

Lumberjacks and Logging

By Julia Pferdehirt

A Readers Theater script to accompany chapter 2 (Roll Out Or Roll Up) of the historical fiction book [*Wisconsin Forest Tales*](#).

Author Julia Pferdehirt wrote this Readers Theater script as a way to introduce chapter 2 of the [*Wisconsin Forest Tales*](#) book and give students an opportunity to read aloud with classmates. Students take turns reading at each asterisk (*) within the script.

Lumberjacks and Logging

* If you could have flown over Wisconsin in an airplane two hundred years ago, you would have seen trees, trees, and more trees. Miles and miles of giant pines. Forests of maple, birch, oak and other trees.

* At that time, America was growing. Millions of people had moved to America from other countries. Cities in the east were growing bigger every day. Small towns were becoming cities. Land that had once been wilderness became farms and towns.

* People moved west. Thousands and thousands of people came to Wisconsin. Growing towns and cities were building everything from houses to office buildings to factories to ships. What did it take for all this building? Wood! And lots of it.

* By 1840, many logging companies were operating in Wisconsin. Lumberjacks armed with axes and crosscut saws cut trees. They cut the giant white pine trees and floated them to sawmills on Wisconsin's rivers.

* In the 1850s and 60s, railroads were built. Then, at the end of the 1800s, the logging companies began to cut "hardwood" trees like oak and maple. These trees were too heavy to float on rivers, so logging companies shipped them to the sawmills by train.

* Every year, more and more timber was cut in Wisconsin until most of the forests were gone. Unfortunately, trees were cut without a plan for the future of the forests. (Today, loggers are trained professionals who care about the forests and environment. They follow plans prepared by foresters to care for the forests. These plans are made for today and the future.)

* The muscle and brains behind the logging in the 1800s were men called “lumberjacks.” They could cut a giant pine with nothing but muscle and a sharp axe and saw. They could float logs down rushing rivers using only their strong arms, quick reflexes and simple tools.

* The lumberjacks were brave, hard-working men. Lumberjacks were an important part of our history in Wisconsin.

* Here are some lumberjack stories that will make you laugh and amaze you. You’ll hear true stories of lumberjack life in the big woods of Wisconsin. You’ll hear “tall tales” told by lumberjacks at night in the bunkhouse or out in the woods eating “pot beans and sinkers.”

* When you see quotation marks you’ll know you’re reading some lumberjack’s real words. You’ll also see brackets [] with words inside. Brackets are used when the writer has added words so the original story will make sense. Sometimes you’re reading parts of a bigger story. Words added to fit the parts together are put in brackets.

Jacks, Pines and River Rats

* I'm Ceylon Lincoln. I was a lumberjack in Wisconsin.

“The work in a logging camp was very hard. The cook...commenced breakfast at 3:30 and the men started for the woods long before light.”

The lumberjacks walked into the woods and started cutting.

“Sometimes they walked as far as three miles...their dinner was taken to them steaming hot on a small, horse-drawn sled by the cookee. They had a fire built...and made the coffee [right] there.”

* “Sometimes we got in as late as six to eight in the evening. So you see, after ...supper it was almost time to get up again.”

* Everybody in the logging camp had a job. Over many years, Ceylon Lincoln did them all!

“A good camp [was] about eight men, four yokes of oxen, eight or ten horse teams. One [hauling] logs. Two teams [hauling] in supplies...and one team on the sprinkler.”

* “The work was divided up...there were choppers to fell the timber, the sawyers [to cut trees into logs], skidders [to pull logs out of the woods], loaders [to load the logs on the sleigh], swampers, and scalers...”

* “Wages were twenty to fifty dollars a month. Swampers [were paid] the lowest, scalers, cooks, blacksmiths and men that fell the timber received the highest...A logging camp depended on a good foreman and, especially, a good cook!”

* Here’s another story from a preacher’s son from Madison. He wrote about his life as a lumberjack in the Chippewa Herald newspaper back in 1882, but didn’t sign his name! He’d stayed around home long enough. He wanted adventure and fortune, so he headed north to the logging camps. Here’s his story:

* “I have one of the hardest jobs in the woods...We have to get up at about 2:30, get breakfast at three and then walk four miles to work, take a cold dinner with us and get back to the shanty...from seven to nine o’clock [at night]....

* “After supper we roll into our soft, downy couch of lousy blankets and listen to...music by the entire band...snoring in seven different languages....while the beautiful odor of wet socks and foot rags is heard in the near distance.”

* By the way, everybody, “lousy” means crawling with livestock. Hoppin’ with blue jackets. Alive with jumpin’ pepper. Or, in other words, full of lice! What do you think of that?

* I fell asleep “only to be wakened in a few minutes by the...cook singing ‘roll out...daylight in the swamp...’ ”

* Some lumberjacks worked in the logging camp in the winter and on the river drives in spring. Other lumberjacks were farmers. They worked on their farms all summer, and came to the lumber camps every winter to earn money.

* Olaf Sorenson was a farmer-lumberjack. His family came from Norway. Olaf married his sweetheart, Annie Veeder. His daughter told the story of Olaf and Annie:

“The family farmed during the summer. They cut cord wood and cleared land. They would load...wood on a bobsled and...travel atop the frozen lake to Sauk Centre. They sold a quarter cord for one dollar...a 20 mile trip which took the entire day.”

* [In winter] “Olaf worked in a logging camp...[and] at the sawmill, sawing lumber and making barrel staves.....[But, they were still so poor that one] Fourth of July picnic, the family walked to the lake. Annie made sandwiches...Olaf mixed up a gallon of lemonade...they couldn't afford the cost of sugar...and Grandma's face still puckers up at the memory of that drink, nearly 75 years later.”

* Lumberjacks liked to sing. Here is the story of a musician who toured the logging camps with his banjo.

* “I'm Emery De Noyer. Those lumberjacks waited for me to come to town with my banjo and songs. The boys loved this song called The Shantyman's Life.

* “The shantyman’s life is a worrisome one, though some call it free from care.

It’s the ringing of the ax from morning ‘til night, to the middle of the forest fair...”

* “...The sawyers and the choppers, they lay their timber low.

The swampers and the teamsters, they haul it to and fro.

Next comes the loaders before the break of day.

Load up your sleighs, five thousand feet to the river, haste away...”

* Lumberjacks didn’t just cut trees. Every person had a job. Trees had to be cut at the right time. They were cut in winter because horses and sleighs could pull big loads of logs on slippery, icy roads. They could never have pulled such loads over dirt roads!

* The logs were piled on the edge of rivers. Then, in spring, the ice melted. Tons of water filled the rivers. The current was fast and wild. Then lumberjacks pushed the logs into the river and the power of the water carried thousands and thousands of logs down river to the sawmills.

* Back in 1880, Mr. John Rivers was a lumberjack and a river rat. That means he cut trees all winter and guided the floating logs to the sawmills in spring.

* Here’s what John Rivers had to say about the lumberjack life:

“Wal, it was back in ’83 or ’84, that cold spell we had. Nothin’ be seen like it since. And it gets pretty cold...up in Wisconsin....Ya gotta buck the timber during winter so’s when the ice thaws in early spring, they’re ready to send down the river...”

* “The logs go down the river soon as the ice breaks...Course that was them days-now they skid the logs down...by rail...by team...but mostly in the north...the river’s still the best way for skidding timber ever invented.”

* John Rivers loved the lumberjack life. And, like most lumberjacks, he loved to tell wild, “tall tales” like the stories of Paul Bunyan. Here’s one of Mr. Rivers’ stories:

* “Bet you never heard of Happy Jack and his derby hat? The boys always kidded this feller Happy Jack about how he was always wearing a derby hat. Wherever he went he would have this derby stuck onto his head...wouldn’t matter if it was morning or night. Winter or summer, rain or shine, this feller Happy Jack had on his derby....

* “Well, that winter it was so cold...the thermometers...just went out of commission for 200 miles around. You step two paces away from the fire...and you paralyze with the frost!”

* “Well, we was all out of grub and starving. Somebody had to go out to the river...bore a hole in the ice and let down a line and snub some fish...The men cut cards to choose who should try it. Well, Happy Jack got the...shortest number...”

* “We rigged him up in all the coats and jackets and woolen shirts we could spare....He put on all these duds and four pairs woolen socks and his leather boots and top of them...rubber boots...He was stuffed up...as big as a horse and musta weighed pretty near as much. Yes sir!”

* “He had 6 pair mitts on, and muffled up to his ears. And on top of his ears o’course was settin’ that little old derby hat.

* “Now, we waited and waited for Jack to come back....After three days the cold let up just a little. We could tell by...the tinkle of icicles in our hair and beard had a different sound....A bunch of us decided to go out to the river and look for Happy Jack...”

* “We all ran out there to the river....one of the boys spotted a little, black object....It was Happy Jack’s hat laying there on the ice...”

* “One of the boys reached down for the derby....it [was] froze to the ice...[We started] kicking and hacking at the ice...[til we could] grab a hold of that derby....”

* “We pulled together, we lifted her up, and the ice making a screeching and cracking as it busted loose. And what was rammed onto the rim of that derby hat, but Happy Jack himself, frozen hard...”

* “We all started a-slappin’ his back and rubbing his face and pumping his arms up and down and finally he came to and cracked a smile....Then, he reaches down in his boots and drags out a string of fish 14 yards long!”

* “ ‘When I was hanging there by my hat, they come and swam into my boots,’ Happy Jack said. ‘Guess the poor critters were glad to find a place warmer than that river....’ So, course we went back to the bunkhouse and had us a right smart fish dinner.”

* Lumberjacks were strong men. They worked hard and played hard. With no tools but axes and cross cut saws, Wisconsin lumberjacks cut millions of trees. With only spike-bottomed boots and pointed poles for balance, lumberjacks rode logs down wild, whitewater rivers. They broke up huge piles of logs called logjams. They hauled piles of wood bigger than a house with only a sled and horses.

* Lumberjacks have a place in history. Their axes and saws and muscle changed the face of Wisconsin.