

LIFE OF THE LABOURER

It is true when we say that life passes like a drum roll. Little by little, everything fades into the past or sinks into oblivion. The profession of labourer is also tending to disappear as the industry evolves. However, twenty-five years ago, after we exclude the professionals, the merchants and the farmers, most men were labourers. Many of these labourers excelled at their work and became bona fide experts in their field. That is why it makes sense to speak of their means of earning a living as a "profession."

Evidently, this type of work would no longer be an example to suggest to youth today because it would mean a return to the past - something just not done. If I now speak of labourers at the end of my book, I mean it more as homage to those who lived the hard life of labourer from youth to old age, when it was their only choice. When we were young, we dreamt a bit in colour but as we got older, we felt the reality of the strenuous work in all its harshness.

Plainly, the life of a labourer, as described here, will be that of a man who will have accomplished his work to the best of his ability, as well as honestly, and faithfully. It will be of one who accepted his fate without bitterness, trusting in divine providence, but doing his part to improve his future- his destiny.

We must say, however, the lack of education and readiness for this life would always remain a handicap and an impediment for advancement. Opportunities for improvement or retraining by means of correspondence or night school courses were practically unknown. Even when they were given, our shift work and, for others, a lack of education even of primary schooling, made it impossible for us to take them.

As mentioned at the beginning of these notes, these labourers came from neighbouring villages or from the city itself and had known rugged work from the age of 12 or 14. From the age of 15, my father went to work in lumber camps in the woods. There were many like him.

Learning to work at a young age was a kind of dream for these courageous teens. These young people came from big families and so, after a few years of primary schooling if they got the chance, their learning continued on the farm, in the mills, in the fields or on river log drives. Since the majority had great courage, they became skilled workers- experts in using an axe, a plane, a saw, and a "pivy". On the farm, they learned the work of a farmer by following their father behind a plough, pulled by horses or oxen.

People had contempt for a young man who still attended school, but whom they considered of "working age". They claimed he would never learn to "work", a testament to the importance attached to manual labour. The older people believed that all young people, boys and girls included, should savour this work considered by many as an art. White-collar professionals were exempt but there was no excuse for all others not to have learned to work. The ambition was to be the most able of a team in any type of work. When rumour had it that such and such a person was the best worker, sawyer, or log driver, it was a realization of a dream and a reward in itself.

At the end of the day, the labourer spoke a lot about his work. In past years at the mill here, we all saw labourers, whose responsibility was to unload the wagons, become determined to unload the most wagons in the least amount of time and possibly establish new records.

That determinant was the same for the loggers using their saws and the pulp woodcutters using their bucksaws. Even if these men were being paid for the job and not always at piece rate, they needed little supervision from the foremen who also pushed to do his own work, a source of great pride for him. What they said of a man also applied to his team. In the Wood Room as in the Barker, the honour went to those who handled the most cords of wood in a shift or (in the Wood Room) those who filled the most Digesters. As a log counter of pulpwood and later as a foreman, I know what I am talking about. The same standards existed in the woods. When I was 18, I was in charge of a timber yard for the Davies Company in Green River at Laurent Montreuil's camp. At this job, we had to keep count of the logs cut during the day by each crew. There were generally six or seven teams per camp. At night, the foreman, known as the boss, went to each camp to ask the yard registrar the number of logs cut during the day. The teams, which had cut 100 or 125 logs during the day, were proud to say it but the ones who had cut only 75 were not as vocal. The tally for the number of logs cut was posted on the door of the lumber camp. I do not believe I err in saying that the work done by one man at that time required two men in 1970. This was not because men lacked the physical ability but because ambition, courage, and love of work were more pronounced in earlier times. In addition, since salary by the job was the norm then, it was practical to rush to do the work; the faster you worked the more you earned.

In general, with a few exceptions, and for the most part, the pioneers of the Wood Room and of Fraser were these men. At the opening of the mill in 1918, they entered the department around the age of 25 to 35, in the prime of life, and remained there until retirement. Others started between 1920 and 1928. The Crash of 1929 brought about lay-offs. The men who lost their jobs went to work in agricultural settlements and never returned. Few new employees were hired between 1929 and 1939 as present seniority lists reveal. However, between 1939 and 1945, many newcomers were hired.

It was not the practice to go systematically with a new employee as practiced now-where the employee starts with the simplest and easiest tasks. If a man seemed robust, he started immediately on the big jobs. It was not the practice either to change jobs. Once you became a "Chipper man", you kept that job for life. The same practice applied to the "Rossers", the "Pond" and the Splitter and so on. Rotation of jobs was only introduced after the Second World War

This practice of specialization became inconvenient but in 1940, it explains why the "Rosserman" knew little about the "Chipper" or the "Splitter". It was after the arrival of the superintendents that the practice changed. It was necessary and advantageous to do so when holidays and "days off" became the norm. Men needed replacements. This forced the foremen to familiarize his men with the other jobs in his department. Sometimes this resulted in a reduction in production for a while.

We remember the great dexterity needed by the "Chipper man" when he fed the pulp logs into the "chippers" with four knives. At that time, a "Chipper man" would have been insulted if he had been sent to work on the debarker as a "Rosser";

those men did have their pride-it was their profession. At least it was legitimate and rightly theirs. They only asked to do the work as long as their strength and health allowed them to do so. These were the terms and limits for the labourer.

For a while and especially during the Crash of 1929, the fear of losing his job was the labourer's biggest worry. In contrast, he seemed happiest when he could assure his future and that of his family. People at that time were not very demanding. A great many of these men were married when they began work in the "Wood Room" and many bachelors married shortly after. It was customary for them to build their own houses. They hired a carpenter to cut the wood for the roof and the framing but did the rest of the building themselves. Thus, they learned the trades of woodworking and carpentry by asking advice from the older men as the construction progressed; he had to be resourceful. Children were born "thick as flies" because the religious consciousness to "carry out their marital duty" still prevailed. The parish priest preached the message from the pulpit and the couples understood their duty.

If a labourer had the required ability to lead a team of men and if an opportunity presented itself, the bosses made him foreman. The position demanded that he be physically fit-more so than the average man, to assure that he would get the respect of the braggarts on his team. It had been so in the memory of men as long as we remember it.

Following the 1930's and especially in the 1940's, the foreman was now required to have a certain education. It was then that the practice of choosing the strongest man stopped. Therefore choosing the one who had the best leadership abilities as well as a good, general knowledge of the responsibilities became the practice. In addition, the human relations component began to gain importance but most foremen did not have this training. Many employer-employee conflicts could have been averted if the foreman as intermediary, had really known his responsibilities. The era of the "boss-bully" was past and the companies would have profited from spending a few hundred dollars training the ones who would be in charge of employees. Believe me, we know something about this. It is true that there were efforts made by the company in this sense, but most were too piecemeal and of little consequence.

The life of the labourer with its routine and monotony as well as its worries and difficulties, came to sap the courage and the strength of the susceptible. Nonetheless, we saw men work 30 or 40 years at the same job. Accustomed to working in the shadows, they did not seek glory other than that of accomplishing their work in excellent manner. Sometimes the fatigue would make them nervous but having known them from childhood, we did not make note of the difference; we easily forgot it.

Many men were active in their social lives. Others, keen and entrepreneurial, supplemented their income with other work. Working for extra revenue, a practice we still have today, had as an objective to bring some comfort to the family or to obtain a better education for their children so they would not have to work as hard to earn their living. In addition, the contribution they brought in their social and religious service was a kind of leisure for them and prevented them from wasting away from the monotony of their meagre living.

We often speak of the spirit of pride and independence of the Madawaska workers of that time. This is true and here is the reason. Hereabouts, especially at the mill but also in the area, lived men who were a mixture of Acadian, French-Canadian, American, English and Irish descent. The "spirit of giving" was practically non-existent despite the pressure felt by certain persons from time to time. No one spoke of separatism, an idea that we found backwards and a little ridiculous. This is why the people from the Madawaska region are called "Republicans". We learned to defend ourselves without help, to manage without help and somehow to make it work. In 1914 and in 1939, during the two World Wars, the Madawaska men did not need to be begged to enlist. This part of the country and we did not need Conscription to be passed. The youth of the "Little Republic," English as well as French, did their substantial part. Monuments of our fallen soldiers, whether in Europe or in our own cemeteries, are eloquent testimonials of what I am affirming here and no one would dare contradict me. Because of this, we have our own pride and moral independence.

As time went by, the workers got older and gave sign of fatigue at their work, despite the means they took to conserve their energy. More and more with the passing years, the authorities took care of the workers who had no education, who were past 60 and gave them easier work. There they could enjoy a few years more of less strenuous effort before their retirement at 65. Unfortunately, with automation and the elimination of jobs, there were fewer labourers and work with lighter duties became more and more rare.

In the years to come, the problem would be less noticeable because a youth hired during the last fifteen years would be able to specialize; then in his senior years or before, he would be able to accept the promotions that would come his way since he had had the training to handle the most important tasks of his environment. In addition, perhaps before long, the age of retirement will be lowered, which I believe will be a good thing. At least the lack of education will no longer be an obstacle to advancement as was the case in the past. In the future, more will depend on his personal initiative.

Having become more and more complicated and automatic, the system of operation in big industry now requires only workers who have the necessary training. A quarter of a century ago, it was excusable for labourers to be without education but today with all the opportunities youth have to learn a trade or profession, the excuse no longer holds.

To end this subject, this history that is ours, I have wanted to leave a small souvenir of this place where I spent a large part of my life. I leave to the present generation the responsibility of thinking what they want of us but we have clear conscience of having done what we needed to do with the means available and a consideration of the circumstances in which we were. It is others before us and we, who have prepared the easier life, which you are lucky to have today. We did it without bitterness or regret, believe me! Continue the task which was started; we have confidence in you!