Where Did All the Loggers Go?

The Austin Nicholson Lumber Co. of Cochrane, Ontario logged for railway ties in Jasper National Park during the early 1920s. It is interesting that logging was then accepted as part of the local economy; more surprising that it was directed by an Ontario-based business—one that advertised itself as “the largest producer of railway ties in the Dominion”.

Another surprising aspect is that there are very few records and only one identified photograph of the operation. One note indicated that they employed 300 men—where did they all come from and where did they go—back to Ontario or to homesteads on the prairies or to the Fraser-Thompson River communities? We would appreciate any leads as to where old family photographs might be found.

The principal figure was James McNiece Austin, senior partner in Cochrane. When James died in 1922 his son Alan McNiece Austin assumed responsibility for the Jasper operation. Since Jasper was a long way from Cochrane, logging, tie cutting and river driving were done under contract. The main contractor may have been James C. Gibson, who had Ontario roots in business, logging and perhaps railway building. David E. Conroy shared overall responsibility with Gibson, was also from Ontario and may have returned to Peterborough in the 1930s. Local businessmen, loggers and construction contractors included Tom (or Tobias) B. Stapley, Dinny Hogan and the brothers...
Jack and Bruce Otto. We know very little about Gibson or Conroy and hope to find out more.

In the fall of 1920 Gibson began constructing a haul road for supplies south from Jasper on the west side of the Athabasca past Portal Creek (Marmot Basin turnoff) and Astoria Creek to the mouth of the Whirlpool. "Otto's Cache", a log storage depot, was located at the end of the road. The Otto brothers then used pack-horses to haul in supplies for the logging camps; later probably by sleigh along the rivers. Supplies included a "considerable amount" of horse feed.

Park Superintendent Col. S. Maynard Rogers was pleased to have this "useful road" built at company expense, especially to improve access to the trail to Mount Edith Cavell. He appointed Warden J.M. Christie to "keep an eye" on the logging and insisted that the company build a cabin at the first camp for the warden. The first camp was built late fall of 1920 and logging started in January 1921. All ties were hacked with broadaxe, at least during the early years. A reported 94,000 ties were cut that first season. It was Gibson who recalled later that they employed 300 men, 50 to 60 in a camp.

Ties were hacked in the bush then hauled by sleigh to landings along the banks of the Whirlpool River. They were watered after breakup and the initial surge of spring snowmelt runoff had passed and driven down to the Athabasca River and on to the Henry House Flats area. The ties were collected by the main boom that was anchored to a small island on the east side of the Athabasca River, stretching over 400 metres across to a holding crib and Jackladder on the west side. It was located just upriver from the present Jasper landing strip. Ties were loaded onto wagons and hauled by horses to the Henry House siding to be packed into boxcars.

There are many stories about broken or missing collecting booms that resulted in a lot of lost ties. Total reported production was about 300,000 for the seven years of operation; Gibson had estimated 500,000 ties in total. However, the only ties reported were those actually loaded on the railway cars. There was one reported fatality on the drive; in September 1924 Ernest Johannes Sorenson, a "young Norwegian" was buried in the Jasper cemetery after a month-long search.

The first camp comprised seven log buildings, including a cookhouse-dininghall, two bunkhouses, stable/barn, office and privy. The old warden cabin, which was also used by Gibson, was about 60 metres further up the ridge, later connected to the warden's phone line. It was used as a warden patrol cabin until the 1960s; since burned, the foundation and privy over the stream-bank are still there. A sawmill was later set up on the bank of the Whirlpool below the camp.

The second camp is the furthest south—the historic "Columbia Trail" fur trade express brigade route to Athabasca Pass runs through it. There are also two pointers (river-driving skiffs) that had likely been hauled back up in 1927 after the last of the drives. The camp, possibly built in the fall of 1923, had a steam-powered sawmill for making ties, run by Tom Stapley. Alpinist Munro Thorington noted the camp during his trip to Athabasca Pass in June 1924.

The third camp, which may have been run by the Ottos, was the last one. Located between the other two it lies along the edge of the river flat, also with a sawmill. It comprised five log buildings and one of lumber. The foreman's cabin was located to provide "a wonderful view over a lake and across the valley to the mountains".

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With thanks for support to Foothills Research Institute and Parks Canada