

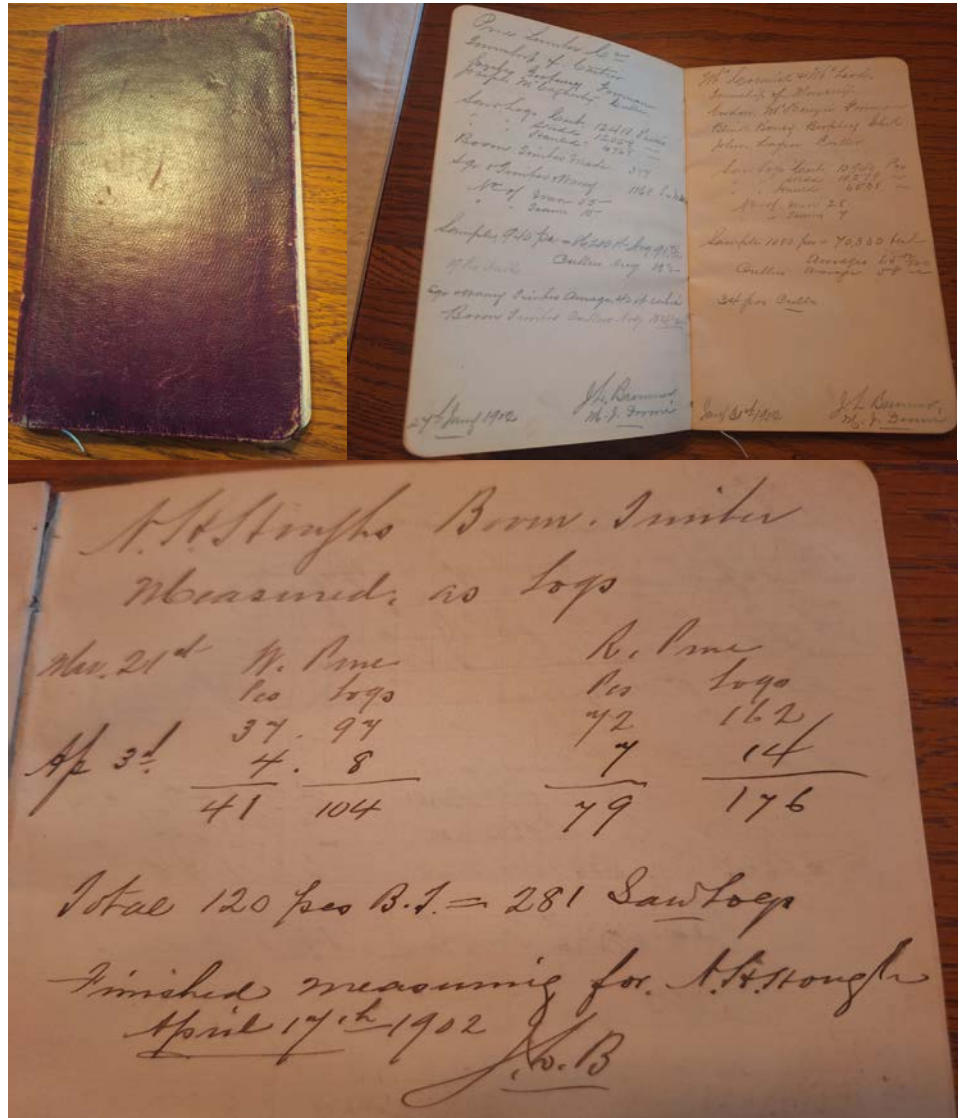
A TREASURE FROM THE ATTIC

EXCERPTS FROM A SCALING JOURNAL DESCRIBING LOGGING ALONG THE NORTH SHORE IN THE LATE 1800S

By Art Robertson

Untouched for almost 100 years by the ravages of time, rodents or moisture in the attic of my sister's shop in Renfrew, the scaling journal I found contains a record of approximately 1,750,000 red and white pine logs cut, skidded, scaled and hauled... and then transported by rail or predominately by water to regional sawmills. The total volume recorded was about 175 million board feet (Doyle Scaling Rule*). The period of time covered was December through April, for five winter camps from 1901 to 1906 that employed approximately 500 men and about 50 teams of horses. During the winter of 1903 to 1904, 394,899 logs were harvested. It all took place on the North Shore, in townships located in Ontario's Algoma District along the north channel of Lake Huron, and its main communities along the present-day Highway 17 corridor. It should be noted that much of the timber harvested during these years was used to build the six big American cities on the Great Lakes.

Shanty (winter lumber camp) size varied from 40 to 70 men in one operation, but 60 men and six to seven teams of horses seemed most common. The Scaler who recorded these statistics was J. L. Brenner, and his assistant was M. J. Devine. Most of the camps scaled were in the Spanish River watershed, which covers 5,400 square miles to the northwest of Sudbury. Camps at Cartier Township and Onaping were also tallied for their output. Camps were named by township, cut block, or place names like Biscotasing and Pogamosing. I will give an abbreviated history of the Spanish River waterway to help frame the contents of the journal...



The treasure from the attic... a scaling journal over 100 years old.

Until 1860 this vast area was home only to the Indigenous Peoples and eventually fur trappers and traders. From 1860 to 1883 only a small amount of timber was harvested from the lower reaches of the Spanish River. Due to a lack of access and manpower, most of this wood was boomed and pulled across Lake Erie to willing American buyers. However, cir-

ca 1880, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) brought the separate railway to the north, with a station and work-centre at Biscotasing consisting of 470 acres, 30 employees, a siding, and a roundhouse for trains. In 1888, the Hudson Bay company had a full trading outpost located there to buy furs from the natives and other trappers. With the coming of the



railway, settlers flooded in and cleared arable land adjoining the railway close to the outlet of the river, and towns like Webbwood, Massey, and Spanish sprang up. This created winter manpower and teams for winter operations, as well as food for the shantymen and horse rations (hay and oats).

In 1897, the Ontario Government put a tariff on export of raw sawlogs to America. Consequently, a lot of U.S. dollars were invested on the Canadian shoreline in proximity of the Spanish River outlet to Lake Huron. The Spanish River Company with U.S. shareholders built two large sawmills and gobbled up a lot of timber limits and smaller mills in short order. Many of the operations did not carry their name but were controlled by them at arms-length. They opened a pulp and paper mill at Espanola in February 1903.

In 1904, 60 million board feet came down the Spanish River... about 3,500,000 to 4,000,000 white and red pine logs. Stumpage (tax paid to the province) in 1880 was 75 cents per thousand board feet. By 1903, it was \$2 per thousand board feet. A fair portion of early timber was hewed with broadaxe, leaving 25% in chips ankle deep. This was a terribly wasteful practice. At or before 1900, square timber became unpopular, and its stumpage was charged at a higher rate due to excessive waste.

RIVER DRIVE

To facilitate the river drive over the 80 miles from the start at Biscotasing, there were approximately 25 or more dams and miles of stream enhancement. It took about a day to sweep logs a mile on a stream or river; hence up to 80 days of sufficient water volume was hoped for... and needed. Many smaller companies went bust or took two years to get logs to the mill. Only young men could endure the hardships of the river drive, which meant up to 15 hours a day on or in icy waters during April and May. The French Canadian component of the camps dominated this part of the operations. I have assumed their pay rate was elevated due

to hardships and dangers involved. The river improvements were a joint effort of all the companies and operators on the river, but the Spanish River Company being the largest, made sure that their logs were transported first.

Almost half of the able-bodied men in Ontario worked the bush in the winter at this time. In summer they went back to the land to farm or worked in the mills. Most of southcentral Ontario had been heavily exploited by 1900, so there were many seasoned loggers from Ontario and Quebec looking north and west to the remaining timber, still untouched by the crosscut saw.

Some interesting Shanty Statistics from the Journal

- Wages for each man: \$27 to \$28 per month.
- Team of horses: \$2/day
- Total number of logs cut and scaled over a set period/each camp; an average camp of 60 would produce on skidway over 1000 logs per day!
- Number of square edge, and boom timbers produced during each scale period; a boom log was 30 inches plus, 16 feet long, with a six inch hole two feet from each end for a boom chain.
- Estimate of proposed winter cut given by each camp foreman at start of winter; the average camp produced anywhere from 2,000,000 to 4,500,000 million board feet each winter.

Anonymous List of Shanty Provisions and Supplies from One Winter/Spring circa 1880

(for a large bush operation with 450 men for the entire season)

- 825 barrels salt/brined pork; (300 lbs. barrels equals – total of 247,500 lbs. of pork)
- 300 barrels of flour (approximately 58,500 lbs.)
- 500 bushels dried beans
- 3750 gallons corn syrup



Building a load of logs in February 1946. Camp 40, McFadden Lumber Company, Blind River, Ontario. A few decades after the content of the scaling journal, but still reminiscent.



Hauling a load of logs with horsepower in February 1946. Camp 40, McFadden Lumber Company, Blind River, Ontario. Again, a few decades after the scaling journal, but relevant.

- 7500 lbs. of tea
- 3000 lbs. tobacco
- 1875 lbs. soap
- 900 wool blankets
- 3750 lbs. of rope
- 15 cookeries
- 1500 pieces of 7 foot boom chain
- 1375 cant hooks
- 3700 bushels oats
- 300 tons hay
- 45 pointer boats

CAMP FOOD

It was a very limited diet up to about 1900, until the advent of the cast iron stove — big ovens to bake bread, pies, and pastries. Prior to that everything was cooked in large cast iron pots, even the bread. Beans and bread were buried in hot sand beneath an open fire in pots. There was little variation in food, and the menu was ultra high in carbohydrates!

After about 1900, fresh fruit and vegetables made for a much more varied diet.

BEGINNINGS OF SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

In 1903, the Ontario Government estimated that almost 50% of the great stands of the province's white and red pine had been harvested in the previous 97 years, since Philemon Wright drove the first square timber to Quebec City in 1806 via the Ottawa and St Lawrence waterways. They declared that at the breakneck speed of the current logging (then almost a billion board feet per annum), the stands would be nearly decimated in 10 to 12 years. However, World War I put the brakes on this over-harvest situation, but only for lack of manpower, and the dwindling number of pine stands and the growing difficulty to access them easily.

Fortunately, during the past 120 years, we have learned to conserve, nurture, manage, and protect our vast primary

resources for present and future generations, rather than exploit. Forestry practices today are sustainable, and science based. I salute those that have made this happen with their vision, foresight, and enterprise. We have come a long way!

* The Doyle scaling rule is a formula used to estimate the board footage in a log by subtracting four from its diameter, squaring the result, and then multiplying by its length in feet and dividing by 16. It is a common rule, especially in the hardwood industry, but it is known to be inaccurate for small logs, as it tends to underestimate their volume, while overestimating larger ones.

Editor's Note: Forest History Ontario and the Ontario Woodlot Association offer thanks to the author, Art Robertson, for submitting this fascinating glimpse at the forest sector of yesteryear. 🌲

SAVE THE DATE!

33rd Annual Woodlot Tour and Conference

PASSING IT ON: SUCCESSION AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

11-12 April 2026 | Lindsay, ON



ONTARIO
WOODLOT
ASSOCIATION

