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Migratory Lumberjack:
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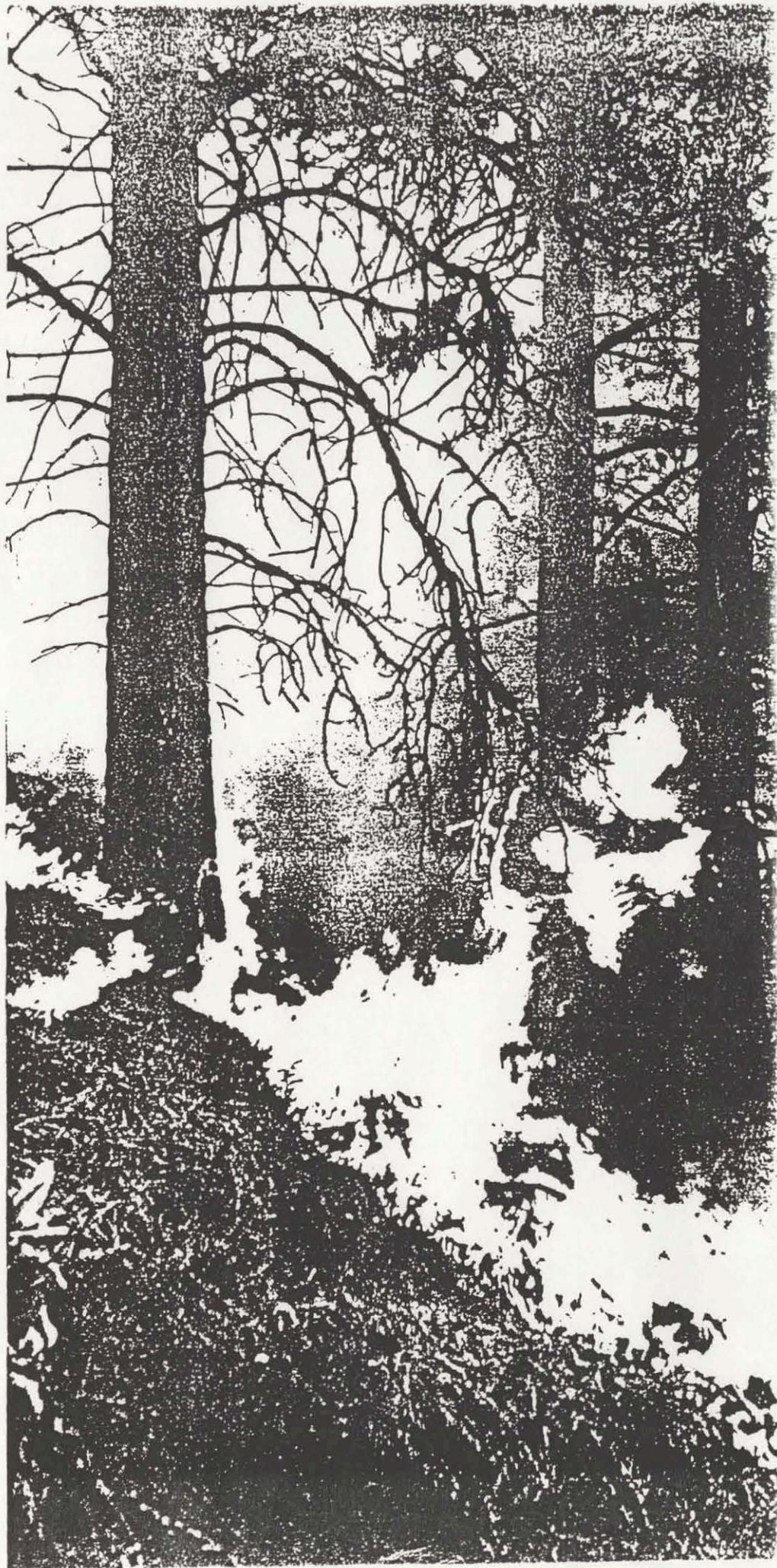
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Migratory Lumberjack

A Portrait of Michigan Bill Stowell

Samuel Schrager

They were single men who had no home except the logging camps and the skid-road hotels. They were called, and called themselves, tramps, a definite stamp of low-class status, but the crucial part of their identity was that they were lumberjacks, and that gave them a position of honor within the tramping population. They formed the backbone of the work force as the logging industry moved westward to successive frontiers. They were masters of the craft, main conduits of the tradition. They set the tone and became the popular symbol of work in the woods.

But what do we really know about the migratory lumberjacks? The standard sources—journalistic accounts, industry records, government reports, memoirs, local histories, scholarly works—seem nearly always to treat them as a natural concomitant of logging, as if they were, like trees or foremen, simply there in the order of things. One is hard put to find sources that reach into the inner lives of these men to deal with their backgrounds, their sense of themselves, and their ways of seeing the world! The problem is not that migratory lumberjacks were inarticulate. It is that their culture, like the cultures of other “marginal” groups

who are scantily represented in archives, was oral, not written. Their absence from the written record is compounded by their transience. By the time a significant number of researchers had begun to document logging life by making field recordings of oral history and lumbercamp songs, the tramps had virtually disappeared from the scene.² That was my experience in Idaho in the 1970s. I knew many residents of logging communities who had worked side by side with the migratory lumberjacks in the woods. They spoke of them with respect, empathy, and a certain wonderment. They admired the tramps for the know-how they had possessed and shared, for the toughness they had brought to the roughest kinds of labor, and for their guts in fighting the lumber companies to win better conditions in the logging camps. They identified with the tramps’ code of ethics: their honesty and loyalty, their egalitarian manner, their automatic reflex to help any lumberjack in need. They were fascinated by (but, as respectable locals, could not take part in) the tramps’ custom of “blowing in,” the prodigious sprees they would go on when they hit town with their paychecks. And they pitied them for this

cycle of dissipation, for their lack of family, for their inability to lead ordinary lives. The tramps, in short, loomed large in the settlers’ recollections. But the settlers spoke of them as of the dead, for they had lost track of them after the logging camps were gone.³ The following pages present a part of the story of one migratory lumberjack who did not disappear, who in his old age set up residence not far from where he’d often worked. I make no claim that William A. Stowell was the quintessential representative of his group. Such a person does not exist. Like all of us, Michigan Bill had his own indissolubly unique way of seeing and putting things. It was in this individual way that he conveyed what the culture he lived by was in essence about.⁴



Standing on the porch of the shack, I was afraid Michigan Bill wouldn’t be there anymore. It was a run-down little place, one of several at the dead end of a side street in the city of Lewiston, Idaho. The whole group of shacks had a temporary air, as if they might be torn down any time for apartments that would bring the owner better rent. Though the shacks were still there, Bill

Stowell might not be. Since I had visited last, five years before, he might have left or died. Through the window into the kitchen I spied an open head of lettuce on the table—a reassuring sign. I knocked, then again louder, and then came the familiar voice in a boom that was easy to mistake for sternness but was in fact Bill's normal tone for forcefully stating a point.

He came to the door out of sleep, suspenders holding up his black pants, shirtless in the summer heat. Bare, his chest was big and square and hardly flabby, marks left of old power. His face too was square, his mouth turned down in a permanent scowl that was determined and touched with inquisitiveness, as though he had seen it all at least once and wouldn't be surprised by any of it that came around again. It was nothing unusual for him to chat in his pithy, humorous way about the logging days, and he wouldn't hesitate to do it with me, to help me, until my curiosity ran its course. This was as it had been before, but there was also a new note. Bill was more aggressively hospitable, lumberjack-style. Whether the reason was that we were now old acquaintances, or that I had come from far away, or that he was finding it harder to be alone, I do not know. But

as soon as I stepped inside he offered me Black Velvet whiskey and beer. At lunch he took me to meet his friends, and that afternoon he offered me lodging. He was inviting me to stick around.

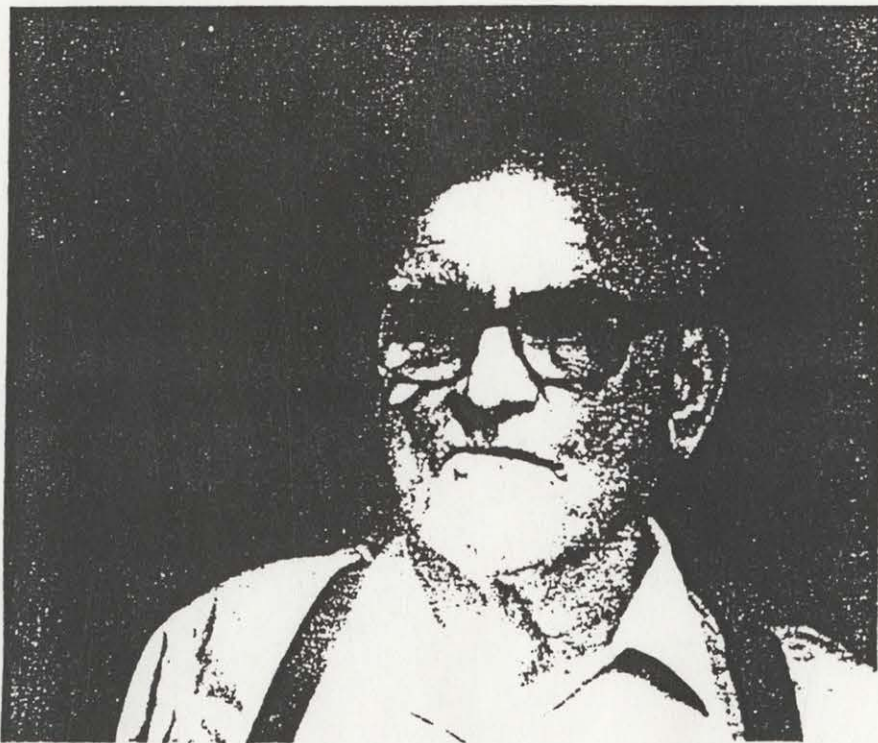
I had heard about Bill first from Wallace Boll, at one time the logging superintendent for the Clearwater River region. For him, Michigan Bill Stowell was the epitome of the old-time lumberjack. As far as Wallace Boll knew, Bill was the last man still around who had been associated with the Clearwater River log drive from its inception to its end in 1961. And like other memorable tramps, Michigan Bill was colorful. Wallace Boll told me I could find him at the Silver Dollar Bar and Cafe, where he hung out and worked as bullcook, the odd-job man. When I stopped by there to inquire about him, the bartender looked at me blankly. The name "Stowell" was practically unknown to her; they called him "Michigan Bill" (or, with affection in their voices, "Michigan"). He was in the back of the bar, talking loudly and drinking. He stepped out long enough to tell me to look him up at home sometime when he was sober. He was, at this moment, blowing in. Not exactly in the old style, of course—he had

come not from the logging camps, but from his house just a few blocks away—but it was the closest approximation available. His habit was to save his Social Security checks until he had built up twelve or fourteen hundred dollars, which took about six months, and then in a day or two he spent it all, buying for everybody. Apart from those sprees, he seldom got really drunk, just as in the logging camp days when lumberjacks stayed sober while working in the woods.

This continuity with the past, carrying on as a lumberjack unregenerate in his present circumstances, impressed and moved me. As we got acquainted Bill detected my approval, and it bothered him. Once he asked me if I admired the way he was living. I admitted I did. Well, it wasn't admirable to him; it wasn't very good. He also warned me against romanticizing his past: it might look colorful to me now, but it didn't seem colorful to him then. Then it was just another day's work.

Bill was an unwavering realist. Except that he was "getting to be an old bastard," things hadn't changed that much. In the old days, he said, when a man like him wanted sex, he usually got one of "the tough old whores" that swarmed all over the lumberjack towns. Now, you picked up "some old blister in a barroom" and brought her home with you, and you'd both "slobber around" drunk, and then she'd fall asleep and snore. Lately he'd had it better. A woman twenty years his junior had been coming over every week or so to stay overnight. "She don't charge me nothing, or I don't pay her nothing. She just comes, I guess, to get screwed, I guess. I don't know. I buy a little beer or whiskey, or something like that."

Recently three guys stuck him up on the porch of his shack for his billfold, which had twenty-six dollars in it. It wasn't so different from the days when men like him who rode the freights were fair prey to be frisked by hijackers and shot if they resisted. The authorities wouldn't care—maybe they'd put a little notice of the death in the newspaper. And then there was the son-of-a-bitch who came uninvited in the middle of the night and acted like he owned



Michigan Bill Stowell on his porch in Lewiston, 1981. Photo provided by author.

the house. The first time Bill discovered him asleep on the "daveno," he let him sleep and went into the bedroom to lie down himself. When the stranger got up, Bill asked him where the hell he'd come from and what he was doing there. "He had no plausible answer—he just said he came in and he saw some chuck in the icebox, and he thought he'd cook himself a meal; he was hungry, and he did. I didn't say nothing, there was nothing you could do about it. Throw him out, is all. But he looked to be a pretty decent sort of guy." Though Bill didn't "cater" to the appropriation of his place, he acquiesced, as though followed by shades of the times when he'd had to jungle up with strangers in some rough shack near the tracks.⁵ Bill did not like to be alone. In the woods you hardly ever were. When he stayed in his own place for very long, he got uncomfortable. He had company sometimes—old friends coming to Lewiston from Weippe and Headquarters and Spokane, stopping by to shoot the bull. And he could always walk to the Silver Dollar, where most everybody he was interested in

seeing would drop in sooner or later. He went over a couple of times daily, ate two of his meals there, and liked to be there when the crowd picked up around noon. When he arrived, the bar crowd regaled him. He was the resident celebrity. Betty Meinecke, bartender and proprietress of the Silver Dollar, had taken over the place from her father, Fred Judd. She kept Bill's money for him, washed his clothes, looked after him in general, and took care of him when he went on a spree. The previous year, she told me, he had disappeared, and she found him unconscious in a gutter. He'd had a stroke. She let Bill spend and she spent for him, but she saw to it that he always had a little left—enough so he could be decently buried. She was warmly affectionate to him and seemed as enamored of his storytelling as her mother was said to have been before her.

Bill had been an honored friend of Betty's parents, and Betty Meinecke was carrying on a relationship they had had for a long time. Her mother, Blanche, used to invite Bill up once a week to have dinner. If he didn't show

up, she'd go get him, so he went. The first time Bill met Fred Judd was when Fred's car had sputtered dead on a rough logging road. Bill happened to be the man Fred encountered as he searched for help.

I said, "I'll help ya." So I went and got an old pickup and chained it up—all around, four wheels—and went out and pulled him in.

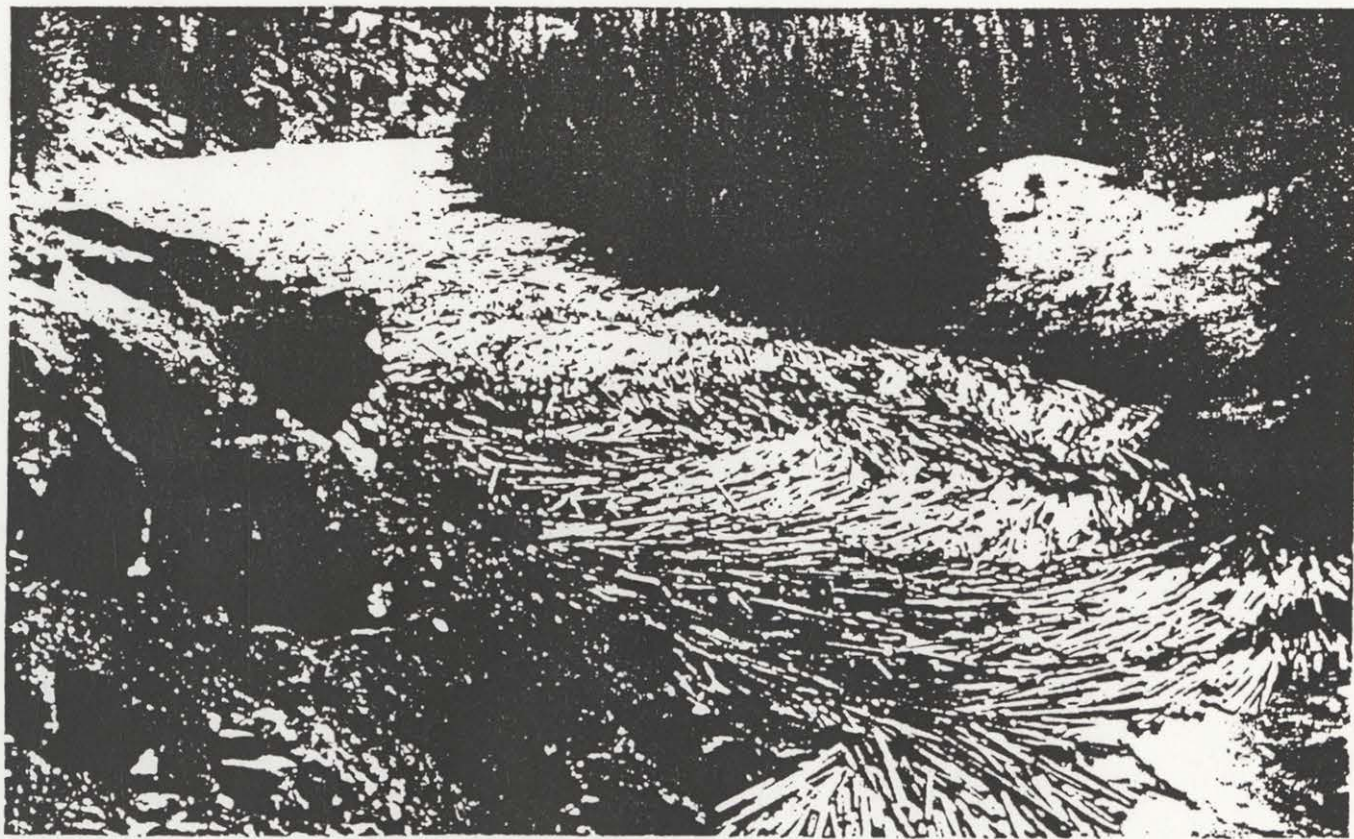
And then I got a mechanic—there was a mechanic working there in the shop on Sundays—I asked him if he'd take a look at the car. I knew him, he was a good guy. He said "Sure!" So I pulled it over there, and hell, he had it going in two minutes.

And, ever since then old Fred's been a real good friend of mine.

Yeah, real good.

He has done me a lot of favors, that guy has. You know, moneywise.

I used to come in here and go broke, flat broke. And, I'd be ready to go, and he could tell by the way I was talking I was about ready to leave, y'know. He'd slip me a twenty or something before I left, y'know. To travel on, y'see. And he always done that. And I'd go to pay him back, y'know, when I'd come back in, and [imitating Fred's distaste]: "Ach! No!"



Logs come streaming downriver during the annual log drive on the North Fork of the Clearwater River at Otis Point, 1931. Photo courtesy of University of Idaho Library.

Tales of a Tramp

What was it like for Michigan Bill Stowell to live the life of a tramp? Here are a few of the reminiscences he favored.

Riding the Rails

Everybody did it. None of them tramp lumberjacks paid fares, y'know. They'd all beat it, some way or other. On a passenger train underneath, or in a boxcar.

If I was making quite a long jump, y'know, I'd take a passenger train. Get underneath, right on the trucks and the whiffletrees, they called it. All you needed was a timetable and a watch, and you could tell where you were at all times, y'know, by the time the train made.

Oh it was dirty, Jesus Christ. Get underneath one of them coaches, and you ride for a division on there, you'd have to scrub yourself for a week! It was awful dirty. And, rocks, and everything flying.

And them bulls. If they see you get on, they'd ride the train too, for a division or so. And they used to take coupling pins, and hang 'em on a rope, a small rope, and get between the cars in front of ya. You know, they couldn't see you, but they knew you were there—they'd see you when you got on. And they'd drop that pin down, to hit the ties, y'know. A coupling pin's big. Hit the ties and bounce up: if it hit you, you was some broken bones or maybe DEAD. They found quite a few of them that way. Dead.

They'd just beat ya to death, y'know, one of them big coupling pins jumping up and down, hitting them ties. Oh, that was bad.

Well sir, I got underneath one night. I was going to Wind River, Wyoming

And I was in Cheyenne. I was going down to drive on the Wind River. . . .

Heh! I got underneath this passenger train, it was *just* moving out. And another guy come right behind me. And he got on, too. So we crawled over on the trucks. I was going on the far side, but he had to get right underneath the shitter! That's the only place he could go when *he* got on there, and *I* was there.

And I think they come from both ends of that train to get a shit in that car that night.

And his name was Smith. I got acquainted with him after; that was the first time I ever seen him.

He had *real* nice teeth, y'know. Moonlight night, and he'd look over at me, and he'd *laugh* every time they pulled the plug. He'd say, "Pal, they're giving me shit now!" and here she'd come, all over him.

He'd laugh, y'know, and you could see them nice white teeth shining.

Good Jungles

The *lumberjack* jungles were *good* and *clean*, and *dishes* there and everything, on these *branch* lines, you know. You know, not the main lines—the branch lines, where the lumberjacks hung out. They kept everything clean,

and tables,
and dishes,
everything clean,
hanging up,
IN GOOD SHAPE!

But the main line, where them *ding* traveled, y'know, there was *nothing*. A couple of old tin cans, and a fire-place, maybe. Everything was always dirty. They never kept nothing. There was nothing to *keep* clean.

I used to carry my own frying pan, and coffee can, and cup, knife, fork, and spoon. And a plate. I could cook *anyplace*.

But, them jungles along the main line, they weren't fit to go into.

Pretty crummy.

Them main liners, y'know, they didn't stop only long enough to make a can of coffee, and go again. If they had any coffee to make.

Oh hell, I used to like the jungles—a good jungle, you know. Shade, and clean. Just the same as cooking outdoors. You know, you get along a good stream somewhere, you could fish. And make her fine.

I'd rather live *that* way than I would in some of these goddamn stuffy rooms, hotels, and one thing and another. There were some of them hotels were desperate, y'know. *Skidroad* hotels, you know, where the average lumberjack would *stop*, y'know. Christ, they weren't fit to live in. They didn't cost nothing. But they were dirty, lousy, and every other goddamn— They wouldn't change the linen on the beds. Oh they was awful.

Death of a Tramp

His name was Monday. That was his name, Monday. Beet Monday, they called him. He was a great big man. He was a *good* man, a tramp lumberjack, y'know. Here, there, everywhere. He never stayed over a week, ten days, any one place.

And he drowned one day on Marble. I was driving there when he drowned. Right below Camp Five dary, he drowned in a team of horses. He was swimming a team of horses across. And he had the harness on 'em, and they got tangled up in the harness. And

continue

he had ahold of one's tail, y'know, the horse was kinda propelling him across. He was helping with one arm, of course. And the horses got tangled up in the harness, and flipped over. A horse can't stand much water. Once they go under, y'know, they're pretty near gone. And they *didn't* come back up, they drowned. And old Beef went with them.

We looked the rest of the day for him. Couldn't find him. . . .

Well, this day that old Beef drowned, some goofy bastard made up a *story* about him, you know. To himself. Thinking, that day, y'know.

And that night—we always had big bank fires at night, y'know, to dry out. And we was standing around by the fire, and this guy said, "Well, Old Beef went to heaven, all right."

And of course someone said, "How the hell do *you* know?"

"Well," he said, "I found out. Today."

He said, "He went up and knocked on the gate. An angel come to the gate and said, 'What do ya want?' He said, 'I want in.'"

"And so he went back to Saint Peter and told Pete that there's a guy out there wants in. And Peter said, 'Who is it?' And the angel said, 'I don't know.' 'Well, go and find out his name!'"

"So, the angel come back and said, 'Saint Peter wants to know your name.'"

"He said, 'BEEF MONDAY.'"

"So back he goes, and he said to Saint Peter, the angel said, 'He said his name was BEEF MONDAY.'"

"'Oh hell,' Pete said. 'Let him in. He'll only stay a day or two anyhow.'"

Lumberjack Character

There was a *few* that weren't too honest, goddamn few. Most of 'em were HUNDRED percent, the old-timers.

AND NOW YET today, I find them that way.

You know, the old-time lumberjack, he exchanged money, y'know. When he come to town, he'd see a bunch he knew, he'd go and *give* 'em a ten or a twenty, y'know, without them asking for it.

But the next time they seen you, you might be broke yourself, and they'd come and hand ya. That's the way they

done *that*, y'know. They didn't keep track or nothing. If you'd give a guy twenty dollars, well, it *twas* his, you give it to him. You didn't *expect* nothing. But they'd always retaliate, y'know. If they met you, when you were down.

So I think they were goddamn honest. Yup.

I was a friend of most of them. All of them, in fact. There was no dishonesty or nothing amongst them, they was just good guys, the way I found them.

If there *was* a cull amongst them he was alone, you know what I mean. He usually traveled alone, too.⁵²

A Woman to Remember

She was a dandy.

She was going to school there. University of Montana. She was about twenty-three, I think. I was twenty-four or five years old then.

I was working on the pond. I was unloading cars, but they'd piled up and jammed. That was in Bonner, ten miles from Missoula. And I used to have to get out on the pond and unravel them, y'know, flatten them out before they'd go up through the sluice into the mill, up the chain. . . .

And the *push* come down, he said to me, "There's a *girl* up there on the *bank* wants to *talk* to you."

I said, "Send her down *here*, I'll talk with her."

He just laughed, y'know, he said, "Aw, go on up and talk with her. Seems like a nice girl." And I went up and did.

And she asked me a whole bunch of questions, and told me she was going to school. And her dad, he run the Missoula Mercantile, a big store, y'know. Oh, I guess they sold everything in the goddamn place. I didn't know him; I just knew her, is all.

And she said, "You work here all the time?"

I said, "I've been here a couple years." She gave me her address. She says, "Come out to the house."

I said, "WHEN? I'll go out there *now* with you if you want me to."

"No," she said, "come out this evening. I'll be in school soon as I leave here."

I didn't go out that night.

I had good clothes then, y'know, I

used to dress up pretty good. So I dolled up there one night and went *out* to her place.

Oh, I stayed there till *midnight*, I guess. And talked to him, and then her mother, and her. And oh, they were nice people, had a fine home.

I felt out of place, you see.

I guess I did act kind of nervous or something. But I left and she said, "Come out again, tomorrow night."

"Oh," I said, "I can't, I got to get some sleep, I got to work."

But I used to go out, oh, once a week. And we'd go out and go to a show, eat, or some goddamn thing. She was a hell of a nice girl, I run around with her for a couple of years.

But I got the wanderlust again, and away I went.

And she located me, by god. I don't know how. But I got a letter from her.

She wanted me to come back and go to work there. I said [in a resigned tone]: "All right, I will," but I never did. So I didn't hear from her no more.

Yeah, she was a fine girl. Good-looking girl. Dressed fine and everything.

But, Oh, it was—not for *me*.

I never liked to be stationary or tied down or nothing. You know. When I wanted to go I wanted to go.

But I wish I had've. Some time or other, I'd a-been way better off. I *know* it.

I would've worked more, and tried to get ahead, y'know.

I never give a goddamn about tomorrow, the way it was; I just went from day to day. All my life.

Except when I was going with her. I goddamn near weakened there.

I wish I had've.

⁵²Lumberjack Character: from author's interview with William A. Stowell, *Lexington, Idaho*, 3 August 1981. All other tales are from the 28 July 1981 interview.

The laugh turns on the image of the tramp as "camp inspector," one who samples the food and the bunk and then moves on.

This is the standard view of the lumberjack as migratory homebody, carried by tramp and settler alike.

▲
William Stowell was born 20 April 1903 in Quebec, just across the border from North Lawrence, New York, the fourth of seven children. His father was English, his mother Irish. They lived prosperously. The house was so big, he said, there were rooms he never entered. He remembered most of all his mother and how hard she worked milking the cows and cleaning. His father had an old water-powered sawmill and a shingle mill, and he cut lumber for the neighbors. He also had a couple hundred acres of timber, and on weekends Bill helped him log. "He worked the piss out of me," Bill said. He said they got along well.⁷ His sisters became teachers. Bill was sent to train for the priesthood. But at the end of the term, when he was dismissed to go home for Christmas, he left both school and home for good. In 1920 he went to Germany with the Fiftieth Infantry. It was, he said, the best time he ever had in his life. Over his protests, his mother kept sending him money. He used it to play stud poker with the soldiers, and his luck was good. He was assigned to live in a tailor's residence instead of barracks. He had his meals out, at the army's expense. There were young streetwalkers. "I never got a promotion. I could have, at several different times, but I fucked it up. I'd go absent, y'know, and fuck around."⁸ Returning to the States in 1923, Bill began tramping from job to job in the woods. He worked mainly in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, the basis for the sobriquet that would be attached to him later. He thought about his family, but he always felt far away. Either he didn't have the money to go back, or if he did have the money, he was spending it on a spree.

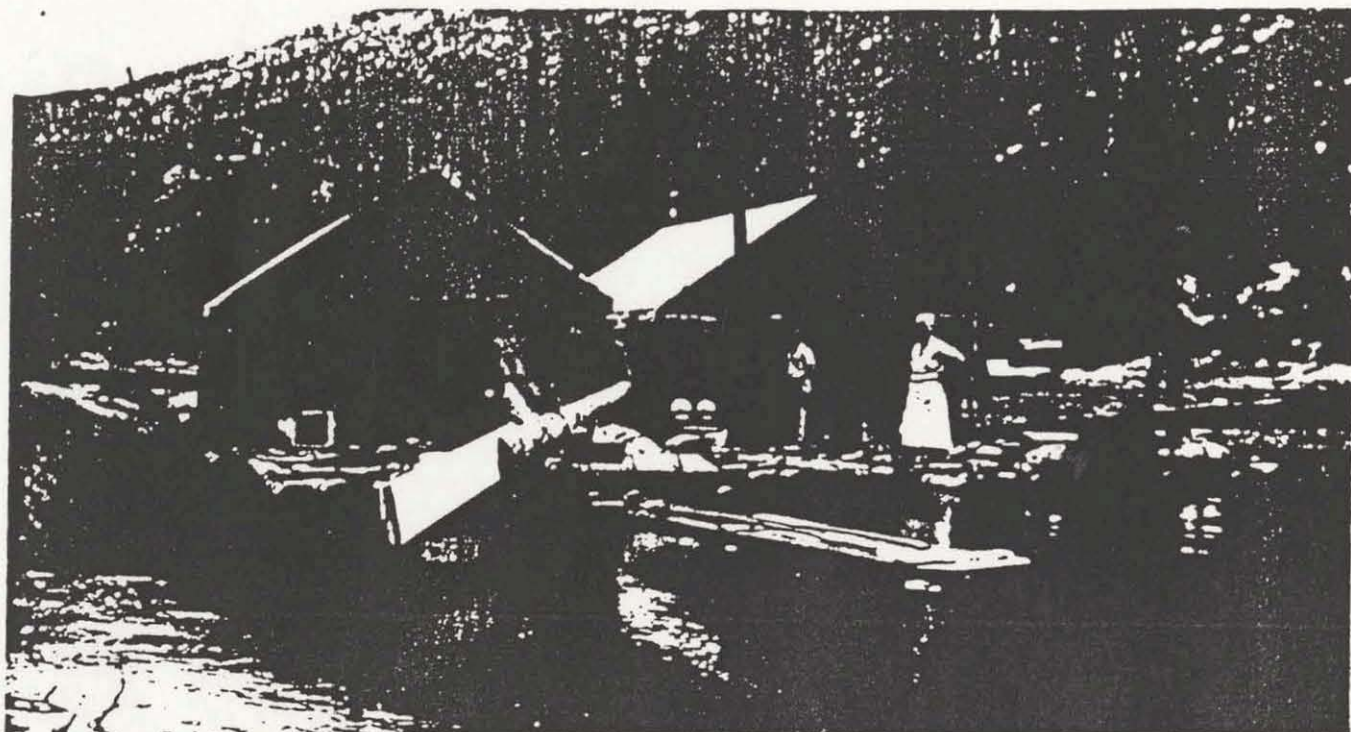
In 1925 he drifted all the way to the West Coast. He knew right away that he liked it. For one thing, the camps were in much better shape: the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) was forcing changes that he saw little hope of being attained in the Midwest. He was impressed by the sweep, the diversity, and the booming activity of the western country. Lumberjacks were circulating wherever they pleased, "gal-

loping" from the coast to Idaho, from there to Montana, all over. "Some of them guys didn't stay over ten days anyway. You know, just long enough to make a road stake and move on. But I never was that way. If I got a job that I liked, making a little money, I'd stay with it, y'know, quite a while. But then, when I went to town—after I went broke, I'd always go someplace else. Move around a little bit. See how they done things *other* places."⁹ Going elsewhere was one side of it. There was also an opposite pull, to come back. "They'd run around for a while; then they'd come back to this spot, y'see, where they liked to work, and where they liked the crew, and one thing and another. Settle *down* there, and put in quite a hitch. As a rule, that's the way it works. The way it always did with me. I'd run around a while, and then I'd finally go back to where I liked the best."¹⁰ Where he discovered he liked it best was Idaho's Clearwater River country. Wherever else he went, he would wind up there working for some time every year. In 1925, on his first swing through the area, he saw the Clearwater Timber Company sawmill being laid out in Lewiston, which meant that the backcountry was about to be opened to logging. In 1926 and 1927 he returned, going into the backcountry to help prepare the camps and cut timber for the first river drive. In 1928 he was in the crew when this drive took place, from the upper reaches of the river to the millpond at Lewiston. He made a point of appearing annually for the drive thereafter.¹¹ But why? What led him to make this particular spot his base of operations over the others where he also spent a good deal of time? As he explained it, he catered to the short-log country of Idaho because of the opportunities it afforded for river driving, horse skidding, and log fluming. These manual forms of labor were almost nonexistent on the Pacific Coast, where the largest timber on the continent was being logged by means of a mechanized technology that he found uncongenial, at a pace he found overly rapid and growing more dangerous as the power of the IWW to protect the men waned. His term for the hurry-up was "highballing." "Why, if a

man got killed, they wouldn't take him in or anything; they'd throw him behind a stump and leave him till night. He might not be dead." According to Bill, ruthless pursuit of profit made the coast a harsh place. The camps there lacked stability; the towns were dangerous.

Then there were settled places, like the Bovill country to the north of the Clearwater, which were tamer than a man like Bill needed or wanted. He liked the Bovill area for its amenities—the best chuck he ever ate in camp, and horses so well cared for, looking so fat and slick as they grazed by the company barn, that the men joked that the logging superintendent slept with them. Around Bovill the married men set the tone.

The Clearwater, in contrast, was populated almost entirely by tramp lumberjacks who spurned the meeties of proximity to civilization for the different sort of ease that came from living in the isolation of their own society. When lumberjacks blew in from the Clearwater country, they often got no farther than Pierce, a town less civilized than the camps it served. In Pierce, Bill said, the fighting was habitual and the drinking never stopped. A man would never be arrested, and there were so many women available that you could "just put a roof over the whole town and call it a whorehouse." The tone of life on the Clearwater was set by the lumberjacks, who made it "a hurly-burly outfit"—rough, but not brutish; rough in the good-natured, freewheeling way that tramps were rough.¹² The remoteness of the Clearwater country and the character of its terrain—many hundreds of miles of steep ridges draining through jumbled creeks into the broad, swift trunk of the river—combined to make it a haven for lumberjacks who specialized in fluming and driving. Bill was savvy about all phases of the work, but like other capable lumberjacks I'd met, would never brag about his skill or even speak about it directly. Say he was describing what the center crew had to do during the river drive when a logjam, or part of it, broke unexpectedly: "If you went adrift you had to be able to take care of *yourself*, you know what I mean. Like



Two wangans on the Clearwater River log drive, 1930. The cook, Harvey Spears, is shown standing at the right in his white apron. Photo courtesy of University of Idaho Library.

if a chunk broke off or something, and the boat couldn't get to you, why, it was up to you. The crew might scatter, you see. There might be a man here and a man over here. Well, you can't get 'em all. There's somebody got to *ride her out*, y'know. They'd usually pick up the ones they figured was least capable, y'know, and to hell with the other sonofabitch. Let him go, he could make her."¹³ He wouldn't single himself out as able; any good man could do it. In fact, he refused to be singled out. He had an unshakable aversion to making supervisory decisions. He knew he was capable of it, but he just didn't want the responsibility. He wanted to stay on good terms with everybody, and there was no foreman in the world, he said, who didn't have enemies. And he hated to commit errors. So he was "always peavey"—a hand-tool man—even at the end of his career, when he was by far the senior member of the drive, and foremen tried to persuade him to pilot the wangans, the rafts that carried the gear for the moving camp.

Bill went on the Clearwater drives to please himself. Having been present for the first one, he made them the one fixed point on his yearly calendar.

However long a particular drive would take, he was in it from start to finish. After it was over, he filed in memory the exact number of days it had taken—his way of keeping track of the unrepeatably combination of circumstances the drivers faced. The shortest of the drives, he said, was three-and-a-half days, in the spring of 1948. Since the water was exceptionally high, only five men were sent to handle the drive, but they couldn't keep up with the rear; it sailed away from them altogether, carrying along cows, bullsnakes, outhouses, and everything else that was caught up in the flooding river. When the drive reached the mill at Lewiston, it tumbled right over the dam and kept going down the Snake River. Bill wound up spending all summer picking up logs that had strayed as far as the Columbia. The crews salvaged thirty million feet of timber to haul back to the mill, at no profit to the company. The longest drive—one hundred and four days—was in 1941. It started with a huge jam on the North Fork that spring, sixty million feet of logs plugging up the river. When they finally got the jam to break, it went with a force the river couldn't carry, and it "threw rear," unloading logs on both banks all

the way to Lewiston. By the time the crews reached the main fork, the river had fallen off, and the logs were piled high along the bars. Every one had to be rolled back into the water. "God, that was disgusting work. Hot then. June. Crawling over them rocks, feet sore. I don't want to think about it." He stayed with it, but others were quitting every day, and new men came in as replacements. He said he didn't know why he kept on. He was determined, for reasons even he may have found inexplicable, to see these drives through to conclusion.¹⁴

In his first years on the Clearwater, Bill hadn't intended to lose contact with his family, but they slipped away anyhow, finally for good.

Oh, I threatened to go back a hundred times. But mother died after I left, and I said to hell with it. My dad was dead. He got killed. Log rolled over him.

But after my mother died—I was always thinking about going back, y'know I made half a dozen stakes, to go back, y'see. I made a stake out here one summer. About sixteen hundred dollars, I guess. I got as far as Duluth, or someplace, and met some guy that I knew.

Away she went.
Back on the boxcar again!
Right in the middle of winter!¹⁵

Michigan Bill was used to landing in jail for being drunk. But the one big stretch of time he served came as result of his association with the Industrial Workers of the World in 1936, at the moment when the union was dealt a final blow in the Northwest woods.¹⁶ Unlike his other brushes with the law, this sentence continued after his release from jail. The lumber companies were determined that the IWW would not be resurrected, and to ensure it they blackballed men like Bill.

Until Bill got to the West he hadn't known anything about the Wobblies, but he immediately saw that they were very popular. Everybody belonged, he discovered. You had to belong, or else the crew wouldn't let you go to work. It wasn't that you felt forced to join; you wanted to, because the IWW had job control.

I got into a camp, and a *delegate* come up to me. And he said, "We'd like to have you in the organization." I said, "All right, you got me!" That's all there is to it! So in I went, head first.

He give me my little book, and he said, "Hide that now."

I carried it in my packsack. Oh jeez, I've been frisked a thousand times for that!"

That was the dues book, with its big red stamps. Dues were a dollar a month. They were used to pay the organizers, who were called "traveling delegates" because they went from camp to camp. "When we *had* any money they'd get four dollars a day, and when we *didn't* have money they did it for nothing."

The delegates taught the men the method of "direct action."

You could act more or less without all these executive boards and the like of that, y'know. You could hold a meeting in camp if you decided to do something, and majority ruled. Take a vote, and if the majority wanted it, why, that's the way it was. It *went*, as far as the crew was concerned. We didn't always win, but it was an effort, anyway.

So, that was what I like about it. These other organizations, they're too much political. High salaries. Big shots. All that, y'know.

It don't work with the common *stiff*, y'know. I don't figure it does!¹⁸

For Bill, as for almost everyone I've spoken with who worked in the Idaho woods, the IWW stood for decent living conditions in the camps. That was what the Wobblies had gained for the men, despite all odds, in the strike of 1917 when they had shut down logging throughout the Northwest.¹⁹ And that was what they were fighting for in 1936, in what Michigan Bill called "their dying efforts."

As he recalled it, the strike began auspiciously. One hundred percent of the lumberjacks in the Clearwater country went out. The mill at Lewiston kept working, of course — the workers there were married men, not Wobblies — but it was only a question of time before the strike choked off the supply of logs from the woods and forced a shut-down. Bill thought they might win. And he thought they were right, too: "I knew that they were going to try to prove us wrong; but the camps, themselves, were in *awful* shape: *lousy*, *dirty*. And when you went to work in the spring, if you stayed there all summer you had the same blankets on that



Men working to dislodge a jam during a log drive on the North Fork of the Clearwater River. Photo courtesy of University of Idaho library. William W. Bacon III, photographer.

bed when you left in the fall. And no change of sheets or nothing." The Clearwater camps, he said, had started out decently in the twenties—not with sheets, like they had around Bovill, but with good food and good bunkhouses. But they'd been deteriorating ever since. The roofs were full of holes. The double bunks had settled until the lower bunk's springs were on the ground unless you shimmed up underneath. The men had put up with these conditions until lumberjacks coming in from elsewhere started complaining about how bad it was and got everybody else kicking. Finally "the lid flew off" and the camps all voted to strike.²⁰ It soon was clear, he said, that the authorities were going to cover up, to deny that there was any legitimate grievance. When the governor of Idaho came to inspect the conditions, he was safely in the tow of the logging superintendent, Bradbury.

The governor come, y'know, old Ben Ross was governor. He come. And I went as far as Headquarters with him.

And I wanted him to go a little further, y'know. But he wouldn't. Well, there was some camps there that had no floors in the bunkhouses.

The only place he went was Headquarters. And they'd done some work there. They'd sealed it off, y'know, and painted 'em inside during that first month we were on strike.

And that's the only place that Bradbury would go, or anybody.

I said, "Come on down the line, Governor, I'll show ya some camps."

"Well," he said, "I ain't got time now, and I think this looks very, very good here." And that's what he said, and back to Pierce we went. And that was the end of it.²¹

The strikers were determined. There were about a dozen real leaders among them, Bill recalled, sincere men who could talk at meetings and to anybody they needed to, men who "didn't care about their own selves if they could gain a point." The town of Pierce, which had always been anti-company, was solidly with the strikers. The strike headquarters was located there in a big house. Camp cooks were cooking in tents, running a good soup kitchen. There were over a thousand men around town, sleeping everywhere. They had no strike fund, but contributions were coming in, a lot of them anonymous and

some of them substantial—enough to keep the strike going. Lumberjacks were out soliciting the surrounding towns for food money, and they got plenty because people were sympathetic.

It dragged on. Many of the men pulled out for the West Coast, which was not on strike, to go to work. The strikers kept the picket line going, and the railroad employees still refused to cross. "Not a wheel was turning" in the woods. The Lewiston mill, running short of logs, shut down its second shift. The pressure on the company should have increased as supplies became critical, but instead—and to Bill's surprise—pressure fell on the lumberjacks. "We had halted production, that's what was the matter. There were too many people getting out of work. Married people, like these sawmill hands. They wasn't going to stand for that."²² In Bill's telling, the company wanted a confrontation that would bring the law in against the strikers. So they started up a camp. "They don't care much for human life, in a case of that kind." Members of the IWW were stationed on the picket line near the entrance to the camp, some of them men who had worked for the foreman, Fromelt, a long time. "Then some of his crew, why his real loyal hands, why they undertook to do a little shooting."

Well, the shooting happened up here near Campbell's Pond, just out of Pierce.

We were coming off the picket line. I was in the bunch.

There was about twenty-four of us in the truck. I think, an old flatbed with stake racks.

And it was just about dusk. They were up on the sidehill, y'know. Nine of 'em, I think there was—nine rifles in the bunch, anyhow—they just started blasting, y'see. Just indiscriminately, y'know.

"Into the back of the truck?" I asked. "Yeah," he laughed.

I bailed out and got down behind one of the duals. They shot through the windshield first, y'know; that's what stopped the truck, y'know.

But, the law come. The state troopers—I don't know how they happened to get there. They must have been planted around there or something, because they come, right now. Eight or nine of them. They broke it up.

And they pinched quite a bunch.

It was dark then. I hid out. I didn't want to go back to Pierce. I knew I'd get pinched.

So, I started hiking, come daylight the next morning. I was going to Missoula. I made Missoula.

I didn't have nothing to eat, but I had about, oh maybe a hundred dollars in my pocket.

And a ranger picked me up. I knew I was going in the general direction, y'see, all the time. The second day he picked me up. He had an old pickup of some kind.

He knew right where I come from and everything!

The pickup was parked, y'see, along an old skidding trail.

And I come along. I didn't go by it; I stopped and waited, y'see. I knew there was someone around there; I seen the sign on there, U.S. Forest Service.

So he come pretty quick.

He said, "How is everything in Pierce?"

Christ, I was a hundred and fifty miles from Pierce then.

I said, "All right, I guess."

So he said, "You going to Missoula?"

I said, "Yeah." So I jumped in with him.

And we got to talking. He give me a couple of sandwiches. And he let me off in Missoula. I told him where I was from and everything. After I knew that he knew it, shit, I told him.

"Sure, I come from Pierce. It's too hot around there for me," I told him.

Well, we had a hall in Missoula then, too, y'see, the IWW. But I didn't go there when I first went to town. I stayed a day, I think it was. And then I went down to the hall. They knew I was in town. You know how the word gets around—grapevine business, and one thing and another. Some of them seen me, of course. I knew a few around there, not too many; it was a long time since I'd been there.

But I went down to the hall and got B.S.-ing with some of them guys. And they told me the FBI was around there.

So, the next day I got picked up.

I was in a bar. I was sober, but I was having a drink or two. And this guy—I looked in the mirror, he was watching me, y'know. And every time I looked he was watching me. He was standing back next to the wall.

I figured I'm going to go back and ask him what the hell he sees about me that looks so funny.

I turned to go back, and he met me then, y'know. Showed me the business. FBI.

Took me down to the sheriff's office.²⁴

Two strikers had been critically wounded, and, according to Bill, died lingering deaths. Martial law had been declared. The shooting was the turning point: the strike was soon called off. Along with four others identified as leaders, Bill was charged with assault. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to a year in the Lewiston jail. "I was no ringleader, I was just an ordinary *stiff*, y'know, working stiff. But I happened to get *caught* under them *circumstances*."

There was irony for the IWW in the fact that the company, just as it had done after the 1917 strike, improved conditions once the strike was over.²⁴ The jail time was easy. There were three daily newspapers. Visiting friends supplied tobacco, razor blades, and money. Occasionally he pulled a bottle up the back window with a rope, but once it got passed around to everybody it was gone—no chance "to get a glow on."

But when he was released, no one would hire him.

Well, I went to the coast, California, Montana, all over. But, I was blackballed on the coast. Same as here, y'know.

I'd work about ten days and they'd get word, y'see. They'd call me in, and—well, I'd know what it was, y'know. A check laying there.

So I went down to Crater Lake. And I knew a guy down there, he was running camp. It was getting along towards Christmastime. I thought, by God, I am gonna make a Christmas stake somewhere, so I'll go there.

So I went there. His name was Gaffney. He used to be superintendent for the Rutledge on Marble. That's how I knew him, y'see. He was running a camp there.

So I went in there. Went right to work. I got in about ten days when the clerk come in one night, and he said, "Mr. Gaffney wants to see you over in his house." He lived in a house, y'see. He was a married man, y'know, he lived in a house.

I didn't go over. I knew what it was, y'know.

So I just packed my sack and went to bed. The next morning, why, the clerk come in again and said, "YOU! DIDN'T GO OVER TO SEE MR. GAFFNEY!"

I said, "No."

"Well, he wants to see you."

I said, "I know what he wants."

So he came in the bunkhouse after the crew left, and told me. He said, "I got to let ya go."

And he showed me the list. There was about a hundred names on it. That's the only time I ever seen that list. I was about the fourth or fifth name on it.²⁵

Bill disappeared from view. He tramped. "Just work when you could, and when you couldn't, why you *didn't*."

In the Yakima Valley he pitched alfalfa for farmers, ten cents an hour, ten hours a day. Bumming didn't appeal to him— "soliciting alms," he liked to call it—but when it came to that, he put his qualms aside. He thought about changing his name, but Social Security started around then, with name and number, and he decided he'd keep his own.²⁶ When he finally saw his fellow Wobblies dribbling back to the camps, he attributed it not to a change of heart by the companies but to a new federal labor law that made the blacklist illegal. He himself didn't go back until 1941, when he was offered a job in the Clearwater country by a small gyppo operator named Clark. On his way in he stopped at a bar in Orofino. He figured he was the only lumberjack in town—everybody else was working—when the Potlatch hiring agent approached him.

"Come over to the office," he said.

I said, "What the hell good will that do me, go over to your office?"

He said, "I'll send ya out to work." I knew he wanted me to go to work.

I said, "What doing?"

He said, "Hooking tongs for Wallace Boll." He was hoister.



The end of the drive in the Potlatch Forests, Inc., millpond at Lewiston, Idaho, 1966. Photo courtesy of University of Idaho library.

Well, that was better than going for Clark, y'know. He had a little old shitting gypso camp, y'know. You know what them gypsos are, Jesus Christ! They had no camps, y'know, just an old tent, and eat whenever you could, on the fly and every thing else. So I figured I'd go with the company.

I said, "All right. I'll go up. When do you want me to go up?"

He said, "Be there in the morning if you can."

And I said, "I'll be there the day *after* tomorrow."

So I did. I went up. And Jesus Christ, they was all glad to see me around at Headquarters there, shaking hands. And even Bradbury come out. I was getting on the speeder, and him and Boots come out, and *they* shook hands with me. They was both big shots. . . .

"Glad to see you. Where you going? What camp you going to?"

I said, "I'm going to hook tongs for that *fucking* old Boll. Where's *he* at?"

He said Camp Eleven. So I went to Eleven.²⁷

Michigan Bill was back—unrepentant and unbowed.



In later years there proved to be one kind of walkout where Wobbly-style tactics could still prevail. The company was vulnerable to wildcats on the river-log drives, because without the crew they couldn't handle the timber.

Mutiny Bar, we struck there three times. Yeah, that's right up here. Oh it's a rock-bound sonofabitch of a place. It's above Arrow Junction aways. Jesus, it's an awful place.

Everybody'd be tired and half pissed off. Somebody'd quit or something, and finally someone'd say, "Let's go for four bits or a dollar, it's a good chance." So we'd *stack arms* and *get her*, y'see. Right away. Next day, y'know. Some of them bigwigs'd come up from the mill. "Go ahead." That was all there is to it.

But it's easy to win on a drive, y'know. I never seen a driving crew lose YET! . . .

That was the Wobbly theory, y'know: Strike when the iron's hot.

Well, this last time, of course, they argued. "We got a contract, we got a contract."

I told 'em, "To HELL with the contract."

I said, "I drove on this goddamn river for three dollars a day, and *ten* dollars a day, and *fifteen* dollars a day."

I said, "My labor's worth twenty dollars a day now. Before I go another goddamn inch." Hmm!

But you could always win on a drive, but in them camps, oh Jesus. They'd always have a big supply of logs, y'see, out here, every time we struck, y'know.

By the time they were used up, we were starved out.²⁸

"IWW. Solidarity forever. It'll never come back," Bill said. At least, "not *as* the IWW." There was intangible hope within him that the IWW idea could still materialize again someday, under another banner, to become a force again among the people. He didn't speculate about how this might happen, but he knew what had caused the IWW to die. "A revolutionary organization at this day and age doesn't get along very good." By *this* day and age he meant the present period as opposed to the old days of the West, when the lumberjacks *were* Wobblies and the union had great appeal to local settlers.

The PEOPLE have changed, y'know. The people have changed an awful lot. Oh yes.

That's what makes it, *I* think.

Is the people, themselves.

You see, the lumberjack was always a single man, a footloose man, y'know. He didn't give a goddamn for ANYTHING. You know. He had nothing to LOSE. And the world to *gam*. So that's what made him that way, I believe. I'm pretty sure that's the way it was with me.

See, a camp, say a hundred and fifty men in a camp—they might be two per cent married, or maybe one per cent: *all single*.

And they had no responsibility except themselves. Anything they could gain was *for* them.

Now, y'see, they're all married. They got responsibilities. Payment on cars and homes and TVs and whatnot.

In the old days, all a man had was his packsack, just what was on his back: that's all.²⁹



Notes

1. One shining exception, unique in its deep consideration of the life and art of one tramp lumberjack, is Edward D. Ives's *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978). Stewart Holbrook, *Holy Old Mackinac: A Natural History of the American Lumberjack* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956) conveys a vivid sense of the lumberjack outlook. Nels Anderson's *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1923) is a valuable source on the social stratum, though it does not deal with logging or the practice of other crafts. For an overview of logging that focuses on loggers' perspectives, see Donald MacKay, *The Lumberjacks* (Toronto, Ontario: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978).
2. For a parallel problem in the study of western mining history, see Jim Foster, "The Ten Day Tramps," *Labor History* 23 (Fall 1982): 608-23. The historical importance, and our lack of knowledge, of wageworkers in the West is addressed by Carlos Schwantes in "The Concept of the Wageworkers' Frontier: A Framework for Future Research," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18 (January 1981): 39-55.
3. A treatment of settlers' oral traditions about tramp lumberjacks can be found in my dissertation, "The Early Days: Narrative and Symbolism of Logging Life in the Inland Northwest" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1983).
4. This view of the relationship between individual and culture was developed in American anthropology by Edward Sapir. See *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, Personality*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), pp. 509-21, 569-77, 590-97. I interviewed Stowell three times in 1975 and 1976 as part of an oral history project that I did for the Latah County Historical Society, and twice more in 1981 for the Idaho Folk Arts program. Tapes and transcripts of the earlier conversations are in the Special Collections Library at the University of Idaho, in Moscow; the later are on file at the Idaho Commission on the Arts in Boise.
5. William A. Stowell, interview with author, Lewiston, Idaho, 28 July 1981.
6. *Ibid.* In these word-for-word transcriptions I use a number of devices to preserve some of the character of Stowell's speech. Paragraphing is set by taking into account his pauses, voice intonation, sense of the passage and use of markers (e.g., "and," "so," and "well"). Italics are used for words that are spoken with special emphasis, and all caps for words spoken very loudly. Ellipses are used to denote that extraneous material has been omitted. In a couple of passages below, the speech is broken into poetic lines when it becomes highly rhythmic. For the rationale behind the use of these techniques, see Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), pp. 39-40, 732.

7. Stowell interview, 3 August 1981.
8. Stowell interview, 28 July 1981.
9. Stowell interview, 24 February 1976.
10. *Ibid.*
11. The Clearwater operation was part of the Weyerhaeuser logging empire. For corporate history, see Ralph W. Hidy, Frank Ernest Hill, and Allan Nevins, *Timber and Men: The Weyerhaeuser Story* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), and Charles E. Twining, *Phil Weyerhaeuser: Lumberman* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985); Keith C. Petersen's *Company Town: Potlatch, Idaho, and the Potlatch Lumber Company* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1987) is a detailed study of a community to the north of the Clearwater and draws on oral history I collected in the area. For an overview of the development of logging in the inland Northwest, consult John Fahey, *The Inland Empire: Unfolding Years, 1879-1929* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), pp. 188-213. In 1931 the Clearwater Timber Company, the Potlatch Lumber Company, and the Rutledge Timber Company were consolidated to form Potlatch Forests, Inc.
12. Stowell interview, 28 July 1981.
13. Stowell interview, 24 February 1976.
14. Stowell interview, 28 July 1981.
15. Stowell interview, 28 September 1976.
16. Very brief mentions of the logging strike of 1936 can be found in Holbrook, *Holy Old Mackinaw*; and F. Ross Peterson, *Idaho: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1976), p. 152. The latter states, incorrectly, that although there was "an interchange of gunfire" during the strike, "there was no bloodshed."
17. Stowell interview, 28 September 1976.
18. Stowell interview, 29 October 1975. Joyce Kornbluh, *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964) is the most comprehensive source on the culture of the union. For an incisive account of an IWW member who studied IWW culture, see Archie Green, "John Neuhaus: Wobbly Folklorist," *Journal of American Folklore* 73 (1960): 189-217. For short oral histories of IWW organizers among timber and other migratory workers, see Stewart Bird, Don Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer, *Solidarity Forever: An Oral History of the IWW* (Chicago, Illinois: Lakeview Press, 1985). Carleton H. Parker made an early effort to understand the social significance of the IWW in his book *The Casual Laborer and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920).
19. The northwestern oral tradition in support of the IWW and the logging strike of 1917 is documented in my article, "What Is Social in Oral History?," *International Journal of Oral History* 4 (1983): 76-98, 85-91.
20. Stowell interview, 24 February 1976. The strike began on 29 June. Demands included elimination of top bunks and provision of clean sheets and pillowcases once a week; abolition of the gyppo cooking system; an eight-hour day, with time-and-a-half for overtime and Sundays; a minimum wage of five dollars per day for day workers and a twenty-five-dollar-a-month increase for monthly wage workers; and no discrimination "against active union men working on the job." The Clearwater country was the strike's center. From there it spread quickly across north Idaho, shutting down operations at Benill, St. Maries, and Coeur d'Alene, involving a total of about twenty-five hundred men. Although Governor C. Ben Ross dispatched seven highway patrolmen to the Clearwater to aid local authorities, by all accounts the strike was carried on in a most orderly fashion, with no violence, throughout July (*Lewiston Morning Tribune*, 30 June; 3, 7 July 1936).
21. Stowell interview, 28 September 1976. Ross instructed both the captain of the Idaho National Guard and the state public welfare commissioner to investigate camp conditions on his behalf during the strike. Stowell may well have escorted one of them, with the story growing over the years. When Ross himself arrived on 7 August, Stowell would not have been present, for reasons that will become clear below (*Lewiston Morning Tribune*, 23, 26 July, 8 August 1936).
22. Stowell interview, 3 August 1981.
23. Stowell interview, 24 February 1976. The shooting occurred about 7:30 p.m. on 2 August 1936. The strikebreakers claimed that the pickets pulled them from their truck and began beating them with chains before the shooting started. The pickets denied it. They had no guns. Six wounded pickets and three beaten strikebreakers were admitted to the Orofino hospital that night (*Lewiston Morning Tribune*, 3, 4, 21 August 1936).
24. Stowell interview, 24 February 1976. Nearly one hundred national guardsmen were dispatched to the area. Those identified as strike leaders were deported. On 18 August the strikers remaining at Pierce voted 120 to 18 to return to work. Ten strikebreakers, charged with assault with intent to murder, were released on bonds of 750 dollars each. Stowell and the other arrested pickets were fined 200 dollars each on their assault convictions but could not afford to pay (*Lewiston Morning Tribune*, 8, 20, 21 August, 5 September 1936).
25. Stowell interview, 24 February 1976.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Stowell interview, 28 September 1976.
28. Stowell interview, 24 February 1976.
29. Stowell interview, 29 October 1975. William Stowell died in Lewiston on 15 September 1982. He had no known relatives.