

## Chainsaws come to the woods

In the late 1930s, gas powered chainsaws began replacing cross-cut saws as the preferred tool used to fall trees. Despite the fact that they made fallers more productive, early chainsaws were heavy, vibrated a lot and tended to be unreliable mechanically. They were also noisy! Because the operators couldn't hear warning shouts or falling limbs, it became mandatory after June 1941 for all power saw crews to wear hard hats.

The German company Stihl was an early leader in the emerging field of chainsaw manufacturing, but the outbreak of World War II cut them off from Canadian customers. The D.J. Smith Equipment Company (which later became Industrial Engineering Limited (I.E.L.)) was one of the Vancouver-based businesses that sprang up as a result.

## Chutes and Flumes

Before trucks came into common use in the 1930s and 40s, logging operations often used chutes or flumes to move logs, poles or sometimes lumber downhill. They

were expensive to build however, so were only used if there was a large enough volume of timber to be moved.

Both were basically troughs, but flumes were filled with water, whereas chutes were not (but they were sometimes greased).

## Beehive Burners

Like the grain silos of the prairies, beehive burners have all but disappeared from the landscape in BC. Once commonplace, a beehive burner was a “free-standing conical steel structure ranging from 30 to 60 feet in height” designed to incinerate the wood waste produced by mills. Unfortunately, they were also very inefficient! Despite attempts to improve that, they still spewed great amounts of smoke and particulate into the air. In Nelson, the often low-hanging haze not only diminished air quality, but resulted in ash accumulating on the houses and yards in the adjacent neighbourhoods. They were largely phased out starting in the early 1970s through stricter environmental controls and better use of waste (e.g. biofuels).

## Planting trees

Although the first tree plantations were established in BC in the 1930s, it wasn't until the 1960s that the need for increased reforestation began to gain widespread acceptance.

Happily, this coincided with an influx of “back-to-the-landers” who came to B.C. from the United States or more urban locations (or both). For many of them, tree planting contracts were a way to make money without compromising either their independence or environmental ideals.

Maureen Jansma remembers:

“My first planting contract. March 1975. West coast of Vancouver Island.

We were a wild band of young people with lots of hair, and enthusiasm. No fleece or high tech gear here. Lots of wool and rubber. We took the Uchuck boat from Gold River, around Nootka Island to Port Eliza. We had one truck, all our food, tents and gear for several weeks of WET coast adventure.

We camped on the beach, with very limited fresh water, pup tents, and a large dark army surplus tent with a small wood cook stove. We took turns cooking very basic food with damp wood.

No showers, no salads, just wet socks, rye crackers, and amazing camaraderie. The planting was steep and gnarly, every man/woman for them self. Work safe would have been appalled

We must have loved it, because out of this crew of 15 folks, developed six large tree planting companies that worked the province over the next decades, planting many millions of trees. The friendly competition continued for years.”

## Logging up Sproule Creek

“John Bell was a mill builder and a sawmill man. He and Dad formed A.G. Lambert and Company and they started in Taghum and up Sproule Creek. The wholesale lumber yard and the planing plant were along the railroad at Taghum, and the logging and sawmill operation was up Sproule Creek. They operated from 1905 ‘til 1933 in that one area.

There were seven sawmills built up Sproule Creek. The first one was a mile and a half up, and the last one in the

main fork was eight miles up. That's the one I worked in. And when it was all cut out in the main fork, then they had two different mill sites in the north fork, so that's how he got started in the lumber production end of the business. That was 1905.

All the lumber came to that planing site from the Sproule Creek sawmills by flume. It came down over the hill and around the corner to the slide-off table and that was the water from Sproule Creek. They flumed as high as four thousand feet in a nine-hour shift from the mill eight miles up. It took two or three different sorting gaps manned by two Chinamen. Friction in the bottom of the flume holds the water back as it flows, and the top of the water falls ahead so it makes waves down the flume. When the water gets a little low on the flume the waves don't float the lumber. So it had to be fed half a dozen times in that eight miles down the creek, because lots of it got thrown out by the lumber itself. The flume had fourteen inch sides, sloped at forty-five degrees, twelve inch bottom, and when running full of water will float two-by-twelves, three-by-twelves, square timbers and so on.

In a nine hour period we'd have taken the whole cut of the sawmill plus ten or fifteen thousand feet of lumber from the piles that were alongside of the flume cut the fall before. The fluming had to be done in the spring at high water. We sawed from the first of April to the first of July because there wasn't enough water at the

headworks up at the top end to flume lumber after the first of July.”

- Recounted by George Lambert, who was born in Rossland in 1902 and died in 1991. From the book *Tie Hackers to Timber Harvesters* by Ken Drushka.

## M.V. Amabilis II

The British Columbia Forestry Service used the M.V. Amabilis II on Kootenay Lake starting in 1928. It carried firefighting crews, brought supplies to the Gerrard fish hatchery and was often called upon in emergencies. You can also see a scale model of the boat in the permanent museum exhibit on the second floor.

## Beginnings and Lookouts

In 1897 the Department of Lands opened a Timber Inspection Branch field office in Nelson, making it one of the first forestry field offices in the province. In 1912, the Forest Branch was established within the Department

of Lands to protect and manage the province's forests. Although its structure and organization has changed much since then, that was the beginning of the present day B.C. Forest Service.

When the Forest Service was at its peak during the 50s and 60s, there were eleven forest ranger stations in the West Kootenays (twenty two in B.C.), each of which employed numerous full time and seasonal staff. There were also thirteen "lookouts" whose actual construction ranged from towers to tents. During the warmer months, men not averse to spending a lot of time by themselves lived in them and kept a sharp eye out for forest fires.

## Poles

As the communities in our region were being built in the late 1890s, so were telegraph and telephone lines. The Canadian Pacific Telegraph Company completed the installation of a new telegraph line from Nelson to Grand Forks in 1899, and phone lines came to Nelson in that same year.

The construction of these lines created a large demand for poles. For a time, the West Kootenays were B.C.'s biggest pole producing area! They fetched much higher prices than ordinary timber, but had very specific requirements and required considerably more care in falling and processing.

## Match Game

In her memoir, Louise Anderson (1922-2009) recalled working at the W.W. Powell match block factory at the foot of Stanley St. in 1941. The factory exclusively hired women to sort and inspect the wood blocks, which were sent to Eddy Match Co. in Berthierville, Que. Eddy Match eventually acquired to company, which operated in Nelson from 1921-62.

“Noise of multi-circular saws filled the sawdust-laden air. Under long fluorescent lights another cloud of fine dust wafted with each scream of the saws as they ripped two inch planks into matchwood. Three girls stood on a raised platform below the saws. In front of them was the top conveyor belt from which they were removing blocks that were free of knots, cross grain, and discolored wood,



tossing these pieces onto a lower belt that ran to the inspector team at the back of the building. The top belt moved the blocks with defects along to the chopping team of 12 or 14 girls who stood in cubicles on planks that covered the winter steam heating system. Each girl, dressed in a dark green smock, had a hatchet and a 12 x 12 inch, three foot high chopping block on which she cut out the undesired portion which became waste that fueled many Nelson homes of the time. The good portions were tossed onto the belt for the inspecting team to check before the material went by conveyor into boxcars that would be shipped east to the Eddy Match Factory.”

## Log in the Winter, mill in the summer

It could have been 1924, 1936, 1943, or, in some camps, even 1950. The camps didn't change. The tick that passed as a mattress was filled with fresh straw in the fall and not changed until the next summer. Each man had to bring his own blankets. The single seat in the bunkhouse was a pants-polished slab under a kerosene light. A bunkhouse was as dark as a bear's cave and smelled as though the bear was wet. The work schedule was simple. Log in the winter, mill in the summer, and survive on your own during the break-up and freeze-up.

In the woods, work started when it was still dark. Up, breakfast, harness the horse, then three men would walk out to the stand of trees they were working to be in place at dawn. One man would cut the trees down. The second man would limb them. The third would use the horse to haul the logs.

In the late 1920s, wages were 45 to 55 cents an hour for sawyers, a nickel less for teamsters, camp help, and the guys who cleaned up. A camp foreman made \$125 to \$150 a month. Then the Depression hit and wages were cut back to 22 cents an hour. Anyone with a job was smart to keep it for as long as possible, so the men stayed in the same camp. People became attached to the camps and organized debating societies, dances, and movie nights.

- From *Cutting Up the North*, by Ken Bernsohn. Although it described life in the logging camps of northern B.C. in the first half of the 20th century, it would have been equally applicable to the Kootenays.