“The best workers they had” – le bûcheron québécois in Maine’s north woods

by Andrew Egan¹

ABSTRACT

It was a widely held belief, including among many Americans, that *les bûcherons québécois* were the best workers in Maine’s north woods. Referred to by some as “hassle-free employees”, they were considered by many to be extremely productive and willing to work longer hours for less pay than their American counterparts. At times, they also helped to fill a void created by high worker turnover—or “quit”—rates among American loggers and an unwillingness on the part of many Mainers to work far from home in the state’s remote logging woods. However, resentment soon spread among Maine woods workers over the belief that these immigrant woodsmen and bonded labourers were receiving preferential treatment from northern Maine’s large industrial forest landowners. This resulted in cross-border tensions and organized labour actions, as well as questions about the future of the region’s logging work force, that persist today.

Keywords: farmer-lumberjack, bonded labour, occupational choice and prestige, nativism

RÉSUMÉ

Selon une opinion largement répandue parmi les Américains, les meilleurs travailleurs dans les forêts du nord du Maine étaient les bûcherons québécois. Certains n’hésitant pas à les identifier à des « travailleurs dociles », ils étaient considérés par plusieurs comme étant extrêmement productifs et prêts à travailler de nombreuses heures pour un salaire moindre que celui de leurs collègues américains. À certains moments, ils ont également permis de combler les pénuries de main d’œuvre créées par les taux élevés de roulement – ou de « démission » parmi les bûcherons américains et du refus de la part de plusieurs résidents du Maine de travailler loin du domicile dans les forêts éloignées de l’état. Toutefois, un ressentiment s’est rapidement développé parmi les travailleurs forestiers du Maine qui considéraient selon eux que ces bûcherons migrants et ces travailleurs sous contrat faisaient l’objet d’un traitement préférentiel de la part des grands propriétaires forestiers industriels du nord du Maine. Cette perception a entraîné des tensions des deux côtés de la frontière ainsi que des manifestations de mouvements ouvriers, en plus de soulever des questions sur l’avenir de la main d’œuvre forestière de la région qui persistent encore.

Mots clés : cultivateur-bûcheron, travail contractuel, choix professionnel et prestige, nativisme

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Introduction

The forest industry of northern Maine has traditionally relied on woods workers from eastern Québec to complement the region’s logging workforce, especially in the state’s more remote northern outposts. Tensions between American loggers and the large Maine paper and land management companies that control the forest products industry in the northern part of the state are recurrent, as is a persis-

tent sense of nativism directed at Québécois loggers, who are perceived as taking American jobs. In their cross-cultural studies of Québécois and Maine loggers working in northern Maine, Egan and Taggart (2004) and, later, Taggart and Egan (2012) offered contexts for understanding the diverse logging community working in Maine’s north woods in the early 21st century. As with many complex socio-economic phenomena, however,

attempts to understand both the current situation and the outlook for the future often begin with an appreciation of the past.

Farmer-lumberjacks to Bonded Woods Workers

Canadian workers from the province of Québec began working in Maine’s woods during the mid-nineteenth century, becoming the skilled *draveurs* (river drivers) and *bûcherons* (loggers) of the region’s northern forest. The historical concentration of harvesting in Maine in winter derived, in part, from the seasonal availability of labour and workhorses from farms on both sides of the US–Canadian border (Jensen 1945, Vail 1993, Egan and Taggart 2004), a practice that continued for several decades. According to Donovan and Swain (1986: 4), Canadian workers have crossed the border to work in the Maine woods since the 1800s: “They actually lived closer than Maine residents to the ‘unorganized territories’ of Maine where most logging took place, and have always been described as good workers for relatively low pay.” Due to the proximity of rural settlements in eastern Québec to remote “logging chances” in northern Maine, these “farmer-lumberjacks” were often easier to recruit and retain than domestic woods workers (McNutt 1978; Parenteau 1986).

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Combining the demands of agriculture with a harsh existence as loggers and river drivers was particularly important in sustaining rural family and community economies in Québec from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Importantly, logging helped to establish and reinforce a cash economy in rural Québec. The seasonal tempo of farming life was often in rhythm with that of woods work. As described by Legendre (2005: 4):

Jusqu'à la fin des années 1940, l'industrie d'exploitation forestière sera caractérisée par sa complémentarité avec l'agriculture... La main-d'œuvre est donc recrutée parmi les fermiers et leurs fils, qui trouvent dans le travail en forêt un supplément financier particulièrement utile et apprécié... La principale raison d'être des jobbeurs est donc leur capacité de mobiliser la main-d'œuvre nécessaire pour cette activité saisonnière année après année et de la maintenir au travail.

(Until the end of the 1940s, the logging industry was characterized by its relationship with agriculture... The work force was recruited from among farmers and their sons, who found in forest-related work especially useful and appreciated supplementary income... The main reason for being logging contractors was their ability to mobilize the workforce needed for this seasonal work year after year and to keep it working.)

This phenomenon continued until the post-war period when there was a migration from rural areas to the cities due, in part, to industrial expansion, resulting in chronic instability in the province's logging workforce.

The immigrant labour agreement reached in 1940 between the US and Canada and put into effect the following year solidified the relationship between the two countries and attracted a number of Canadians—mostly Québécois—to Maine's logging woods. While visa labourers have the same privileges as US citizens (except for the right to vote), bonded labour must be requisitioned by a US employer through a government-controlled application process. The "bond" is then required to work for the requisitioning employer for a predetermined base rate of pay, and return to Canada when work is completed. However, the prospective US employer must attempt to recruit and show preference for domestic labour when it is available. Bond and Wolfe (1978: 6) described bonded woodsmen as "Canadian nationals who are permitted to enter the United States at the solicitation of employers following a procedure which certifies that no domestic labour is available to perform the type of work for which they are being sought."

However, many Québécois workers soon realized that it was relatively easy to obtain immigrant visas. Cognizance of this issue encouraged some would-be bonded woods workers to find employment in other sectors of the New England economy—presumably where the work was perceived as being more lucrative, less strenuous, and safer—and them thereby abandoning woods work. According to Thibodeau (1965: 12), "these people, like our (US) citizen woodsmen before them, want better education for their children and more modern conveniences, and these cannot be achieved by working six to nine months a year" in the woods).

Economic and social conditions in Québec also encouraged the migration of woods labour to Maine. Provincial economic

policy, for example, generally failed to create wage employment for poor farmers in Québec, compelling them to seek logging employment in remote regions of Maine (Vail 1993). By the 1930s some Québécois moved to Maine to find new logging opportunities, having converted to agriculture or otherwise exploited many of the forests of southern Québec: "Les colons ont tôt fait de déboiser leur terre et les lots avoisinants, de façon erratique, pour combler la hausse de la demande et de profiter des prix élevés du bois... Ils sont bientôt obligés d'aller bûcher à l'extérieur, en particulier dans l'État du Maine" (Legendre 2005: 149).

(The settlers [in Québec] had earlier cleared their land and neighbouring lots in an erratic fashion in order to meet heightened demand and to take advantage of higher prices for wood... They were soon obliged to log elsewhere, particularly in the state of Maine.)

Bond (1977) also cited the lack of employment in rural Québec as the primary reason for the ready availability of Québec loggers in Maine's north woods, a notion also supported by Donovan and Swain (1986), and the demand for woods workers from Canada appears to have been related to high quit rates among loggers in the US. Given these conditions, migrant Québécois loggers represented a "reserve army" of often impoverished and seasonally underemployed Québécois farmers (Parenteau 1986).

Québécois loggers were also willing to work in regions of Maine considered by most of the state's citizens to be so remote that there have been suggestions that raising wages alone would not attract enough domestic workers to the logging industry to meet labor demands there. Indeed, in some geographically isolated areas of Maine's logging woods near the Canadian border, the relationship between domestic logging labour supply and logging wages has been considered relatively inelastic (Pan Atlantic Consultants/Ireland 1999). The attraction of perhaps better pay and more lucrative logging chances in Maine may have contributed to a logging labour shortage in Québec. Noting a "drastic reduction" of qualified loggers in Québec from 1967 to 1971, Ferragne (1973) recommended efforts to improve the image of loggers, in addition to working conditions and wages.

Les vents contraires

By World War II, loggers from southern Québec began to work in larger numbers in the Maine woods. In the mid-1960s it was estimated that 75% of the logging workforce in northern Maine was from Québec (Public Affairs Research Center 1968). In addition, socialized medicine and subsidized credit for the purchase of logging equipment may have combined to encourage Québécois loggers to tolerate greater risks to personal safety and less lucrative logging opportunities than may have been acceptable to their Maine counterparts (Vail 1993).

Woods workers from Québec, either bonded to an American employer or working in the US under a visa, were often thought to be superior in logging skills and work ethic to native Mainers. In his review of woods labour in Maine in 1960 (p. 46), Carter observed:

It was the feeling of one company official... that the bonded and visa labour were the best workers they had. They are not given preferences as some people claim, although they are much better workers on the whole... the bonded labourers cause very little

trouble to the companies and jobbers; and the companies feel that, since they are faced with an acute shortage of domestic labour, the practice of bonding labour is an effective way of meeting the problem at this time.

These portrayals, and the inevitable tensions with American woodsmen that arose from them, were depicted by Searls in the 1980 documentary film "Cut and Run." It described the labour action undertaken by the Maine Woodsmen's Association (MWA) in October, 1975, in part to counter the hiring of bonded Québécois loggers to work in Maine's northwoods despite relatively high unemployment there, as well as claims of low prices for wood and unfair log scale applied to wood harvested by American workers. The MWA work stoppage temporarily curtailed production at several wood processing facilities in Maine, damaged track owned by the Bangor and Aroostok Rail Road that carried pulpwood and wood chips to the paper mills and paper from the mills located along the Penobscot River, and blockaded the flow of wood at the Canadian border.

The documentary's narrative estimates that, by the late 1970s, approximately 1700 of 7000 Maine woodsmen were employed directly by the paper companies, with the rest being independent logging contractors and their employees, because "by and large, it was much cheaper for (the paper companies) to receive wood from the independent woodsmen than to cut it themselves." Searls described the work habits of Québécois woods workers this way:

At present, about 2500 Canadians leave their homes late Sunday or early Monday. They work in the woods until Thursday afternoon or Friday morning and then return to Canada. They cut about one-third of the pulp and timber harvested in Maine. A majority of these men work in Maine on commuting visas, but there are still a great number who are bonded to a specific employer on a yearly basis. These men are called "bonds".

Reflecting on this difficult life, separation from his family, and the dangers of woods work in the 1970s, one Québécois bonded woodsman, Lucien LaChance, who worked in Maine for Scott Paper Company and was interviewed for the documentary, states:

"You know, my wife has been telling me for at least four or five years, 'Lucien, when are you going to stop going in the woods? I'm afraid of the phone call that you've had an accident at work from a stub or a tree and that you're hurt or dead. When are you going to stop working in the woods? I long for the day when you'll be able to have a life with us here together.' I always tell her I'll stop. But I never do."

Opening with the sound of Robert Charlebois and Louise Forestier crackling over the radio of a 1970s GMC pick-up truck carrying Québécois loggers crossing the border from St-Theophile to Jackman, Maine, at 5 am on a cold Monday morning, the film highlights the tensions between American and Québécois woods workers and the companies that hired them. In one segment of the film, a group of malcontent Maine loggers is interviewed. A spokesman for the group refers to immigrant and bonded woods workers from Québec as "hassle-free employees" because they worked long hours and did not demand employee benefits. He goes on to claim that Québécois immigrant loggers work for less money and are assigned the best logging opportunities, or "chances", asserting that "It's common knowledge from

here to Fort Kent that Americans always get clean up, Canadians always get the big wood. And any lumber camp you go to from here to Fort Kent and south as far as Patten, it's the same story." However, supporting the notion that Québécois loggers were more productive than their American counterparts, the group's spokesperson states that "in a small situation like this you have four Canadian crews cutting roughly 60 cords a week, where we may have seven American crews and we don't even cut close to that."

While there is little or no systematically gathered evidence supporting the assertion that Québécois loggers received preferential treatment in the assignment of logging opportunities, additional anecdotal evidence supporting a bias in favour of Canadian logging crews includes a comment by a graduate of a logger training program in Maine during the 1960s who claimed that "there was no future (in woods work) because the Canadians get the best chances." However, perhaps more objective is the view of Donovan and Swain (1986: 7), who wrote that "one important MWA contention that has not been addressed, and upon which a variety of opinions are held, is whether or not Canadian laborers continue to get better 'cutting chances' than Maine loggers in the northern part of the state".

The labour action initiated by the MWA was not an isolated occurrence. In 1999, for example, some loggers from northern Maine's Allagash region blockaded a border crossing between Québec and Maine. Echoing complaints voiced in 1975, the Allagash loggers claimed that Canadian loggers were taking American jobs and were depressing wages for local loggers because Canadians were prepared to work for less money (Kryzanowski 1999). A study commissioned by the Maine Department of Labor the same year concluded that, although a shortage of workers existed in northern Maine, the bonded labour program did not depress logging wages statewide, but likely had a "highly negative effect" on wages for some loggers in northern Maine (Pan Atlantic Consultants/Ireland 1999). However, a few years later, the 2004 report of the Maine Legislative Committee to Study New Payment Models for the Logging Industry concluded that the "availability of Canadian loggers has had an adverse impact on Maine workers in the St. John Valley." Later that year, state legislators from northern Maine urged the state's congressional delegation to review the cap on bonded woods labor, stating that "there was a time for bonded labour, but reliance on foreign workers has created a system that keeps Americans unemployed ... and is responsible for depressing logging wages for Americans"¹.

Loggers from Québec have responded to controversies surrounding their right to work in Maine's north woods. In the summer of 2005, 11 Québécois loggers met in St-George, Québec, to talk about their profession. They discussed a variety of logging-related subjects, including woods labour, respect for their profession, logging regulations, and working in Maine. According to one logger from the Beauce region of Québec who participated in the discussion, "It's too far for them (Americans) to come up (toward the border)—so why not have loggers from Québec do the work." Another stated that "It's not about taking jobs away, but geographically it makes more sense for us to go there. It's closer to home for us—those guys don't want to stay way from home too much." Referring to the difficulties associated with crossing

¹www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew

the border to work in Maine, a third claimed, "To cross the border here is like the inquisition," to which another chimed in humourously, "It's not so bad. The customs officer went to school with us!"

Ce n'est pas un choix; c'est le seul métier connu (Beauce logger, 2000)

While the rich history of the Québécois logger in northern Maine provides a backdrop for understanding current and future conditions related to logging in the region, other, more immediate questions related to occupational choice and familial attachment to logging among Québécois loggers have emerged that call into question the overall stability of the region's logging workforce. Interviews of Québécois loggers living in logging camps in Maine conducted over a half century ago by the Public Affairs Research Center (1968) suggested a sense of resignation to logging among interviewees. Responding to the question, "Why did you take this job?" 31% said that they had insufficient education for other work and 21% indicated that they could not find another job nearby. Only 15% reported that it was the best-paying job available, while 12% said that they logged because they have always done this work.

The apparent lack of both occupational prestige and job satisfaction experienced by Québécois loggers described by the Public Affairs Research Center in 1968 has been largely reaffirmed by a more recent cross-cultural study of the logging community of eastern Québec. Egan and Taggart (2004) found significant differences between Maine and Québec resident loggers in their responses to questions related to why they became loggers. For example, Maine resident loggers in the study region more often indicated that, in choosing to become loggers, they felt less constrained by their education or the prospects of other employment than loggers from Québec, many of whom appeared to be more resigned to logging, often suggesting that it was the only work that was available or that they knew how to do. In addition, significantly more Québec resident loggers expressed strong intergenerational attachment to logging and indicated that they are loggers because that is what they have always done. However, despite this intergenerational attachment to their profession, far fewer Québécois loggers than those from Maine's northern woods region would recommend logging to their offspring.

It is clear that the final chapter of *le bûcheron québécois* in Maine's north woods is yet to be written.

Despite an uncertain future, related to wages, working conditions, the public image of the logging profession, a significant downturn in the region's forestry sector, tensions with American loggers, and Maine politics and US immigration policies, the contributions of *le bûcheron québécois* to Maine's northern forest and the state's economy and culture are unmistakable and his place in Maine's history as *un gars capable* and *un bon travailleur* remains strong.

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