The History of Lumbering in Wakeham

By Lorna Clark Miller
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The following article by Lorna Clark Miller is the second in a series of papers that were researched and written last summer by students enrolled in a course on the Geography of Canada. Given the students' limitations in terms of time and resources, these papers may contain some inaccuracies and mis-statements. Consequently, we ask all readers to please contact SPEC with whatever information they have available such that we may all better record the history of the Gaspe region.

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Lumbering in the Gaspe region is a very old industry that dates back to the French Regime in Canada. For example, in 1726 Governor Beauharnois reported to the French government that there was much valuable timber in the Gaspe Peninsula. Similarly, in his recommend-ations concerning the fortification of Gaspe harbour, Bougainville wrote: "Fine standing timber for masts and good construction lumber are available in the nearby woods." The French did in fact construct a saw mill on the York River, about four miles west of Gaspe harbour, where the present government fish hatchery is now located. Wolfe apparently burned down this mill, along with a large amount of sawn lumber and a few wooden framed houses, in his raid of 1758. (C.E. Roy, Historical Gaspe, 1934:106).

After the Conquest, many new settlers trickled into the Gaspe region. For example, in the spring of 1765, a naval lieutenant, Felix O'Hara, was allowed to settle anywhere he wished in Gaspe provided the land was not already occupied. In April of the same year, O'Hara, to-gether with two other merchants, John McCord of Quebec and William Gilliland of New

York, formed an association and asked for a grant of 2000 acres.

From about 1814 to 1850, several new families, some of them from England, arrived in Gaspe searching for land that could be cleared and cultivated. (See table below.) Most of these immigrants took up residence on both sides of the York River where they farmed, fished, and cut timber.
Population of Wakeham: 1831-1861
(source: Roy 1934)
1831: 53 families; 322 souls 1861: 520 souls

The livelihood of the residents of Wakeham throughout the last century depended on all natural resources readily available in the community. Lumbering was in fact only one of many components in a mixed economy. To better illustrate this, let us turn to the first generations of Clark's who lived in Wakeham in the 1800's and early 1900's.

William Clark arrived from England in 1828 and immediately settled in Wakeham, on Lot No. 24 which he bought from Felix O'Hara. After building his home on the south side of the present-day road, William cleared his land, planted apple trees, and set up a small farm. In summer lie fished salmon and smelt which he then sold to merchants in town. Some farm produce, primarily butter and eggs, along with firewood, were-taken to town by canoe Where they were also sold and where he in turn purchased flour, sugar and tea. Because of the sloping character of his property, William cultivated his land by structuring terraces on which he grew oats and wheat. In 1844 a geologist visited the region and an oil well was started at Silver Brook, two miles from William's home. William sold firewood to the Petroleum Oil Trust Company which was owned and operated by British capitalists. The sale of wood constituted a welcome supplement to the scanty income William derived from farming and fishing. Nevertheless, William Clark was probably considered more of a farmer than a lumberman; he made full use of his land and his apple orchards were only destroyed in the 1950's when the new Wakeham highway went through to Murdochville. He died in 1862 at the age of 59, along with six of his children, as the result of diphtheria.

The British Government granted John Clark, one of William's sons, a lot situated three miles from his father's home in Wakeham and two miles back from the river's edge. John was obliged by the grant to build roads into the property where he always cherished the hope that a new community, complete with a school and church, would someday develop. John married at 24 years of age and moved temporarily to his new property with both his bride and his mother. He was somewhat dissatisfied with his lot, however, and one day decided to move to Australia to make a new life for himself. Leaving his wife behind; but the cold and ill-suited, clothing

apparently forced him to return to the Gaspe Peninsula. John thus moved back to his lot in the woods where he cleared enough land to build a one-room log house. Poverty continued to harass him, however, such that when his first child was born, she died of exposure. This prompted John to move once again to the settlement in Wakeham where his first wife had died and where lie later remarried. John eventually returned to his lot in the woods when his sons, Allan and Douglas, moved to the old property in 1902. John still clung to the idea that a community would be established there someday, but the only settlers to ever reside there were his two sons and their families.

With the third generation of Clark's, lumbering achieved greater prominence as a source of revenue for the family. For example, when he was 18 years old, Allan Clark began working in lumber camps where he cut long wood which was sold in Gaspe. At the age of 26, he married and moved to York for two years where he continued to work with wood. He later moved to the old wood lot where his father gave him a lot measuring three acres wide by 100 acres deep. With the help of his, father and brother, Allan built his house, a barn and a chicken house from his own cut timber. Allan began cutting and selling wood from his land during his first years. there. He later worked with private loggers for $20 per month, hardly enough to buy clothes for his twelve children.

In the spring, Allan went to the drive, pushing logs into the brook to float downstream to the mill in Gaspe. One fall he worked in Grand- Etang, on the north coast, building a log cabin for American sports fishermen. As his family grew up, part of Allan's income was also derived from the sale of eggs and butter. Allan further cultivated his land to the fullest since one of his daughters remembers being lost in a large field of oats. Similarly, when he late in coming home from the drive one year, his oldest daughter had already prepared the soil for planting before his arrival. In addition, Allan also worked during the summer as a guide for American sportsmen whilst hunting wild animals supplemented his family's diet during the winter months.

With the arrival of large lumber companies in the Gaspe region at around the turn of the century, the men in Wakeham, including many of the Clark's, became increasingly dependent on the lumbering industry. The Baird's Lumber Company was the first such firm to be established in the region of Gaspe Town. It was founded by Alexander Baird of Douglastown in 1889 when the latter acquired from the government fifty square miles of limits on the St. John River. Baird also built a saw mill on the bar at Douglastown. In 1900, Baird sold his mill and limits to the York Lumber Company which moved the mill to Sandy Beach Point and expanded its limits to 480 square miles oil the St. John, the York, and the Dartmouth Rivers, as well as along the St. Lawrence River coast to Grand-Etang.

In 1920, the Howard Smith Paper Mills Ltd. bought out the York Lumber Company. The Howard Smith Mills cut timber on a large scale and drove it down brooks to the rivers. From there, the1umber was floated to a boom where it was rafted to the mill in Sandy Beach to be rossed (debarked) before it was shipped by boat to their mill in Cornwall, Ontario. Although the Howard Smith Milts ceased their Gaspe operations in 1930, various small firms did, from time to time thereafter, cut timber and operated portable saw mills and shingle mills on the company limits. The Howard Smith Mills did resume part of their Gaspe operations from about 1944 to 1952, but the latter only involved the cutting of burnt wood which was shipped to Cornwall by train.

The Canadian International Paper Company, which bought out the Shepard and Morse as well as the St. Maurice (Gaspe) limits, was another large company of importance in the Gaspe region. Around 1921, the C.I.P. contracted to cut wood on the second "rang" of the St John River. All wood was cut in long lengths of 12-14-16 feet. The latter was driven down the river to the mill in Gaspe where it was sawn into two-foot lengths, rossed, and then shipped to different mills in Quebec. After 1930, the C.1 P. continued cutting long wood, but the modernization of the mill, including the addition of slash saws, made it possible to cut wood into four-foot lengths. With this new process, the wood was hauled out of the water on conveyor belts, at the other end of which three appropriately spaced slash saws cut the wood as it passed. From there, the wood went to the drum rosser where it was debarked - a procedure previously accomplished by hand machines. The wood was then stored in the yard and eventually shipped to the C I.P.'s mills elsewhere in Canada and in the United States. When the saw mill burnt down in 1939, it was not replaced such that from 1940 onwards, the company altered its operations. Firstly, all the timber was cut into four-foot lengths in the woods themselves, as it is done today. The latter was then floated down stream and loaded directly onto waiting ships to be taken to mills elsewhere for processing. Throughout its operations, the C I.P. was interested primarily in spruce, fir and cedar. The spruce and fir were manufactured into plank boards and laths whereas the cedar was transformed into shingles in the mill at L'Anse-auxCousins.

The Gaspesia Pulp and Paper Company, which purchased the limits of the C.I.P. in 1961, as well as those which remained of the Howard Smith Company, is the latest firm to have limits in the Gaspe area, including Wakeham.

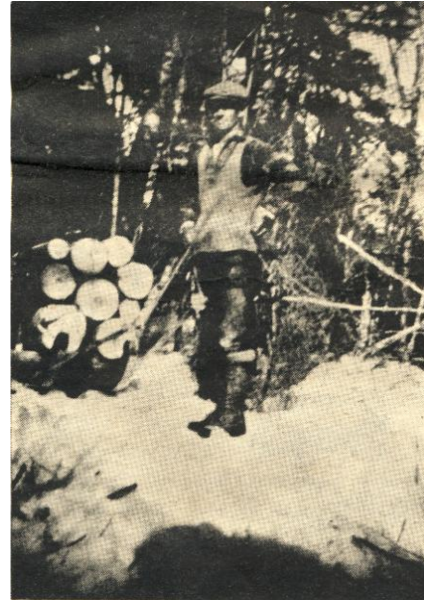
The Gaspesia Company had an office in Gaspe until 1973, when it was moved to Chandler. From 1961 to 1973, all pulp, no longer logs, was shipped out of Gaspe by rail, but since 1973, all the wood is transferred by large trailer-trucks directly from the forest or from private properties in the Gaspe region to the Chandler paper mill.

In terms of employment for the local population, the large companies that conducted operations in the Gaspe region after the turn of the century added a very important dimension in the form of "lumber camps" which employed thousands of men over the years. By the 1920's and 1930's, every camp was set up in a characteristically uniform fashion. On every site there was a bunkhouse, cookhouse, office, hovel, blacksmith shop, and warehouse. Each camp employed about 100 men, including cutters, scalers, cooks, a chore boy, and a blacksmith.

Every summer, several acres of timber were surveyed and in August-September, the camp was constructed. The roads leading to the camps were mere paths wide enough for a sleigh. A "drag", consisting of heavy timber bolted together, was harnessed to a horse to smoothen the road. Since dog and horse teams constituted the only traffic over these roads, pavement was hardly necessary.

In November, the men moved into the bush where they cut fogs until December. The working day began at 7:00 a.m. and extended to 6:00 p.m. After supper, moccasins had to be repaired and axes and saws sharpened, but there was usually some time left over for a game of cards or fiddle music and step dancing. Mr. L. Miller of Gaspe remembers a group of

Scandinavian men who arrived in 1927 and built a sauna bath which constituted their major form of entertainment after supper.



The company supplied all the food which was portaged into the bush by dog or horse teams and then stored in the warehouse. The menu consisted of barrels of salt pork, barrels of molasses, pea soup by the gallon, beans, potatoes, baked bread, pies, eggs and tea. There was no limit to what a man could eat.

The company also provided tools for the men and during their stay in the woods, their families received advance paycheques. At the end of the cutting season, each man's wood was totaled in dollars, the amount spent in tobacco subtracted, and the balance given to him. No traps, firearms, or liquor were allowed in the camp area, but come Christmas, there was "many a good party around the bay."

After Christmas, the men returned to the bush and the big haul began. Teamsters could be heard throughout the forest as they yelled orders to their horses. The wood had to be piled along the edges of brooks and rivers before the ice melted. Some private lumberers who cut wood on their own lots also had to haul their logs to the river's edge. About April, the ice usually began to melt and the big drive began. Dozens of men would be seen with long pevee poles pushing logs into the waterways. Down it came in swollen brooks and streams into the York River, pass the community of Wakeham, into a waiting boom.

The holding boom extended from the present York Bridge (six miles west of Gaspe) to six miles downstream fronting the property of the late John Laws (the location of the hospital today). This boom was constructed on the ice in March. Men and horses worked the pile driver from sunup to sunset. The horses pulled cables which tripped a huge block that dropped onto the piles, driving them through the ice and into the river bottom. The boom itself was made from 30-foot long sections of logs which were attached with huge chains. The piles driven to the bottom held the boom in position.

The logs coming downstream continued to fill up the boom and then motor boats towed the boom to deeper water. One end of the boom was left open while the men stood on large rafts guiding the wood, with the flow of the tide, into a smaller boom which held 200 cords of wood. A tug towed the smaller boom to the waiting pulp boats. All wood was loaded onto the boats by using a "jack ladder". A chain pulled the pulp and logs onto a conveyor belt whip men stood near the hatches sorting the wood according to companies. Each owner had his own colour and their logs were marked accordingly before leaving the forest.

That wood which never made it to the holding boom was usually carried by water onto farmland during the spring floods. When the water receded, these logs were left high and dry, ready to be reclaimed in the "big sweep". Indeed, more men, often teenage boys, were hired to pick up this wood to return it to the river.

The men who were involved in this lumber industry usually knew their work quite well. For example, when he asked if there were many accidents in the woods, Mr. Miller replied that there were a lot more in the mills. Men weren't as used to the machines as they were to the bush. These woodsmen may not have been educated in book-learning, but they knew their job well. According to Mr. Miller, hauling wood down steep terrain probably provided the greatest danger. The "sandman" was thus a very important man in the camp since teamsters and their horses depended on him to have the hills sanded. Mr. Miller remembers one incident when a load of logs skidded on the ice, pushing the team of horses to their death over a bank.

The last half of the 1920's were the Golden Days of the 20th century. The stock market was booming, the lumber industry in Gaspe was at its highest peak, and employment was at an all time high.

During the depression years when the economy of the country dropped, Gaspe's was no exception. During this difficult period, many Wakeham men cut wood on their own properties and were paid $1.00 a cord. They were given an extra 25¢ a cord if they hauled it to the river side. In the spring, an extra 50¢ a cord was paid to throw it into the water. Just before Christmas in 1933, funds were granted to the Municipality of York for relief work. The council used money to cut out the base line of Wakeham Township better known then as the "starvation road". The line was about ten miles long and had four separate gangs to do the work. Each group had a foreman and a timekeeper. All the unemployed came in for a share. Each man received 25 days work with an average pay of $1.00 per day. The line was cut out 30 feet in width, the wood salvaged, and the brush burnt.

In addition to these direct and indirect forms of employment in the lumber industry, it is important to remember that the men in Wakeham used some of the wood for their own purposes and more importantly, that most of the families in the region had other sources of revenue. For example, all houses built during the 19th and early 20th centuries were constructed with timber from private lots. Many farmers were able to prepare their lumber by hand in their own homes. Local wood that was donated by private citizens was also used in 1900 to build the first covered bridge across the York River. In 1931, a second bridge was built next to the previous one. The lumber was sawn at a family mill in Wakeham and local men, under the directions of a French foreman from Quebec City, constructed this second covered bridge.

The economy of Wakeham throughout this period can only be described as mixed. A dozen or so men trapped during the winter. Several had salmon stands on the channels in the bay many winter woodcutters were guides or fire wardens during the summer, while women and children sold blueberries to a blueberry factory in Gaspe. Birch bark sales were likewise popular and then of course farm products were an essential part of every family income. Indeed, every family had animals, poultry, and gardens. Eggs, butter, potatoes, and mutton were the more common farm products sold. (See examples from William Annet's Diary).

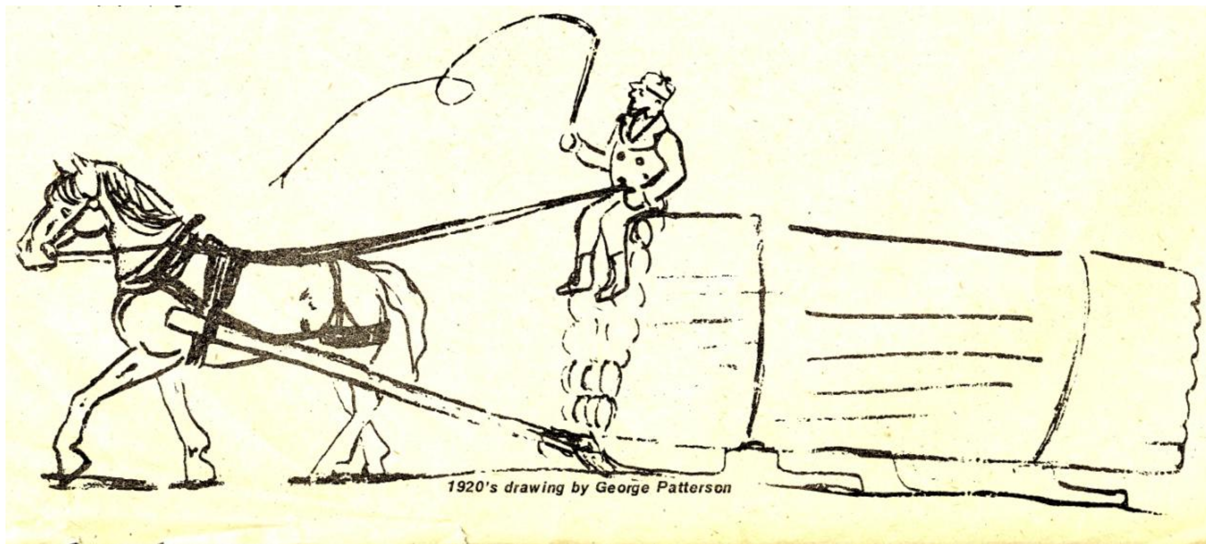
May 16, 1902	8 doz. eggs at 15¢	$1.20
June 20, 1902	12 lbs. butter at 20¢	$2.40
October	4 partridges at 20	$0.80

The wood industry has supported many a family in Wakeham over the past two centuries and it continues to supplement several incomes. Today, however, one must apply for a permit to sell wood and must only sell to a specified buyer. One is only allowed 1/3 of a cord per acre and only given one permit per year - very unlike the days of old when one could sell as much as one could cut in a year.

Lumbering and pulp wood cutting has been going on in the Community of Wakeham and its surrounding areas for well over two hundred years. It began with the sale of logs which were cut into lumber by hand and then shipped to faraway mills. Gradually larger companies moved in and bought the limits of smaller companies. The mode of cutting, preparing and transporting wood has changed considerably over the years. The early settlers cleared their land using whip saws, pulp hooks, broad (double blade) axes, picks, shovels and hoes. In the 1920's and 1930's, the wood was debarked and cut into four-foot lengths in the mills before shipping. In the 1940's and 1950's, wood was loaded directly onto boats from the booms. Since the 1960's, power saws, trucks, timber jacks and loaders can be heard throughout the forests.

The whizzing of cross-cut saws and the clinging of axes that used to chop down trees have ceased. The highway in Wakeham is busy with large semi-trailer trucks carrying 18 or more cords of wood at a time directly to the Chandler Pulp Mill. The booms holding pulp and logs until shipment, the railroad cars being loaded at night, and the drives in the brooks in spring have all disappeared. Horses are seen grazing in the fields very unaware of how important their ancestors had been in the wood business.

Gaspesia Pulp and Paper of course does still have camps all over the area, but these are hardly as "rustic" as those of the 1920's and 1930's. Progress means change in people, ways of living and environment. If I look towards the mountain from my house, I see such a network of roads and barren land that I almost think it is a small town instead of devastation left behind by exploiters. The large companies have been taking from the area for years and have put nothing back. It makes me a little sad to think that modern machines and progress have taken away something very special about the old lumbering days in our-area. All the men to whom I spoke about the "days in the bush" always related their stories with a smile indicating fond memories.



1920's drawing by George Patterson