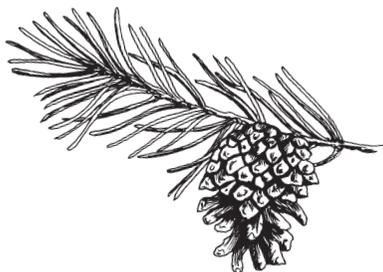




WISCONSIN FOREST TALES

BY JULIA PFERDEHIRT ILLUSTRATIONS BY PAMELA HARDEN



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CHAPTER TWO INTRODUCTION



FORESTS HAVE ALWAYS been important in America's history. In the 1700s, wood from forests built cities and towns. In the 1800s, people began to move west.

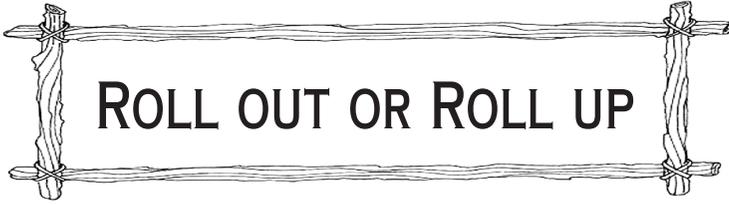
By 1850, when this story begins, Yankees from the eastern states and newcomers from Europe had come to Wisconsin. These settlers built farms. Soon towns and cities grew. The whole country was growing, and lumber was needed.

In northern Wisconsin, the white pine forests looked like gold mines to lumber-hungry Americans. Most people believed the forests of Wisconsin would last forever.

Lumber companies bought forestland and built sawmills. Trees were cut, sawed into logs, and floated by river to the sawmills. This work was done by hand, using axes, saws, horses, and oxen. The men who did this hard work were called lumberjacks.

It took muscle and brains to cut thousands of acres of trees. It took skill to float millions of trees downriver to sawmills.

Although some lumberjacks were just farmers trying to make money in winter, most were professionals. Many couldn't read or write, but in the forest, they were experts. A good lumberjack knew where a tree would fall when he cut it.



“**D**aylight in the swamp, boys! Roll out or Roll up,” Boss Larson bellowed like an ox. It was 4:30 in the morning. I jumped from my bunk as if I’d been fired from a shotgun. It was my first day as a lumberjack and I had to show Boss Larson he hadn’t made a mistake hiring me.

My neighbor Nels worked for Boss Larson. When he said Boss was hiring new men, I wrapped my clothes in a blanket and walked to the camp. Nels took me to the office.

“He’s stronger than he looks, Boss,” Nels said. “He’ll work very hard.”

Boss Larson scowled. He squeezed my arms. “Skinny,” he muttered. “You’ll eat more than you work.”

I stood as tall as I could. “No, sir,” I said, trying to make my voice sound deep and strong. “I’ve been working on the farm with Pa since I was no bigger than a stump. I won’t let you down, sir.”

I needed to work. Pa had died last winter. Ma and the girls needed every penny I could earn.

Boss Larson stared right back at me. “You over fifteen, boy?”

I held my breath. Nels had told me the boss always asked that question. If I said I was just fourteen, he’d throw me out the door. Nels and I had talked before he brought me to the lumber camp.

“You’re scrawny as a chicken, but you’re strong,” Nels told me. “But Boss still won’t hire you unless you’re sixteen.”

“Sixteen? I can’t wait two years to work,” I said. Nels got real quiet. I’d seen that look on his face before. He was thinking of a way to weasel around Boss Larson.

“I won’t lie,” I said. “Pa never lied and I won’t either.” Pa always

said, "Tell the truth, son, and you have your good name. A good name is worth more than a thousand dollars."

Nels laughed. "I've got a plan that'll save your good name, Johnny." Nels took a piece of paper and a stub of pencil from his pocket. On the paper he wrote the number 15.

"Put this in your boot," he said.

In my boot? Was this a joke? I pulled off one boot, slipped the paper inside, and yanked the boot back on.

"If you're foolin' me, Nels, I'll get you. I'll put lice in your long johns. I'll put salt in your coffee. I'll . . ."

Nels laughed like a hoot owl. "Trust me," he said. "Boss only hires boys over fifteen, right?"

I nodded.

"Well, ain't you standin' over the number 15?"

I thought about it. Doggone . . . I was standing over the number 15!

Boss Larson pounded his big fist on the desk. "What about it, boy? You over fifteen or not?"

I gulped. "Sure as I'm standin' here, sir. I'm over fifteen." I was sure he could hear my heart beating like a dinner bell.

"I'll give you a try, boy," Boss said. He opened a big black leather book. He dipped a pen in ink and handed it to me. "Twenty dollars a month," he said. "Make your X here."

I wrote my name, John Regis McDonald. Boss glared. "An Irish boy who can read and write?" he growled.

"Yes, sir."

Boss Larson slammed the book closed. Nels grabbed my blanket roll and pulled me out the door.

"How'd I do?" I asked.

"Well, Boss don't like boys. He don't like Irishmen. And he don't trust anybody who can read and write."

My heart fell like a bucket to the bottom of a well. The Boss hated me before I even started. But I couldn't lose this job. Nels said they needed a man, so I'd just have to work like one.



That's how I found myself freezing outside the cook shanty this morning. When Cook opened the door, I squeezed inside and sat next to a big jack with red hair. "Name's Red," the man said.

What a place! Platters piled with pancakes, beans, doughnuts, and sizzling salt pork. The cookees, boys like me, kept the platters full. Tin spoons and plates clattered. Nobody said a word except "More blackjack!" or "Gimme them sinkers, boy." The cookees scrambled between the tables with coffeepots in one hand and pans of doughnuts in the other. When Red hollered, "Stove lids and blackstrap down here," the cookee brought pancakes.

"Eat, boy," Red growled. He speared five pancakes—I mean stove lids—onto my plate. Too scared to say a word, I ate. And ate. And ate.

"Time to go, Johnny," Nels said. I shoved two more doughnuts—I mean sinkers—into my pockets and ran out the door.

In the yard, Red shouted orders and everybody moved. Jacks yoked oxen. Jacks carried axes and saws. Horse-drawn sleds were loaded with hay bales, barrels, shovels, poles, hooks, and chains. All around, jacks spit tobacco and laughed. I heard men talking in three different languages.

"Red's the **foreman**," Nels whispered. "Our crew would be nothin' without him. He says jump, you jump." Everybody on Red's crew has a job. Jacks cut trees. Swampers and skidders trim logs and haul 'em to the trail. Teamsters load logs on the big sleds."

foreman: leader

"You. **Greenhorn!**" Red roared. "Grab a barrel of skid grease and make it quick."

greenhorn: new lumberjack

I looked around. "You with the sinkers in your pocket," Red

roared again. He didn't seem happy.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled. Oh, no! He was talking to me!

Barrels of black grease were stacked in a shed. I wrapped my arms around a barrel. It weighed fifty pounds if it weighed an ounce. The sides were slippery. I bent my knees and pushed. I grunted. I groaned. Finally I stood, gripping that barrel with both arms. My knees shook and my eyes bulged.

Red laughed. "Looks like the greenhorn can hold the barrel or walk. But not both."

"Sucker!" somebody howled.

Sucker? I wouldn't let anybody call me a sucker. Not the biggest jack in Wisconsin! I took a deep breath and staggered toward the sled. One step. Two steps. Three. Four. I couldn't feel my fingers. Five steps. Six. The barrel started to slip. I knew my face was turning ten shades of red, but I wouldn't give up. Seven steps. Eight. Nine. Ten. Then I saw Boss Larson leaning out the cook shanty door, wearing a red cap and **mackinaw**. I tripped over my own feet and the barrel flew one way and I flew the other. Right into a snowbank.

mackinaw: heavy red and black coat

Twenty-five jacks roared with laughter. Giant hands picked me up and pounded on my back. "Not bad, boy," Red said.

"Ten steps with a full barrel. Ain't that a record?" said Nels.

Red banged on the sled with his fist. "Hop on my sleigh, boy," he said. "When a greenhorn carries a barrel of skid grease he deserves to ride into the pinery."

Nels pushed me toward the sleigh—I noticed Red called it a sleigh, not a sled. He jumped up beside me. "You did it," Nels whispered. "They trick every greenhorn into trying to carry a skid-grease barrel. Slippery as a wet fish. That's why Johansen called you a sucker."

Now it was my turn to scowl. I didn't like being tricked.

"But Red likes a man who doesn't give up," Nels said. "You passed the test."

I passed the test! As the horses pulled the sleigh onto the trail, I slipped a sinker from my pocket and took a big bite. The foreman likes me.

Then a flash of red caught my eye. There was Boss Larson, still leaning against the cook shanty door. He was scowling and staring—at me. The smile melted right off my face.



The road into the forest was just two grooves made to fit the runners on the big lumber sleighs. Red drove the big sleigh. Jacks and oxen followed, pulling small sleds loaded with axes and saws. Red talked and spit tobacco at a furious pace.

"Red's the best at everything," Nels said. "He can fight harder, cut faster, spit farther, and hit the bull's-eye with an ax more times than any man alive. That's why he's foreman."

"See this trail, boy?" Red said. "At night, the tank crew loads the sprinkler with water to fill the grooves. Come sunrise, the road's solid ice. Slick enough to slide a load of pine clear to the river."

Sure enough. No amount of muscle could have pulled a load of logs over plain snow. But the lumberjacks had made a road of ice from the pinery to the river.

Red spit tobacco into the snow. "In the old days, jacks cut trees with nothin' but an ax and muscle. Old jacks from up Canada talked French. They could fell and load a white pine before most men rolled out of bed."

At the top of a hill Red stopped the sleigh. The jacks took saws and axes and waded through the knee-deep snow into the forest. Nels led a slow team of oxen hitched to a skidding sled.

From the hilltop, I could see miles of trees. White pine reaching to the sky. Hemlock, oak, and maple, too. Seemed like the forest went on forever.



OSHKOSH PUBLIC MUSEUM

Lumberjacks from the Wall and McNaire logging shanty in northeastern Wisconsin, 1886.

Red whistled. “Nothin’ prettier.” He spit again and sat quietly. “Look while you can, boy,” he said. “Couple of years and all this will be cut and floated down the Wolf River. Mills turning our white pine into houses and barrels and sittin’-room chairs for the whole country.”

I got my first taste of work right away. I was a road monkey; I had two jobs: hay man on the hill and chickadee. The hay man spread hay to slow the heavy sleds going downhill. Red showed me how to cover icy spots with hay so the sleigh’s runners wouldn’t slip.

“What does a chickadee do?” I asked. Red pointed to a pile of horse manure and pushed a shovel into my hand. Red said frozen

manure is dangerous. Horses can stumble and runners can slide off the track. But what did horse manure have to do with chickadees? I was too busy shoveling to ask.

I helped Red lean long boards called skids against one side of the sleigh. While we worked, the ring of axes and the zip-zip-zip of the crosscut saws floated out of the forest like music. **Teamsters** hiked out from camp, ready to load the sleigh.

teamsters: loggers who loaded and drove sleighs

Red grabbed a long pole with a hook on the end. “It’s a cant hook,” Red said. “They should be sharp. One slip and the log rolls off the load. Then you better hope you’re not in the way. Good men have died because of a dull hook.” Red said the big camps had blacksmiths to sharpen and check tools. But Larson’s camp was small.

“Where I’m foreman, I check everything. I check every tool and every harness. On my crew I see everything and know everything,” said Red.

Did he really know everything? Did he know I wasn’t sixteen? Did he know I’d lied? My stomach felt upside-down. Suddenly I heard a sound like a gunshot. Crack! “Timber-r-r-r!” A jack’s voice echoed in the forest. Crash! A white pine tree had fallen.

I worked all morning. I spread hay on every icy patch on the hills. I checked every harness and covered the horses with blankets. All the while, Red told me the right way—his way—to do each job.

At dinnertime, the cookee hauled out a bobsled loaded with bread, hot bean stew, tea, and washtubs piled high with sinkers. The smell made my stomach howl.

“Boy, help the cookee build a fire. The jacks like to warm their toes. If the tea’s cold, they’ll roast you instead.” Red headed into the trees while the cookee and I scrambled after firewood.

The cookee was a Norwegian. He chattered while I fished tin plates out of an old burlap sack. “Name. Me. Anders,” he said. He

pointed to me. "Name, you?"

"Johnny."

"You da hay man, ya?" Anders asked. I nodded. "Hay and da horse pile. All day. Be quick or da Boss say 'Roll up.'"

"Roll up?"

"Ya. No more job. He say roll up da blanket and you be walkin' home."

No more job? Anders meant Boss Larson would fire me if I didn't move fast enough. I needed this job. Mama and the little girls needed the money. So I'd move as fast as Boss Larson said. No matter what.

The fire was crackling. Anders laid a log between two stumps and hung an iron pot of tea on it. From under the seat of the cook sled he pulled a tin horn as long as my leg. He lifted the end to his lips and blew. One long, high note echoed through the pines.

"This Gabriel." Anders pointed to the horn. "Call jacks for dinner like angel Gabriel blowin' his horn. Everybody be hungry. Roar like mama bears!"

Anders was right. The jacks not only sounded like hungry bears, they looked like them. Jacks with black beards and big shoulders waded through the snow. Some wore red and black wool mackinaws. Some wore buffalo-skin coats and thick woolen mittens. I saw tall leather boots with spikes on the soles. A few jacks wore Indian moccasins and three or four pairs of thick woolen socks.

"Hey, cookee," a tall, skinny jack with a fuzzy yellow beard yelled. "Fetch me up a plate of that stew."

Another jack with hands as big as shovels pushed toward the fire. "I'm so hungry I could eat twenty-five sinkers," he bragged. "I'll eat all the stew you've got. After that, I'll eat the pot, the lid, and the ladle."

The next thing I knew, Anders was pushing tin plates heaped with stew and hunks of thick brown bread into the hands of every jack. I scooped hot tea into cups as fast as my hands would move.



WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Loggers sitting on the deacon's bench in a camp near Cable, Wisconsin, 1895.

I didn't know human beings could eat so much! One jack named Little Ole wolfed down four plates of stew and a whole loaf of bread.

When dinner was over, Red grabbed me by the collar, and before I knew which end was up, I was stumbling after him into the pinery.



White pine trees more than a hundred feet tall stood like giants in the forest. Some were so big that three men couldn't reach around them. Here and there, a few birch, hemlock, or maple trees grew. But in the deep forest, pines grew so thick and close that snow never reached the ground. From every side I heard the sounds of axes, crosscut saws, and lumberjacks' voices.

“In the old days, we used axes,” Red said. “Took a whole day to cut one pine. Now, with crosscut saws, they cut two, maybe more, in just a morning.”

Nels tromped through the trees, driving an ox and a log. “Gee, boy,” he called out to the ox, “gee, I tell ya.” He tugged on the ox’s harness. Nels’s trousers were shiny with ice. He and the oxen must have dragged logs through some half-frozen swamp. No wonder the ox wasn’t happy. Nels didn’t look so happy, either.

Red said skidders like Nels worked as a team with their oxen. The skidders guide and clear a path. The ox pulls a sixteen-foot log to the road. Then teamsters roll each log up skids and onto the big sleighs.

“Wait till you see a **sky loader** balance a pile of logs higher than a two-story house,” Red said. “With just a cant hook, muscle, and his good lumberjack’s eye. A crew’s nothin’ without a good loader.”

sky loader: man loading logs on top of a sleigh

“That’s not what Nels said,” I blurted. “Nels said the crew would be nothin’ without a good foreman.”

Red’s fierce blue eyes fixed on me. What was I thinking? Jacks had fun and joked all the time. But a horse manure shoveler shouldn’t be joking with the foreman.

Red trudged ahead. My heart felt like a stone in my chest. First Boss Larson didn’t like me. Now I’d spoken out of turn with the foreman.

We found a group of lumberjacks at work. One jack named Rolf showed me how to load a skidding sled. It took real muscle to “hook” a log with the sharp cant hook and roll it to the sled.

I tried and tried, but the hook kept slipping. An old jack ambled over, smelling of tobacco and pine sap. “Name’s Hank,” he said. He put those big hands over mine. “Sink the hook into the log like you’re chopping with a hatchet, boy,” he said. “Then

pull the log toward you.”

I raised the cant hook and chopped at the big log. I could feel the hook bite into the bark. I pulled with my whole weight. For a moment, nothing moved. I stood on my toes, pulling with muscles I didn't even know I had. Then, slowly, the log began to turn.

Somebody whistled. I turned to see Nels. He was leaning against an old gray ox. “That's my Johnny!” he hollered. “You're makin' me proud!”

Hank's name was really Henri. He pronounced it On ree. He was one of those old Canadian lumberjacks who spoke French. Red said those old Canady jacks could fell a tree, cut it into logs, and haul it to the road before most men were out of bed. When I looked at the size of Hank's hands, I believed it!



Red growled in my direction. “Back to work, boy.” I scrambled to keep up with his long steps.

Back at the logging road the teamsters were hard at work. “Up! Up! Not so fast!” a sharp voice shouted. “Whoa! Slow and steady.”

Red and I stepped from the forest to find the teamsters rolling a whopping big log up the skids onto the sleigh. They pulled the log up with chains. Above and below, men with cant hooks pushed and balanced. At the very top stood the sharp-voiced lumberjack.

“That's Three-finger Ole,” Red said. “Best sky loader in Wisconsin. I've seen him balance a load so high it took six horses to pull it.”

Three-finger Ole? I didn't want to think about how he'd gotten that name. Ole balanced giant pine logs as neatly as a builder stacking bricks. Now, I understood why Red said a crew would be nothing without a good sky loader. Somehow, Three-finger Ole knew exactly how to roll each log onto the pile.

When the last log was loaded, Red sent me to check for ice and horse piles on the hill.

Dangerous was the word that whispered in my head with each

step. One log off balance. One chain too loose. One icy spot. The whole load of logs could let loose, rolling everywhere. I swallowed hard. Three-finger Ole had lost fingers loading pine. A man could lose his life.

When I'd cleared the last frozen horse pile from the trail and spread the last armload of hay, the sleigh was ready. Red and Three-finger Ole were double-checking every chain. The second I reached the hilltop, I saw a flash of red. Boss Larson stepped out from behind the sleigh.

If wishes could make me invisible, I would have disappeared. Boss Larson kept walking until he stood right in front of me.

"Missed a patch of ice halfway down the hill," he growled. "That's what I get for takin' on a greenhorn."

My hands were shaking—and not from cold. "I—I'll fetch more hay right away, sir," I said. Even my voice shook.

"I sent a man down to fix it," the Boss glared. "You think 'cause you can read you're too good for real work, boy?"

"Oh, no, sir. Never." I'd checked the ice grooves so carefully. Now, sure as shootin', the Boss was going to fire me.

"Mr. Larson," a voice came from behind my back. "The boy's done a good day's work. I'll make him into a real jack by the time his baby face sprouts a beard."

I turned. My stomach flipped over like a pancake on a griddle. It was Red!

"Ready? Hay on the hill?" Three-finger Ole shouted from the top of the giant load of logs.

"Ready," Red shouted. "Take it slow and easy."

The teamster flicked his whip. The horses pulled. Slowly, the giant load inched to the edge of the hill. Carefully, the teamster guided the horses down. Chains creaked. One man walked next to the horses, speaking softly to them. I kept my eyes on every horse's hoof and every hay-covered patch of ice. One slip and I'd be fired for sure. One slip and that driver could be killed.

The sleigh picked up speed. Faster and faster. My heart beat

faster, too. The only thing between the sleigh's runners and the slippery ice was a thin layer of hay.

Halfway down the hill, the horses were almost running. The driver held the reins tight. I held my breath. Chains creaked. Sleigh runners scraped. Horses' hooves pounded the ground.

Then the sleigh and horses reached the bottom of the hill. "Huddap. Good boys. Whoa, there!" I heard the driver yell.

At that instant I heard another voice yell. "They made it. They made it!" All around me, jacks laughed. Red's fist pounded me on the back. It took me a second to realize the yelling voice was mine.



I staggered into the bunkhouse that night. Every part of me was either wet or frozen, or both. Jacks peeled off wet trousers and long johns. Soon the rack over the wood stove was covered with drying wool. The smell of fifty wet, sweaty socks took my nostrils by surprise.

The sound of the Gabriel called us to supper. I could hardly keep my eyes open. I remember Nels spooning beans on my plate and shoving a hunk of pie under my nose. "Eat!" he ordered. I must have eaten and Nels must have led me to my bunk, because the next thing I knew, Boss Larson was bellowing in the bunkhouse door.

"Daylight in the swamp, boys. Roll out or Roll up!"

Every day in the lumber camp began the same way. We rolled out before sunrise. I learned to eat like a jack, stuffing my belly like a Christmas turkey. Then we hit the pinery, ready to see timber fall.

Some days Red sent me into the forest with the jacks. I learned to use an ax and hold up my end of a crosscut saw. I helped the swampers chop branches so a tree could be sawed into logs. Each log was sixteen feet long—the right size for the sawmill downriver.

One afternoon I took a load to the river with Three-finger Ole. Logs were stacked along the shore like stove wood. Ole said come spring, melting snow would fill the river with water. Higher and

higher. Faster and wilder. Churning and splashing. That was called “driving pitch.” Then, the lumberjacks would roll every log into the swirling water. Like thousands of wild, stampeding cattle, the logs would float downriver to the sawmill.

“Come spring, this river will roar!” Ole said. “River pigs ride these logs like bareback riders in the circus.” He showed me how lumberjacks used the spikes on the bottoms of their boots to hold onto wet, rolling logs. They balanced with cant hooks and poles.

Ole smiled. “River pigs can ride anything that floats. Boy, you could toss a bar of soap into the river, and a good river pig’d ride the bubbles to shore.”

Ole stopped the sleigh. The teamsters pulled away the chains and pushed the logs onto the riverbank. One of the teamsters crouched down with a hammer in his hand. He was called a stamper. On the hammer was a triangle with a circle inside. It was Boss Larsen’s mark. The teamster pounded it into the end of each log.

Ole told me, “These stamps are like brands on a cow’s behind. Logs from every company tumble down the river. The whole mess floats to the sawmill. At the mills, the boys use the marks to sort Boss Larson’s logs from everyone else’s.”

Someday, I thought, I’m going to ride the river.



Lumbermen worked hard and they played hard. Six days a week, from before sunrise to after sunset, they worked.

Then came Saturday night. Buck Olsen would play his fiddle and the men danced. They flipped a coin and the loser danced the lady’s part. Those jacks could stomp and sing until the floor shook.

Sundays everybody played poker or did washing. No lumberjack cared about bein’ clean—unless the season was over and he was headed into town to gamble or dance with the saloon ladies. No, Sunday washing wasn’t about clean. It was about critters.

“Fetch your long johns,” Nels said to me the first Sunday I spent in camp.

“They don’t stink yet,” I said.

“Stink?” Nels laughed. “I’m not talking about stink. The bunkhouse is home to our own kind of livestock. If you don’t boil your underwear, they’ll carry you out the door!”

Livestock? I wasn’t sure what he meant, but I pulled off my long johns. Outside, a big kettle hung over a fire. Little Ole had just dumped his long johns into the water. A lot of bugs floated to the top of the kettle. I stared.

“What’s the matter, boy,” Ole growled. “Have ya never seen lice before?”

Lice? The livestock Nels was talking about was body lice! No wonder the jacks boiled their long johns! Suddenly I felt itchy everywhere.

Sunday night the temperature fell. Spit turned to ice before it hit the ground. Supper was pork and cornbread. In honor of Sunday and the lice boilin’, cook baked hot pie. I warmed my belly with a whole apple pie and enough coffee to make me float like a pine log.

Before lights-out, the jacks sat on the deacon’s bench, a half log at the end of the bunkhouse, swapping stories and tellin’ whoppers.

Nobody could tell stories like Red.

He propped his feet up on the end of a bunk. “I know every jack up and down the Wisconsin River,” he said. “Did I ever tell you about Angus Duffy?”

Three-finger Ole groaned and pulled his hat down over his eyes. “Ole’s just jealous of old Angus,” Red said. “Ya see, Angus couldn’t swim.”

I stretched out on my bunk to listen.

“Now, Angus couldn’t swim a stroke. But he was smart. When his crew crossed the river, Angus, he grabs two sledge hammers, one under each arm. He walks right into the water. Those sledge hammers pulled him straight to the bottom.”

“Thought you said that Irishman was smart,” Rolf said. “But it takes an Irishman to know one!”



Lumberjacks at a Rice Lake logging camp do their laundry on a Sunday.

Plop! Red spit a plug of tobacco right into Rolf's boot, drying by the fire. "That's right. Well, the whole crew stood on the other side of the river watching Angus go under. They wait. They wait some more. They wait till somebody says, 'He's a goner.'

"Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Not a sign of Angus. Finally, after thirty-six minutes by the foreman's gold watch, Angus comes drippin' up out of the river.

"Angus couldn't swim a bit, but with those sledge hammers to weigh him down, he just walked across the river along the bottom."

Little Ole threw a balled-up wool sock at Red. “What a liar you are, Red!”

“I’m no such thing,” Red hollered. “I saw Angus with my own two eyes!”

Little Ole plopped down on the deacon’s bench. “Well, let me tell you about the snow up Canada way.

“Big winter of ’48, it snowed to the peak of the bunkhouse roof. One blizzard lasted a week. When it stopped, I tied on my snowshoes and headed into town. Right there on the **tote road**, I sees a fine fur hat. I snatch it up. But under the hat is some dandy’s head.

tote road: road leading to camp

“So I dig the feller out with my bare hands. He’s half-froze. Blue as a jaybird. ‘Don’t stop diggin’, Ole!’ says the man. And what do you think?”

I propped myself up on one elbow. “What?” I asked.

“I dig and dig. And under the man was his horse. By sunset I dig ’em both out. The dandy man grabs his fancy fur hat, sticks it on his blue head, and off he rides.”

Red and Ole swapped stories from the deacon’s bench for an hour. Red said he once saw a jack eat 500 sinkers at one sitting. Ole swore he’d hit an apple with his hatchet from 100 paces—blindfolded! My last thought before I fell asleep was they should have called it the liar’s bench instead!



I started to think like a lumberjack. I knew just how much hay to lay on the ice. I could sharpen a cant hook and harness an ox. I even learned to help the teamsters check the loads before they headed out.

“Slow and steady,” Red always said. “Check ’em once, check ’em twice.” I saw that the best jacks did things Red’s way, and everybody stayed clear of Boss Larson.

One Saturday, the water from the tank sled froze almost before it hit the ground. Little Ole's breath froze solid on his beard. Hank even said, "**Quelle jour!** This be Canady-cold!"

quelle jour: "what a day"

Red had business in town, so Three-finger Ole was in charge. "Watch the big hill, Johnny," Red said to me at breakfast. "Keep your eyes on the load. When it gets this cold, cant hooks don't grip so good. Chains can slip and ice covers everything."

It was a terrible day. By noon I couldn't feel my feet. Just like Red said, ice made the cant hooks slip. The beans and bread for dinner were half frozen. Twenty-five jacks were cussin' and complaining about everything from ice in their beards to holes in their socks.

In the afternoon, a cant hook slipped and a sixteen-footer came rolling down off the sleigh.

"Back, back!" Claude screamed. "She's going to cannon!" Hank pulled Little Ole out of the way. But Three-finger Ole didn't move fast enough. I think the jacks could hear his scream way out in the pinery.

"Ole, can you feel your stilts?" Claude said. The log had pinned Ole's leg against a snowbank. Every jack on the hill began to dig with shovels and hands.

"I don't think my stilt's broke," Ole said. "But it hurts!"

The men dug away the snow and ice and pulled Ole from under the log. Hank slit Ole's trousers to the knee and felt every inch of his leg. The jacks were so quiet you could have heard them breathe.

Red's gone. Ole's hurt, I thought. No teamster and no foreman. Our crew's worth nothing!

Three-finger Ole's leg wasn't broken. But it was bruised and startin' to swell up like bread dough. He couldn't load logs with that leg. They piled him onto the cookee's sled and sent him back to camp.

With Ole and Red gone, loading was slow and everyone was angry. The teamsters didn't trust Hank to guide the big logs to the top of the load. They argued about the best way to balance the load. They fought about who should drive down the big hill. Hank and Claude even argued in French! I went over every inch of the big hill, checking for icy spots and laying down more hay.

From the bottom of the hill I saw a flash of red, and Boss Larson stepped from between the trees. My heart began to pound. "Huddup!" Boss roared. In a second, there was silence. "Time is money, and you're wastin' both!"

Boss glared and shouted. In a few minutes, three logs were heaved to the top of the load. "Hurry up, there. Get those chains fixed!" The teamsters rushed around, tugging chains and fastening them to the sleigh with iron rings and hooks.

Red's voice whispered in my mind. Slow and steady. Check 'em once, check 'em twice. But Boss Larson kept roaring and the jacks kept hurrying. My stomach felt like I'd swallowed a brick. Everyone moved so quickly. Too quickly.

"Move out or I'll take this load down the big hill myself!" Boss grabbed the horses' reins. "Where's that road monkey?" he yelled. "The hill better be ready!"

I ducked behind the sleigh. I knew the hill was ready, but Boss Larson was angry enough to fire somebody on sight, and I didn't want to be that somebody!

Even from my hiding place behind the sleigh, I found myself checking and rechecking every chain and every hook. Just like Red had taught me.

Suddenly I saw something move. On the fourth tier, a forked log was loaded. Two smaller logs were stacked on top of it. In a flash, I saw one log move. The chain was too loose!

"Let's go!" shouted Boss.

The only thing keeping those logs in place was that chain. The only thing holding the chain was one hook. Suddenly, one log moved. Then another. The hook was slipping! It was going to fall!

“Stop! Stop!” I screamed. “She’s slipping!”

As I turned to run, I saw a flash of red. Boss Larson stepped to the side of the sleigh. If the hook slipped, Boss Larson would be killed!

I didn’t stop to think. I didn’t even stop to breathe. My feet took off all by themselves and I ran—not away from the sleigh but toward it. Toward Boss Larson.

“Move! Move!” I pushed Boss Larson away. “The load’s shifted! The hook’s slipping!”

From every corner teamsters and loaders jumped into action. Hank pushed a pike pole between the iron hook and the ring. Claude and two other jacks scrambled onto the load. Cant hooks dug into bark. Pike poles steadied logs. Hank shouted orders half in English and half in French. Boss Larson stood by, looking pale and a little shaky.

Then I heard the one voice I most wanted to hear. “Slow and steady, boys!” At the bottom of the big hill, sitting on a brown horse, was Red.

Red took charge, and when every log had been checked and every chain was snug and tight, he gave the order. The teamsters guided the sleigh and horses down the big hill. Just like the first time I’d seen a giant load of logs pulled down that hill, I held my breath. But this time, every single spot of ice was covered with hay.

That night, after supper, Red caught me by the arm. “Got a word for you, boy,” he said. Was he going to say that Boss Larson had fired me? My stomach felt like cook was tossin’ sinkers into it.

“Did a good job today,” Red said. “I got somethin’ for you.”

Red reached into his jacket and pulled out an iron stamping hammer. “This here’s a mark,” Red said, “for a new logging company.” He held the mark by its wooden handle. On the end was an iron block with a raised design on one side.

What new logging company? Why was Red telling this to me?

“Me’n Three-finger Ole been savin’ our pay for two seasons now,” Red said. “This mornin’ we bought a thousand acres of

standing pine near Chippewa Falls.”

I traced the design on the logger’s mark with my finger. A circle with the letter R inside. Ole and Red. Suddenly I felt sick. If Red left, Boss Larson would be in charge. How could I work at the camp then?

Red smiled. “I’ll need a good man to do some stamping and loading.” He pushed the mark into my hands. “You’re a good man.”

I felt frozen to the spot. Red was offering me a job. I wouldn’t have to work for Boss Larson!

“Well, what do you say?” Red asked. “You want to write your name in my book instead of Larson’s?”

My mind raced like a loaded sleigh down the big hill. Of course I wanted the job. Red would teach me everything he knew. I’d be a real lumberjack. A real man!

I opened my mouth to say, *Sure I’ll write my name in your book*. Then I remembered that day, weeks ago, when I’d written my name in Boss Larson’s book.

I could almost hear my pa’s voice whispering in my mind. Your name, son. Your good name.

I knew what I had to do.

“Red, I want to be on your crew,” I said. “But first, I got some truth-tellin’ to do.” I turned the stamp hammer over in my hands. “Red, I’m fourteen, not sixteen. I lied to Boss Larson to get this job, but I won’t lie to you.”

There. I’d said it.

“You told Boss Larson you were over fifteen?” Red asked.

“Yes, sir. I put a paper with the number 15 written on it into my boot. I said I was standin’ over fifteen.”

I stood lookin’ and Red stood lookin’ back at me. Then he covered his face with his hands. His shoulders started to shake. Red was laughing!

“I liked you the first time I set eyes on ya, Johnny,” Red said. “Anybody who carries a bucket of skid grease and gets around Boss Larson is my kind of jack!”

I held out my hand to Red. "I'd be proud to work for you, sir."

Red shook my hand. As we walked to the bunkhouse, I felt as warm as a summer day. I could send money to Ma and learn to be a first-class lumberjack. My pa would be proud of me.

"Hang onto the mark," Red said. "You'll be needing it when we start to cut pine in Chippewa Falls!"

LUMBER CAMP LINGO

LUMBERJACKS had a language all their own. Their words paint pictures in your mind of life in the lumber camps. Here's some more "lumber camp lingo."

- Blue jackets:** bluish-colored body lice; also "pants rabbits"
Blankets, stove lids, or flapjacks: pancakes
Go-devil: a fast, small sled pulled by hand or oxen
Horse skinner: teamster, sleigh driver
Mulligan: meat and potato stew
Swamp angel: plow to dig grooves for the sleigh's runners
She's going to cannon! Look out! A load of logs is going to fall!
Washer, sinker, or flat: doughnut
Yannigan: pack sack

PINE WAS KING

BEFORE 1860, most Wisconsin loggers cut white pine trees and left the rest. White pine was softwood that would float downriver to the sawmills. Hardwood trees like oak and maple wouldn't float.

THE CUTOVER

BETWEEN 1850 AND 1860, railroads were built. Then, logs could be moved by rail instead of floated downriver. Suddenly, lumberjacks could cut softwood and hardwood. Hardwood trees like oak or maple were good for building homes and furniture. Soon, logging companies cut every tree on their land.

Before the loggers came, most of northern Wisconsin was forest. The logging companies cut most of these forests, and this area was called the *cutover*. People thought farmers could use the land once the forests were gone. But they were wrong. Good land for trees is not always good for crops.

RIVER PIGS RIDE THE RIVER

LUMBERJACKS were a rough, tough bunch of men. They worked hard, lived hard, and fought hard. But the toughest lumberjacks were probably the river pigs.

River pigs used rivers to move logs to the sawmills. Sometimes they chained logs together in huge, square "rafts." Sometimes they "herded" logs down high, fast rivers like cowboys moving stampeding cattle.

Running logs was dangerous work. One slip and a river pig could fall and be crushed.



LOGGING THEN AND NOW

IT WAS ABOUT 1840. America needed wood for growing cities and towns. That wood came from forests. Logging companies hired lumberjacks to cut our Wisconsin forests. And, did they cut! Those first lumberjacks didn't know much about caring for forests. They thought our trees would last forever. This way of logging hurt our forests and damaged our land.

Today's loggers are skilled professionals, who have been trained to be safe and care for the land, water, wildlife, and forests. In Wisconsin, loggers can earn the title Certified Master Logger. Expert loggers are good for forests and good for Wisconsin, too.



WDNR

Professional logger cuts trees in the forest.