

THE LUMBER CAMP AT BLIND RIVER

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(see images after text)

The lumber camp was a mysterious place in early-twentieth century Canada, an isolated labour environment where unremembered and uncelebrated men felled timber then shipped from the forests to Britain. Only in sporadic moments of rest and the click of a lens were these camp workers memorialized by photographers, who plied their trade across places such as the woodlands of western Ontario, north of Lake Huron. *The Lumber Camp at Blind River* indexes the lumber camp worker and his environment. This image by an unknown photographer depicts the “shanty boys” between work and rest, artificially posed and looking away. Shanty, likely derived from the French *chantier* or “camp,” was the upper-Michigan and western Ontario epithet of lumberjacks in the early twentieth century.¹ Both evidence of the desire of the common man to be dignified by portraiture and the cultural program of photography, the photograph that depicts them illustrates the need of the dominant culture to know its ephemeral constituents, and the need for these constituents to be known themselves.

Photographs from the Blind River logging boom were common enough. Ontario lumbering surged early in the 19th century when the Napoleonic Wars blocked access to traditional British sources of timber in the Baltics.² From 1845 the upper Ottawa River watershed was the source of upwards of 12 million cubic square feet of timber.³ Trees felled and squared in lumber camps throughout the province were floated down rivers, assembled into large rafts and shipped from Montreal for export to Europe.⁴ A peak in this period of rapid industrialization throughout Ontario coincided with the 1896 election of Canada's first Liberal government under Wilfred Laurier and the introduction of an open immigration policy.⁵ Within five years, provincial demographics underwent a major revolution: the immigrant

population of Ontario had reached 46 per cent, the vast majority of them Eastern Europeans drawn to steady, if seasonal, work in forestry and agriculture.⁶ A time of prosperity encouraged a culture of documentation; in the vicinity of Blind River and its outlying forests, a handful of photographs emerged of camp workers paused in their routines to pose together before the environment in which they lived and worked.

Two of these photographers have been identified. Several camp images are attributable to Henry Peters (dates unknown) who sometimes signed works such as *The Eddy Bros. Camp* and consistently inscribed descriptions on the photographs themselves. The photographs by the Timmins area photographer generally bear a set of uniform elements: a single-point perspective view of the camp members and their animals standing informally before the camera, the men often laughing and smiling, with the camp cabins stationed between the men and the forest beyond. The compositional uniformity of his works makes Peters an unlikely source of *The Lumber Camp at Blind River*. Additionally, Peters capably photographed the animals without blurring as well as Timmins-area mining detonations, demonstrating a technical proficiency not present in the unsigned photograph (observe the blurred head of a dog in the lower left of *Blind River*).⁷ Likely for the same reasons, this photograph seats its subjects while Peters's all stand, a clear indication of *Blind River's* longer exposure time.

The second photographer of lumber camps in this region is known only by the name Julius Boettger (dates unknown) inscribed on the reverse of *Photograph of Workers at a Bush Camp, circa 1915*.⁸ The use of dark sepia toning, the seated workers, and the position of the cook in white at the forefront are among the significant similarities between this image and the *Blind River* photograph. Additionally the photograph is clearly overexposed.

The cook is featured prominently in *The Lumber Camp at Blind River*. The job of the cook was vital to

lumber camp operations. The cooks often worked from 4:00 am to ensure the feeding of the shanty boys, calling them out from the forests on his home-made Gabriel horn, which symbolized the cook's presence in the camp.⁹ The life of German-American camp cook Bill Spiessmann is recounted in a personal history, detailing his marriage to Floss Dunbar in 1910 and her ensuing work with him in the Blind River lumber camp operated by the Cook Brothers. In reality, only two mills, The Eddy Bros and the White Pine mill were operating in Blind River until 1911. The Cook Camp that employed Bill Spiessmann was based 24 km east at Spragge, then called Cook's Mills.¹⁰ It is almost certainly Bill Spiessmann in this image of the *Cook Camp* reproduced in an unsourced newspaper clipping, in a photograph that is stylistically the work of Peters and also contains his signature inscription. It was shortly after 1910 that shelters were upgraded from the log cabins evident in the photograph, cabins compositionally similar to those in *Blind River*.

Furthermore, there is an apparent correlation between the appearances of the cooks in the *Cook Camp*, *Blind River* and *Photograph of Workers at a Bush Camp*, each one of them sporting a dark moustache, and two of three wearing a tie. And in another feature seldom seen, a woman appears in two of the three photographs that contain three cook staff, which is a unique element in itself. Is she Floss Dunbar who for a brief period after they married helped her husband with the cooking?

The Lumber Camp at Blind River is likely an image of the Cook Mill's camp circa 1910 by the hand of Julius Boettger. Yet the evidence does not settle matters and directs us again to the fundamental question of what a photograph is, and why, when it exists outside of knowledge, we seek to force it in. Susan Sontag, in *On Photography* (1977), wrote that photographs are “the most mysterious of all objects that make up, and thicken, the environment we recognize as modern.”¹¹ According to Sontag, photographs belong distinctly to an acquisitive consciousness in which the creation and distribution of photographs, a process which documents the widest range of experiences and subjects and the

transformation of all images into potential photographs, sustains an illusion of knowledge augmentation.¹² Photographs, a “narrowly selective transparency,” purport to engage innocently and naively with the world, yet this passivity is the source of what she calls photography's aggression: the subtle imposition of frames of power-knowledge.¹³

In observing *Blind River*, we look both upon a lumber camp and upon an index of immigrants and labourers; located by the photograph in their rustic environs far from the cultured cities; found, but not dignified by place or even name. The anonymous faces stand as a testament to the erasure of time, even for those whose role in the maintenance of a new nation was pivotal. This mysterious image, detached from a coherent textual history, both mystifies and clarifies the people and environment it depicts.



The Lumber Camp at Blind River. Ca. 1910-1920.

Silver gelatin print on brown cardboard support ; 18.1 x 24.9 cm on support 30.0 x 35.0 cm.

Library and Archives Canada / R12847-3-3-E.

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3915878.



Eddy Bros Lumber Camp, Blind River.

Henry Peters. 8.5 x 11 inches.

Huron Shores Museum.

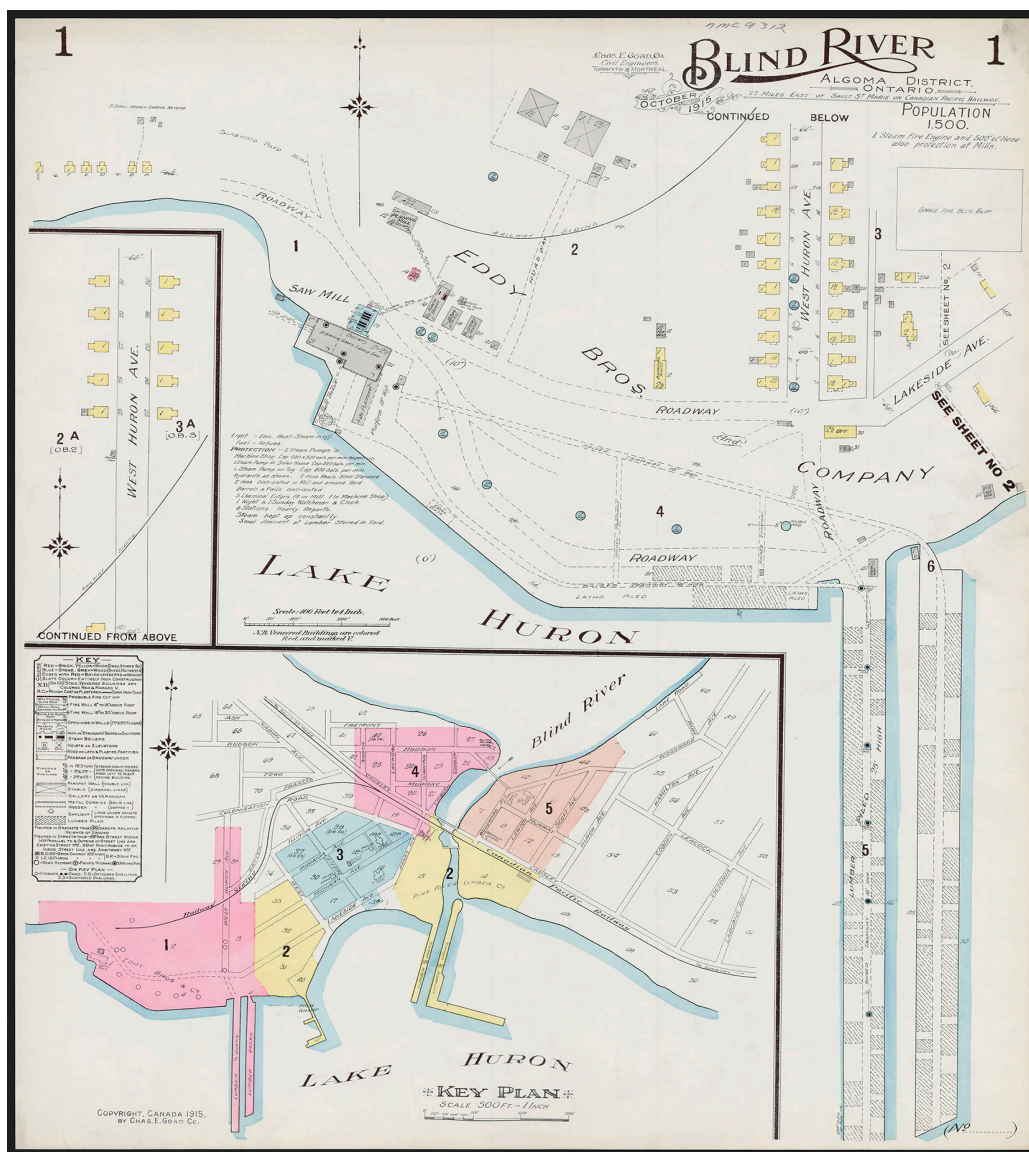
<<http://images.ourontario.ca/Northofhuron/124054/data>>.



Photograph of Workers at a Bush Camp, Circa 1915.

Julius Boettger. Whitestone Library Digital Collection

<<http://images.ourontario.ca/almaguin/76958/data?n=3>>.



Library and Archives Canada / Bibliothèque et Archives Canada
www.collectionscanada.gc.ca

Blind River, Algoma District, Ontario, 77 miles east of Sault St. Marie on Canadian Pacific Railway, October 1915

1 map on 4 sheets : col. ; 63 x 53 cm. Library and Archives Canada / R6990-213-1-E

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3810499>.

BLIND RIVER AND DISTRICT



OLD TIMERS — Camps, such as Cook Brothers Camp, shown in this picture, were scenes of bustling activity in the early part of the century around

Spragge. Here men gathered to hire on for cutting, hauling and general handyman around the many centres of wood's cutting operations.

Cook Brothers Lumber Camp, Blind River, Newspaper Clipping. Clipping circa 1960.

Huron Shores Museum. <<http://images.ourontario.ca/NorthofHuron/124058/data>>.

NOTES

- 1 Benjamin C. Mukkala, "Photo Stories: The Shanty Boys," *The Forest History Society*, 19 Dec. 2011 <<http://www.foresthistory.org>>.
- 2 "Industry in Ontario - History of Ontario - Southern Ontario Tourism," *Southern Ontario Tourism - Welcome to Southern Ontario*, 7 Dec. 2011 <http://soto.on.ca/history_of_ontario/industry_in_early_ontario.html>.
- 3 "Industry in Ontario - History of Ontario - Southern Ontario Tourism."
- 4 "Industry in Ontario - History of Ontario - Southern Ontario Tourism."
- 5 "Immigrant Workers and Canadian Society Prior to 1914: General Trends," *Multicultural Canada*, 7 Dec. 2011 <<http://multiculturalcanada.ca/Encyclopedia/A-Z/I/1/1>>.
- 6 "Immigrant Workers and Canadian Society Prior to 1914: General Trends."
- 7 Michael Barnes, *Timmins: the Porcupine Country* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1995) 57.
- 8 "Photograph of Workers at Bush Camp, circa 1915," *Our Ontario: Amalgum Highlands Digital Collection*, 7 Dec. 2011 <<http://images.ourontario.ca/almaguin/results?fsu=Lumber+industry>>.
- 9 "DNR - A Shanty Boy's Meal - Lesson Plan," *SOM - State of Michigan*, 7 Dec. 2011 <http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-54463_18670_18793-53124--,00.html>.
- 10 "Blind River History Told By Bill and Mrs. Floss Spiessman, Circa 1974," *Our Ontario: Amalgum Highlands Digital Collection*, 7 Dec. 2011 <<http://images.ourontario.ca/BlindRiver/2261388/data?n=2>>.
- 11 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) 3.
- 12 Sontag, 7.
- 13 Sontag, 9.

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Barnes, Michael. *Timmins: the Porcupine Country*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1995.

"Blind River History Told By Bill and Mrs. Floss Spiessman, Circa 1974." *Our Ontario: Amalgum Highlands Digital Collection*. 7 Dec. 2011.
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