

Allen Robertson, interviewed by Imbert Orchard, 1968

[00:00:00] **Stanfields?**

Yes. Stanfields was a recognized underwear and it wasn't a light weight either. We wore the heavyweight winter and summer if we wore it at all.

**How often did you wash?** Well, I should say I aimed to wash once a week. We used to get Sundays off. We worked 10 hours a day, six days a week, and Sunday was a recognized wash day. But during the first war, that picture changed quite rapidly. The camps began to supply bedding and in some cases provide laundry facilities, even if they didn't do the laundry. The men would do their [00:01:00] own washing, but they would be provided with hot waters.

**What caused the change?** I think largely a higher standard of living in the country. The fact that other industries, city industries, were competing with the labor force and the operators in the logging camps had to better their conditions or they couldn't attract the class of men they required.

**I guess there was a change in the type of men too. A lot of them came up from Quebec or Maine or somewhere like that and came out and they were very tough. And then it seems like all kinds of types gradually worked in.**

That's quite right. And another factor that came in was the thing that these men began to get their [00:02:00] families closer to the camps around 1912, and from then on, many of the camps began to provide houses or allow the men to erect houses and bring their families in. It was still an isolated hard way of living, but it meant that the men in camp changed their way of living to some extent. Quite a percentage of the men stopped the heavy drinking and throwing their money away, working hard 10 months a year and blowing it in a week or two.

**Was there any, was it unionized by that time?**

No, there were no unions in the woods until near the end of the first war. Actually not until the twenties did the unions have any effect, I would think.

**[Skip in tape?]**

No, I don't think nationality in my mind entered into it too strongly. Occasionally, I went into a camp, I've even gone into a bunkhouse where there were [00:03:00] 20 or 30 men sleeping in double tiered bunks and 90% of the men were speaking all Swedish. Or Norwegian, but that happened very seldom in my experience, although in the earlier days, I think it was more common. English was spoken and understood quite generally with the men that I started to work with from 1913 on. And even before that, English was certainly spoken generally.

The men themselves, of course, if a man was married, it made a difference. But a lot of the men were single men and they lived hard and played hard. Most of them were in good physical condition, I would say, because if they weren't, they weren't able to [00:04:00] cut the mustard and they didn't go out in the camps or didn't stay if they did go out. There were cases in my experience where some of the short log loggers came to work in this country from Quebec, principally, as I knew them, and they were accustomed to much more primitive conditions than we were. I remember two instances where the foreman due to the complaints of the men in the bunkhouse finally told this man or another case, two of them are concerned, to go to town, and he said, before you go out again, get the lice off you and clean up. That is what we had complained about to him. The funny part of it was that both these men came back to the camp two weeks later of their own accord and wanted to go back to work again. [00:05:00] And he said, what in the hell are you doing back here? I thought I

fired you two weeks ago. Well, they said, we went to town, we had a bath and we cleaned up and we got rid of all the lice.

We're ready now. They stayed about two weeks and we were in the same condition again. So that time they went and stayed out.

**I understand that the wet weather is drying up the underwear and shirts and things like, was pretty smelly.**

yes. Originally, of course, that was simply done as best you could in the room that you slept in. **What was that?** The drying of the clothes, and it meant for pretty congested atmosphere at times. The clothing was just hung above the big wood heater in the center of the room. Later, the camps developed, drying rooms, change rooms, [00:06:00] and a different type of living came into the camps, but that wouldn't really come in until during the first war, was the big change in the living condition from the original. After that, they got better and better.

**How do you remember the food as it originally was?**

The food was always reckoned higher class in the logging camps than in other industries isolated from the cities. And in many cases it was good, but there was no refrigeration. And when supplies, which had to come from Vancouver on steam ships which had no refrigeration, meat particularly was a real hazard. The meat that was served was often by the day's standards, totally unfit for [00:07:00] consumption, but it was not the fault of the boss logger. He was a hundred miles from the nearest center. It took two or three days for the boat to arrive there, and all it could do was to hang in a windy place on the ship. And then he had to try and keep it in camp without refrigeration. And the boat only calling once in a week, it meant in summertime, in particular, a very difficult proposition in keeping fresh fruit. Even eggs and things of that sort didn't shape to serve, but they did the best they could and they gave you a wide variety and all the quantity that you wanted.

**Sometimes things were a little stale as well.**

Yes, there was plenty of complaints about the food. That was a very common trouble in the camps. Long before the unions came into the picture, deputations [00:08:00] went to the foreman, superintendent, whoever was in charge, saying, you've got to change this, or we want you to change that, but there wasn't much sympathy given to it. Usually a man who complained was looked on as a troublemaker and he was given his time and that was it.

**As you were saying, until conditions came where they could get better jobs elsewhere. Yes. First of course they just went to jobs.** No, that's right. You wanted to live in this country. You had to live under the conditions that existed.

**These men, did they mostly wear beards or were they clean shaven?**

Beards were fairly common, but I think most of the men were clean shaven. **At least they shower and shave once a week.** Well, that might be closer to the truth though, right? Once or twice a week shaving.

**Tell me about the relationship to the [00:09:00] Union Steamships and so on. They I gather they used to be sort of special ships when the loggers would go up and down to town. That would be sometimes more specifically weekends or something. I don't know when things were changing. That was quite something traveling on the ships in those days.**

Well, I don't know about it, I have no memory of special logger ships. The only service that was in the country was the Union Steamships on this part of the coast. The CPR covered part of the coast as well. **Which part? The upper parts is it?** Yes, but more of the Vancouver Island side. The Union Steamship stayed more or less along the mainland. Oh, as far as Queen Charlotte Sound and north of that, although up until the twenties, not much logging was done north of Vancouver Island and the

Union served most of the logging camps from Campbell River North. I would think [00:10:00] the CPR boats were running to the northern part or to Alaska more, not handling the local trade. But many of those boats handled almost nothing but logging trade, and it was quite common to go aboard a ship like the Cassiar or the Comox or Cheslakee or Cowichan, and maybe there'd be a woman aboard, or maybe there wouldn't be any. In summertime, of course, there'd be some of the families traveling, so there'd be some women on board. But up until 1915, 1918, most of the loggers never expected to get a state room. They expected to spread their blankets in the gangways.

**Did it make any difference to their behavior having a woman aboard?**

Yes, I would say very definitely. The idea of behaving yourself when a woman [00:11:00] was around, was fully accepted in the camps that I saw.

**When a woman wasn't around, what was it like?**

Well, tough language and spitting on the floor and lying around half naked according to conditions were quite common.

**The language used, was it anything more colorful than what we have today or..**

Yes, I think so because men that worked at one trade all the time, and many of them for a number of years in the same district, developed terms that were not used in other industries. And unless they were moving among their own people in the city were hardly understood.

Even some of the occupations when you hired out, you hired out as a wood buckler or a [00:12:00] splitter or fireman, or perhaps a chaser or faller or buckler, sniper, knotter; might be a pigman or, or a lot of terms like that, that were used in that logging industry only and meant little or nothing outside of it. And of course, the terms as to how you handle the log and how a log fell or how it went into the water and things like that. They all developed distinctive terms.

**What sort of things would those be?**

Well, I find it hard now. I'd have to go back and think quite a bit before I could mention terms.

**Would they use these terms sometimes to mean not the logging, but to do with something in [00:13:00] ordinary life? Yes. That would be so. Can you give any instances of that sort of thing?**

No. I'd have to do some thinking about that. Now, I've come out of the logging circle where those terms were not used, and I haven't used them for so many years that it's only occasionally one comes to mind that I use.

**Yes, you and your brother should get a conversation going here.**

That would recall it, yes. When you get a couple or three loggers together, those terms soon develop. You talk about haywire conditions and bale wire logging outfits, and... **Is haywire a logging term then?** Very much so because in the horse camp days haywire that used to fasten the bales of hay together, were used for everything conceivable around the camp. And if [00:14:00] as the camps got older, the haywire began to fall apart. Well that meant something that was being doctored and fixed up and fastened together any way to keep it going. That was haywire. **Things were going haywire.** Well that applied as you mentioned, to conditions as well as to the actual materials. Conditions that would be known as haywire.

**This is very interesting. Here's something that we all, we use commonly and who would know that this came right out of logging and you know, you don't question these things that the term was, grew up from, somewhere. Anything else like that, that came out of logging? Anything to do with conditions.**

Yeah, I need some prodding now to get those terms. **With axes or cutting or...** Well axes, for instance, we had axes of different shapes. We [00:15:00] used all double bitted axes in those days on this coast. And an ax was formed for a particular job. It was built for swamping, which was a blade

about three inches wide, perhaps a sniping ax would have a much wider blade. A falling ax would be a very narrow blade. And the same thing on the manpower saws. Falling saws, different construction, different lengths. Very limber saw compared to a bucking saw. Because a falling saw was always used with a man on each end, where your bucking saw normally was only used by one man. It had to be stiff enough to run by one man without buckling.

### **What is swamping?**

Swamping was the [00:16:00] term used in the horse days for clearing enough brush so that a horse could get back and forth through the brush. Later when steam logging came in, swamping disappeared because the engines had power enough to pull a log through any brush pile. It didn't require a man to go ahead with his, an ax or an ax and a saw, and cut things out, a path that the horse could pull the log through. The sniping, as I've said, was a way of sharpening the end of the log, so it would ride up onto the skids and wouldn't dig into the ground, and knotting was done by hand then. There were times, long periods during the steam logging days when we did very little knotting unless the limbs hung on the logs and went into the water. [00:17:00]

### **What is knotting?**

Well, that was cutting the knots off so that the logs would slide easily on the skid roads. The first time I went knotting when I was about 14 years old, they put me knotting one day on the yarding crew and we were working in big spruce that has very hard knots and the timber we were working in, there were quite a number on it. Now I didn't know much about how to cut a knot. The result was at the end of the day, I came in with one blade, all the edge gone, just snapped right off from hitting knots square instead of coming down on them at an angle and the other blade nearly as bad. And I showed it to the foreman and he said, you won't be knotting tomorrow.

### **Funny if nobody explained that to you before you got...**

Well, I [00:18:00] was sort of country raised and I guess they figured I had knowledge enough to get along or perhaps they were just trying me out.

### **Tell me, what was it like when you first went to camp? What did you do? What were your impressions, when you remember that?**

Well, I was not city raised, so as I say, at 13, I didn't start in as an apprentice in any way. I started 10 hours a day at a man's wages and was expected to do a man's work, and I was able to do it. The first job I had in the woods was bucking wood for a donkey. Later, by the time I was 16, I had done almost any job in the camp with the exception of cooking. I'd even run donkey, spare hours when the engineer found something else to do. But I had felled timber, bucked timber, worked on the rigging. I could splice cable. [00:19:00] I figured I was a pretty catty boom man.

### **What do you mean by catty?**

Well, I could stay on top of the logs without spending part of the time in the water. **Was that a logging term?** Yes. Yes, it was used as a term to mean agility, the ability to stay on top of the logs, or if you did fall in to come out with your ax in your hand or with the saw, instead of leaving it on the bottom. **Catty was sort of nimble.** That's what it meant exactly, to be able to take care of yourself without getting wet. **Applied specifically to the boom, then.** Oh, it meant the same thing in the woods. If they spoke of a man being catty, it meant he was agile and able to jump and get out of danger and get into places easily that some men found difficult.

**That's interesting, that's sounds**[00:20:00] **completely different from today if you call someone catty.**

**[Voice #3? Almost inaudible discussion of the word "punk" - Today apply to somebody who doesn't really seem to amount to much, isn't very important in in the world, you know, in society. Did whistle punk have any connection with this?]**

No, I think it came the other way. I think the punk was an imported word there. It often meant a man who was able to do only one small thing. I don't remember the word punk being used, except that it was a Chinook word, meaning of little value. And that might have come in that way. [inaudible]That's my understanding of it.

**That could [00:21:00] very well be. I, I don't, I don't. I I, I'm gonna look that up cause this is very interesting. And then the whistle punk, just as you talk about the salt chuck, it's a common name. Those days they called it the salt chuck, didn't they?**

Yes. Well the common word was simply chuck here, you're going out on the chuck, or the chuck is coming in or something of this sort. You didn't even bother with the phrase salt.

**Any other Chinook words used in logging?**

Yes, I think there were quite a number. As a boy, I spoke Chinook enough to understand, to carry on a conversation. Words like skookum, for instance, is a Chinook word, meaning strong or heavy. Tinas, which is one of the early words we used for the small cable that people dragged out the heavier cables with [00:22:00] was another Chinook word, meaning small. We called it the tinas or tinas line. And oh, I guess there were quite a number of words, but again I'd have to sit down and revive my memory.

**You better do that, so I'm glad I'm gonna have another session. This is very interesting. And some of the other, you know, here your uncle of [inaudible]as a lad, you know the, the, the kind of You obviously, as you say, brought up close to it. You took to it quite easily. You did, you took a lot for granted, which somebody coming in from the outside... For instance, did they have, did they use young people, boys, and so on very much in the woods in those days and in certain jobs, and did they come from the cities where they sort of out of fish, out of water and what this sort of way?**

No, I don't remember boys being used in the [00:23:00] camps unless they were capable of doing a man's work. But I came to this island at seven years of age and my father was crippled for several years through rheumatic fever. So that as the oldest child in the family, I was expected to do a good deal of the man's work, and by the time I was through the fourth reader, the opportunity to go to high school was not present because it meant going to Vancouver.

But by that time, due to farm work and seeing loggers working in nearby places, I was able to handle, saw, and ax and hammer and wedge, and understood a good deal of the rigging without any special lessons. When I went to the camp and said, I want a job, he said, can you buck wood or [00:24:00] can you fall timber, or such like, and I said, yes or no, and that was it. He expected me to do a man's work, and if I couldn't do it, were, you would get a can tied on you and you tried somewhere else.

**What, you got what tied on you?**

Well, it was one term they used. When they said tie a can on simply meant the man was canned, he was fired. I don't know where that term would come from but the firing conditions, the hiring and firing then was in the hands of the foreman of the camp to a much greater extent than it is these days. And there were times when that developed into quite serious phase. I saw on one occasion in a camp of 350 men, [00:25:00] and this was in the twenties, in the early twenties when the foreman stood outside the cookhouse at breakfast and fired every fourth man as he came out of the cookhouse, he simply said to him, you are fired. 1, 2, 3, 4, you are fired. And that was it. We found out later through the grapevine that the employment office in Vancouver was paying that superintendent a dollar for every man he hired. Well, that was just an example of some of the conditions that went on in those days. **So he'd rehire and get a dollar.** That's right.

**What were the wages?**

Wages when I started for a good ordinary logger were \$3 for 10 hours work. [00:26:00] \$3 a day for 10 hours work and you paid a dollar a day for your meal, for your meals, and what accommodation there was in the bunk house. So it was \$6 a week for board and lodging, \$3 a day for a 10 hour day, and that was a fair wage. A good hook tender would get three and a half or perhaps \$4, but three and a half more common. The rigging slinger might get \$3 and 20 cents. Fallers all worked piece work in those days, and they would get about three and a half a day for a head faller, maybe 3.25 per second. Rigging men, hook tender, as I said, about three and a half perhaps. Ordinary choker men, \$3 a day. Railroad men, steel men, building the grade, were getting two and a half, 2.75 [00:27:00] a day.

But a pair of boots in those days, one of the finest boots you could buy, like Johnson's, spring heel, as we call them, cost about \$7. Where today, of course, a man's wages and the camps are running \$25 to \$40 a day, a pair of boots cost you \$40.

**Yeah. So what was the rigger when the rigging, what, what was the fellow that climbed the trees?**

Well, the high rigging started when they first began high lead work, which was the next phase after ground lead. Ground lead, the logs were dragged on the ground all the way to the water or wherever they were being taken, even to the railroad, cuz they were using [00:28:00] railroads for transporting long distances before they started high.

But during the first war and previous to the first war in the western United States, they started rigging spar trees and using the high lead system, using skylines and various types of overhead cable. Well, that was when the first high rigger came in. It was his job to place the rigging on these tall standing trees.

He would take the limbs off and take the top off first. Then he would climb and have the cable sent up to him, and it was his job to fasten them on the tree in the proper places, hang the blocks and thread the lines. **That was quite sticky.** Yes, it was highly dangerous work to begin with until it became more or less standardized and special equipment was built.[00:29:00]

Yes, men went up in the first case just with the ordinary rope. Later, after one or two men had cut the rope accidentally, they put steel cores in their ropes. They improved the tools that the men worked with and made a safer job out of it. But unions were starting to come into the picture at that time. So safety regulations were something that people began to think about. In the early days if a man didn't take a chance, he was regarded as being a slow poor worker for doing things that today, if a man did them in the woods....[00:30:00]

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