

Trip brings back childhood memories

A drive down Hwy. 11 through the Chalk River-Pembroke section of the Ottawa Valley still stirs feelings of a home-coming experience.

The sights of old, remaining buildings, old, unpaved roadways off the beaten track, unchanged little with the passing years, and always not too far distant, the Ottawa River, ancient and venerable mother, bring back a flood of early childhood memories.

From the lumber depot at the mouth of the Schyan River which we called home during our early years, Chalk River was our nearest village, shopping and railway centre.

To go to The Chalk was a real adventure.

At Dover's store you could get anything from hardware through clothing and boots to records of Alma Gluck or Uncle Josh.

Nearby at Herman's Hotel there were rooms, meals and a fully-stocked bar.

And over at the CPR station, at close range, you could watch the trains come in.

Through here moved the hundreds of men that were employed in the lumber camps of the Gillies Lumber Co., served by the Schyan Depot.

A trip to the village involved crossing the Ottawa from the Quebec to the Ontario shore by row boat or motor launch.

Then there was a jaunt by horse and buggy or wagon.

In winter it was a one-phase operation by sleigh across the



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frozen river and hence to the village.

There was a period during freeze-up and spring thaw when the river was impassable and the depot was entirely isolated from the outside world.

In summer, visitors to the depot would hoist a flag at the landing on the Ontario shore signalling their intent to come across the river.

They were picked up by boat.

When the gangs of men moving into the outlying lumber camps during the fall months, were large, they were often transported across the river by scow normally used to move goods, horses, or cattle.

Smaller groups would be taken across the river in pointers along with their belongings, usually stuffed into a potato bag fastened at the top and with a shoulder strap attached.

That was known as their poche or turkey.

Large gangs would sometime number as many as 80 to 100 or more men.

They would gather in the depot sleep camp or wander about the yard until they were called to the office to be officially registered and assigned to specific lumber camps.

Among the many dogs that were permanent residents of the depot was a husky called Danie, (real name Danger). The only person to touch the dog was my father.

As kids we kept our distance from Danie and he kept his. At night the dog made regular rounds of the grounds near our quarters. We always knew when my father was returning from the village. Danie would move to a stone wall near the shore and sit staring across the river until he arrived.

While the camp crews remained, Danie took a post under the steps of the sleep camp.

As each man walked to the office, the dog followed immediately behind at his heels, not nipping but presumably getting a permanent imprint of the smell of each individual.

It was customary for the crews to eat dinner at the depot and in order to accommodate all they ate in shifts.

We kids were not allowed out of the house while the gangs were moving through the depot.

Many of the men coming into the camps were getting over summer-long drunks.

Some would eat double dinners, some would talk to themselves, other would shout, talk crazy or even take off by themselves into the bush or wander down the shoreline.

The depot people knew what was happening and said, "They have the blues," or "They're in the horrors,"

For the final journey to the designated lumber camps, each man threw his poche on the wagon and walked the 10 or more miles to the camp.

Sometimes the fellows "in the horrors," would never reach the camp.

They would just disappear into the forest. Sometimes depot search crews would find them dead from exposure or exhaustion. Sometimes they would never be seen again and their fates would remain forever unknown.

But when they came out in the spring after the long winter haul, they were entirely different.

They would often bring with them the pieces of art unique to the lumberjack.

Miniature blacksmith tongs, carved in wood with only a jack-knife, or maybe a walking stick decorated with intricate designs.

Occasionally someone would have a carving of a team of horses and a complete load of logs on sloops, every detail correct and no tacks or nails to hold it together.

Among the lumberjacks whittling helped to fill in the few moments of spare time throughout the long winters.

But in the hands of a few the jackknife was the tool of a skilled craftsman.

And the depot people were often the recipients of some of these pieces of primitive art.

EPILOGUE: The dog Danie was shot and killed by a fire ranger the day following our departure from Schyan Depot. The fire ranger said the dog attacked him.

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