

The Shanties: Anthony Senack's story

By Wes Bomhower

Tony was born in 1926 on the Pickanock Road in Quebec Province, three miles from the village of Sandy Creek and about six miles from Otter Lake, just a bit north and east from Campbell's Bay. He attended school in spring and autumn but there were no classes during the winter months because of the snow and the distance to school. So, by the time he was twelve, he was working in the lumber business located not too far away during winter. The year he turned fourteen he was skidding logs with his father who had a contract with C.I.P. only twenty miles from the Senack residence. This contract was on Crown Land and C.I.P. had the timber rights.

It was terribly cold that winter, dipping to minus 45 degrees Fahrenheit one day and Tony froze most of his toes while skidding the logs but because a log struck his feet causing his toes to bleed, there was no permanent damage to his feet. He spent the rest of the winter at home.

In 1941, he and his brothers headed north a hundred miles to work for Gillis, a lumber baron who had over 500 square miles of timber rights in Northern Quebec. The first fifty miles they rode in trucks, the last fifty they walked to reach some of Gillis' Shanties. They went into the camps about mid-September and didn't come out until the first of April most years, working six days a week the whole time. Sundays they always had off unless there was an emergency, and the men would then wash their clothes and catch up on other mundane chores.

There was a huge central warehouse built to store hay and grain for the horses and other supplies for the various camps which were scattered in both directions from this warehouse. Each camp was roughly ten miles apart. Stables were built for the horses at each camp, (usually 7 or 8 teams per camp,) and were usually

constructed close to a lake for easy access to water. In every camp, one large log building housed 75 to 80 men, heated by big box stoves in which green wood was burned and kerosene lanterns provided light. It was lights out at 9:00 p.m. strictly enforced on the working days, and the chore boy who was French Canadian would announce ten minutes before the hour, "ten minutes to night, lights out soon". He meant of course, ten minutes to nine, but it always drew a few chuckles. Saturday night was special, since that's when they got out the fiddle, harmonica and guitar for a jam session and square dance. Some of the men wrapped a towel around their waists, they were the impromptu women, and lights were allowed on until 10:00 p.m. as they whooped and danced.

These loggers or shantymen came from all over eastern Canada, from different nationalities, from the Maritimes, the Gaspé and other parts of Quebec plus many from Ontario, but there were seldom any disagreements among the men. Work was hard, the hours long, breakfast at six a.m., supper at six p.m. and the food was good. Their diet consisted mostly of salt pork, some frozen beef, beans, home made bread, (butter once a week during war years,) prunes, molasses and corn syrup. There were always plenty of pies, cakes and cookies.

The cook-house with its huge dining room was a separate building, and after the men ate breakfast they quickly made up their own lunches to eat on the job with a small camp fire to boil tea. Coffee was a treat on Sunday mornings when breakfast was at 7:00 a.m.

Another separate building was the washroom with large wooden troughs and basins for washing up and the toilets of course were big common outhouses, nothing fancy, just a log installed about knee high to sit on for the business at hand. Not a lot of time spent there, especially in the colder months.

The Shanties (cont.)

Each man was issued an axe head and axe handle when he came into camp in September and he was expected to hang the axe to his own liking, take good care of it, keep it sharpened etc, for the duration, with files and grindstones supplied by Gillis. Crosscut saws, (no chain saws as yet) were kept in top shape by sharpeners and setters to fell the huge white pine trees, many of them five feet in diameter at the stump and straight as a die.

On the hills, ice roads were made by

and sluiceways they encountered. And this meant they were away from home until some time in July when the log drives were completed, then back into the camps again in mid-September. Not the kind of life for everyone, to be sure.

Tony came to Ontario in 1945; working in sawmills during the summer and returning to the shanties in winter, and eventually met up with a pretty girl, Thelma Emon of Calabogie. They married in 1949 and have lived in the general area of Calabogie until the



hauling water in huge tanks by teams of horses and sleighs from nearby lakes, Brule Lake, Harvey Lake, Bow Lake and Bertram Lake being some of the closest ones. The ice roads made for better and easier sleighing while hauling the enormous loads of logs to the lakes and a blacksmith was kept busy attending to the horse's shoes to see that they were sharp shod for the ice roads. The blacksmith also maintained whippletrees and other horse drawn equipment, including the sleighs.

A heavy rope or cable was constructed with a 'crazy wheel' to help hold the loaded sleighs back when negotiating the steep hills of the ice roads. This was necessary, otherwise horses and men would have been killed by the runaway sleigh loads of logs.

Most of the camps were built on the shore of a lake and in those years these lakes were teeming with a variety of fish. On a Sunday afternoon, a few men would chop holes in the ice and could catch enough fish to feed the whole gang their supper, (providing the fish were cleaned ready for the pan and the cook was in a good mood.)

Many of these men went on the log drives in spring, floating the logs down through the various lakes and rivers to the sawmills and markets of the day; an extremely dangerous occupation, considering all the rapids, waterfalls

present time, Tony working at various jobs. They raised three boys and three girls and purchased a house on Mill Street.

1955 Tony began working on heavy equipment with different contractors and worked some years with Ontario Hydro as a mechanic. He became a top notch bulldozer operator, much in demand, and was employed by the contractors building roads throughout Ontario. At 81 years of age, he has finally hung up the big work boots and just tinkers around the garage a bit, getting in Thelma's way once in awhile. He stays in pretty good shape by walking up for the mail and generally keeping an eye on the village. *End*