French party the Walrus had a keen sense of his own importance, and when his disposition was ruffled, he used pungent and picturesque language in a tone like that of a coffee grinder filled with gravel. Blackie was about thirty-five years old, more good natured and more prepossessing. He twirled a mean mustache whenever a strange mademoiselle appeared on the scene. Uncle Sam was the most amusing of all. He was a stocky, twinkling-eyed old rascal whose face bore a resemblance to the Uncle Sam of cartoons. He had grown grey in the service, and had developed a decided taste for vin rouge and anecdotes of a rich and racy nature. The fourth and last was Shorty, a quiet, solemn, little man of about forty. Shorty was so full of energy that he was always working ahead of the others and waiting for them to catch up.

Work followed the introductions. This forest had already been approved as a project for the Twentieth. We were to go through with the Frenchmen, mark trees for cutting, caliper, and record them. They used small marking hatchets with which they cut off chips of bark at breast height then stamped the wood with the die on the hatchet head. This was also done just above the ground, so that one stamp or brand would show on the stump and again on the the butt log, to prove that the tree had been selected for cutting by the proper officials. Since accurate volume tables had been worked out for different species and locali-

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ties, the only measurements required were the diameters at breast height.

Of all the species the fir was most common and reached the largest diameter. Even then, fir trees of over thirty inch diameter were rare. Uncle Sam would sometimes walk up to such a tree, pat it with his hand and say, "You have no such trees as this in America". If one of the crew tried to tell him of the west coast trees, he would shrug his shoulders, "Mon, Dieu, what a liar". It was interesting to note the frequency with which root grafting occurred in the fir. We often saw stumps that had grown a callus three inches wide, being connected with neighboring trees that were uncut. Next in importance to the fir, was Norway spruce. This was usually taller and slenderer, often forming splendid poles. There was a small amount of Scotch pine, which had been introduced. This tree was almost invariably limly, crooked and generally scruffy in appearance, decidedly inferior to the others. In fact it was the French policy to cut and get rid of the pine, since it is considered a failure in that region. The larch was not common but compared favorably with fir and spruce in quality.

In cutting, the selection system appeared to be in general use. The stands were mixed, uneven aged, and while the forested areas were large, the individual holdings were often very small. There always appeared to be an abundance of natural reproduction. The percentage cut largely depended on the condition of the stand in question. In a comparatively mature stand like that of La Sarre, a maximum of 40% was sometimes cut, but this was much above the average. In selecting the particular trees for cutting, great care was taken to mark the over mature and defective trees and to open up crowded clumps. As a rule fir was considered mature when it reached a D. B. H. of two feet, and seldom showed any signs of deterioration when smaller. Trees of this size and up were always marked unless so numerous that their removal would open up the stand altogether too much. Trees of any size that showed disease, infections of fungi, large burls or stag head were marked. However, the trees are nearly always cut before they become over mature and start to deteriorate.

In the course of several weeks we covered this forest, as well as two adjoining tracts belonging to the same estate which owned several hundred acres of forest. This was part of an old estate of the days before the French Revolution and was still the largest in that section. We were always accompanied in our work by members of the owners' family who kept their own tally. Since the men were away in the army, it was usually Madame P. and her daughter. They were very cordial and greatly interested in

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America and American customs. On our part we had been long enough in France to appreciate the acquaintance of ladies of the better class. One or another of the crew was usually so busy entertaining Mademoiselle P. that her tally was far from accurate.

The French Foresters took their work in a very leisurely manner. Uncle Sam was never seen to hurry except once when a bee stung him on his southern exposure; Blacky would go into high when there was a woman in the case; the Walrus could be stimulated by a long pull at his canteen; but Shorty was always on the job. They usually came stringing through the woods at about 8:30. After ten minutes to shake hands all around, work continued till 11:30. In the morning they were often grouchy, but a quart of red wine at noon caused them to see the world in a more rosy light and by 1:30 they were ready to “carry on” in a very cheerful frame of mind. At 5:00 a second dairy reception was due, and then we parted till the next day. It must have been in late September when the Walrus went on strike. He announced one evening that work would end for a few days until he got his potatoes dug. This did not appeal to us, and someone asked if he intended to put his private affairs ahead of his war work. “War,” said the Walrus, “But, yes, one understands that there is a war; but also there are my unfortunate potatoes which must be dug without delay. If the war interferes with my potatoes, so much the worse for the war. Let the war continue. I shall dig potatoes”. And he did.

The next job was harder. It was a tract of about seven hundred acres, composed of nearly three hundred separate lots, with probably half as many individual owners. The boundaries were so indistinct that it was necessary for the owners to accompany the party, since a separate record was required for each holding. Each lot had its own name, for example, the Priests’ wood, the Great Forest, the Boars’ wood, and there were a dozen Black Forests. Most of these small proprietors were peasant farmers living in the neighborhood. They were accustomed to cutting a few trees from time to time, according to the size of their holdings, with the permission of the forest officers. The owners trimmed the trunks down to a top diameter of four inches, barked them and hauled the entire trunks to the nearest sawmill. In hauling, oxen, horses and even milk cows were used. The horses were often blinded in one eye so that the government would not take them for the army. It was interesting to note that the percentage of waste is much less than in the United States. The French considered that 20% of the tree was contained in the limbs and tops. These were bundled up in fagots and sold for firewood. Slabs, edgings and sawdust make up a second 20%, leaving 60% to be marketed as lumber. Their mills are usually

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crude band mills of small capacity but no doubt better suited to local conditions than an American mill would be.

The forests owned by the state are apt to be in the more inaccessible regions, as in our own west. In France the state forests often contain the best timber for that reason and also because power logging is practically unknown. The French officials favored tracts in the state forests as American projects largely because of mature timber that offered more difficult logging chances than they were accustomed to handle. On the other hand, the small owners and peasants disliked to dispose of more timber than usual even at a record price, and the sawmill owners in particular feared to see their business ruined if an American sawmill came in. They could handle their little woodlots and their little mills as their grandfathers had done without American help, and they much preferred to do so.

A still different line of work was looking up ownership records. This was done in connection with the route of a proposed logging railroad which had been surveyed from the town to the La Sarre tract. It was necessary to know the ownership of each field crossed by the five or six miles of the proposed road. About eighty years ago all the region had been surveyed, mapped, and each field as it then stood numbered and its ownership recorded. From the old maps the fields crossed by the proposed road were located, then from other volumes the present owners were hunted up. Sometimes a field had been divided a dozen times since the original maps were made. In that case it was necessary to go back to the ownership as recorded in the first records and trace it down to the present till all sub-divisions were accounted for. What added to the difficulty was the small size of the lots. A farmer might own twenty acres, but it would be in a dozen lots scattered all over the commune. The number of family names in any locality was small. A village of five hundred people might have only twenty or thirty family names. Men were sometimes distinguished by adding their professions or trades to their names, as John Henry Peter Innkeeper Jones, and John Henry Peter Cobbler Jones.

Finally the work called us over into the neighboring department, Cantal. On the slopes of a mountain, the Plomb du Cantal, was the State Forest of Murat where a company of the Twentieth had been operating a sawmill for several months. Here we put on rubber boots and waded in snow for a week or two. This forest was at a high enough elevation so that the trees were noticeably shorter than in the La Sarre tract. Utilization was not so close in the more distant parts, where tops and limbs frequently went to waste, as in woodlands where markets were nearer and easier of access.

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November 11 found us in the picturesque little city of Le Puy where headquarters had recently been established. Eleven o'clock came and the armistice went into effect. The whole headquarters detachment was ripe for a celebration. The French were almost delirious, and all bars were down. Parades, tin horns, flags, confetti, wine, women, and song. The public square was the livliest spot of all. Two of the boys were admitting to a group of mademoiselles that the Yanks won the war; one was going to quarters in a wheelbarrow; a half dozen were roaring out, "Drunk last night, drunker the night before"; while the surrounding French (who had been told that it was our national anthem) stood with bared heads, and over at one side bewhiskered old veterans of the Franco-Prussian war were lining up to kiss the major. Without going into detail, it is enough to say that the boys staged such a lurid celebration that the Major's soul yearned in vain for a guardhouse. As a result the only ones who were not confined to quarters were the fortunate few who didn't get caught.

The Armistice put a stop to our operations. A detachment which had been erecting sawmills and camp buildings tore their work down and headed for Bordeaux in jig time. The one mill in operation cleaned up a few odds and ends and quit. Timber acquisition was a thing of the past.

During the next two or three weeks headquarters company slowly dissolved. One morning in early December I was given an officially stamped paper that read: "Pvt. Edward M. Davis is relieved from further duty with these headquarters and will proceed immediately by rail from Le Puy, Haute Loire, to Castets, Landes, reporting upon arrival to C. O., 17th Co., 20th Engineers for duty."