

In the early thirties, living in the backwoods near Venosta, Quebec, I was about 14 when I left that boring prison they call school. I was an instant lumberjack. I had reached a milestone where most of the males in our area found themselves, at that age, in those times. This happy occurrence satisfied a longing that had been interrupting my thought process for some time.

I was not only free from the classroom, but I was liberated from the stables and the hay lofts. No more pitching hay to feed the animals, nor watching it spew from the other end when nature had completed her cycle, to pile up in a condensed, aromatic mess, awaiting my shovel to remove the morsels to the manure pile. Or compost heap, if you like.

FREE AT LAST

I was free at last to join my three older brothers and the other loggers in the logging camp, to where I headed quickly, lest someone change the game plan. The camp had been erected to house the workmen and the animals involved in the logging operations. The buildings sat about a mile from the farmhouse, snugly surrounded by a prime forest. It may as well have been a thousand miles away from the watchful eyes of my father and sister, as far as I was concerned. An added bonus, of course, was the marked difference in the aroma in the air now, from that of my previous occupation.

If you have ever had the opportunity to compare the smell of new fallen pine or spruce with that of new fallen manure, then you will have some idea of what I'm talking about.

In September, when most of the house chores

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around the farm were done; most of the horses, we loggers, and a pig were banished to the camp for the winter.

With the transient workers came the lice and the bed bugs. Some of the workers stayed just long enough to unload their vermin. Others stayed until they discovered the presence of these incomparable bed mates.

One transient among them, I remember, was a real gentleman. He admitted right away that he had lice. How honest can you get? Information of that nature is usually kept between a man and his bugs. My father was bubbling over with enthusiasm, convinced that he had found a new head logger. Our new lead man countered with the suggestion that my father buy him a new set of clothes, and deduct the cost from his future earnings. Another great idea. This would ensure that no new lice would enter the camp.

My father was delighted with the man and his honesty. When we arrived at the village store, my father insisted that his new man be outfitted from the underwear out, including a pair of the store's best boots. When we returned to the farm house, the new man went to the barn to change his clothes. We never saw him again.

My father, a proud man, forbade us to divulge this information to anyone. A bruised but wiser man, he hired a new foreman. Someone he knew, this time.

I entered the camp on a high that I had never felt before, and on the back of an old spavined mare, named Topsy. The camp was sullen. Not at all as I had expected it to be. I was used to my brothers ignoring me, but their humor was usually good. This unexpected situation baffled me, but I didn't try to figure it out. It wasn't long before I discovered that everyone in the camp hated Fred, our new head logger. He swore and raved at us. He snored all night, and he spit on the floor. He could read lips a mile away. We took to calling him "dirty old Fred", and he even found out about that. And he got up too early. About four o'clock, I think.

Fred's habits annoyed us no end. He couldn't win, and he didn't try. But he did get the fire started in the mornings to heat the icy building, and to boil the pot of potatoes. Then he would feed the horses, while the rest of us emerged. We used to throw the potatoes for lunch time one top of the stove to heat, while the meat was cooking. A few days after my arrival, I awakened one day to see Fred washing his false teeth in the potatoes, which had just begun to warm. If there was ever a deadly sin in the camp that was it. I wasn't yet the bravest of individuals, so I closed my eyes, gagged, and pretended not to notice. When Fred left the cabin, I informed my brothers. What happened next would make hell feel like a summer breeze. More about the camp's first rebellion, and the joys of camping, next week.