# ONCE MORE A-LUMBERING GO

LAWRENCE OLDER

You mighty sons of freedom
Who 'round the mountains range,
Come all you gallant lumber-boys
And listen to my song.
On the banks of the sweet Saranac,
Where its limpid waters flow,
We'll range the wild woods over
And once more a-lumbering go.

Once more a-lumbering go;
and we'll range the wild woods over
And once more a-lumbering go.

"YOU CAN take the man out of the woods, but you can't take the woods out of the man." When people say this phrase to me, they mean to be facetious, but I accept it as compliment. I was born to the breed known as "woodchoppers" who cut wood for any conceivable purpose. Unlike the lumberjack, they did not regularly leave in the spring but when there was work to do stayed to cut charcoal wood, make charcoal, cut brick-kill (kiln) wood, mine timbers, railroad ties, etc.

My family moved six times before I was nine years old. The sixth move took us to the foot of the Dug-way where it joined with the old "Sand" Road. That road received its name because sand was hauled over it up the mountain to Oscar Granger's Mountain Glass Works on Mt. Pleasant, in the Town of Greenfield, Saratoga County. That was where Saratoga glass originated, so we always referred to the area as "The Factory." Sand came from Chatfield Corners, about a mile below the Dug-way. When facing

north, we were on the left leg of a triangle; the right leg was the old plank road to Saratoga over which were transported the products of the glass factory. Close to that road, west of Porter Corners, was a graphite mine. I remember when it was in operation, as my eldest brother and many of my friends worked there. A local song about it was common when I was a boy. It was known to me only as *The Graphite Mine.*

> Stop at headquarters and look at the sign:
> "Miners' Rest Boarding House" at the Graphite Mine.
> Corned beef and cabbage, the cooks chewed it fine,
> And served it for hash at the Graphite Mine.
> And old Irish bum from Castleton Town
> Was chief engineer at the Graphite Mine.

Shortly after my ninth birthday, I was handed the business end of a crosscut saw. I did not relish this contribution and there was a brief scrimmage, and I wound up pulling the saw. It was not so harsh a chore as it may seem, and a healthy nine-year-old can be a lot of help. As soon as I buckled down to the job, I began to like it and formed an attachment for the crosscut which was equalled only by my fondness for the bark spud. With such an early start, it is not surprising that I became so "woodsy."

I do not know how to explain my preference for one job and not for another, but I liked to peel and did not like to chop. I am still a tough man to beat with a spud, but almost anyone can outchop me. I can handle an axe well enough, and learned to chop "either-handed" — holding it in either my right or left hand. It was my practice to notch a tree right-handed, change hands and cut the back notch while still standing in the same position.

The spud was one of our common tools used daily for six or eight weeks of every season. Woods children had to learn to use that equipment. And I mean *had.* No one ever asked, "Do you want to?" The spud is a sharp, small, spade-shape tool used for peeling bark when the sap is running. A man grasps it with both hands, slits a few feet of bark lengthwise, carefully making cer-

tain that he does not dig into the wood. He then removes the split section by passing the spud around the bole of the tree, between the bark and the wood. He pushes the further side away from himself from top to bottom, reverses the spud and pulls off the near side, top to bottom.

A "choppin' " was a series of strips, about 50 feet wide, side by side. One man started by walking a little distance into the woods to locate a tree that could come all the way down without hanging up. This first tree would be dropped over anything available to keep it off the ground in order to prevent the axe or saw from coming in contact with earth or stones or, in winter, to keep from being buried in the snow. Each succeeding tree was sent over onto part of the others to be in a sort of windrow and at a height which allowed the sawyers to work in a more or less upright position thus saving their backs.

After it was down, the tree was trimmed, marked for the saw and the top cut off and piled in brush piles. Tops were not saleable, and we had to get them out of our way. As we worked, we slashed away at the underbrush and then piled that along with the tops. Early in the afternoon we started cutting up. By that time we had a windrow of tree trunks criss-crossing each other. Each tree would be free of branches and then marked off at four foot intervals. We started with the last one we fell. (Choppers of New York State say "fall" a tree; then they say, they "fell" it. If you ever hear one say a tree was "felled," you better investigate him.) Cutting from the top of the heap down allowed most of the pieces to drop free. If a cut did bind the saw, it would be raised slightly by a "hand-speak" (a wooden pry). When all the trees had been cut, the pieces were split into two or more parts and put into piles.

Boys learned how to assess a tree as they approached it, looking for hanging, dead limbs, noticing how it leaned and judging how much wedging would be needed. Every moment of the day and every step were planned to avoid waste motion and to be ready for any dangers or emergencies. Bad trees would be notched first,

then followed by the wedge. The notch is a vee cut in the base of a tree to control the direction of its fall. If the tree is vertical or if it leans into the strip, it will go over without wedging. If it leans back, it has to be lifted over with a wedge. A tree that leans back would become heavier in the back if it had been weakened by a notch cut out of the front. So for trees in such condition, we sawed into the back first and then got a wedge behind the saw as soon as there was room for it. The cut could then be made through to the stopping point near the front of the tree. Now the saw was removed, and the notch cut in front. Next, one or more wedges would be driven into the back to bring the tree over. There were other ways of doing this, and I am only mentioning one example. But one agreement between the sawyers was always kept; from the very start they understood, and never changed, "Who will take the saw when she starts to go."

Until the late 1930's, most woodchoppers stayed in a shanty near the job, but we often had to walk two or three miles before we came to the choppin'. One shanty I remember was made of rough, straight-edged lumber and covered with bark. I always did the cooking, coming in early to prepare the meals while my partner would keep working until meal time. We had plenty of potatoes and other vegetables, pancakes and bacon, and plenty of fresh meat. I had a good 30.30 carbine and the "Woods Market" in which to hunt. My brother, Ben, has been my partner off and on over the years, and I have worked with him more than with all the others combined. He is now 63 and has been in the woods all his life, beginning when he was 16. He usually worked at the camp where our mother was cooking until he was married.

One winter the two of us stayed in a large camp that was divided into four apartments. Each unit had a crew in it. An old "jack" was in one side and used to come visit me nights. I believe he must have known all of those old British tunes, but his lyrics were so filthy I never gave them a second thought. It has taken me years to find out where those tunes came from.

One day that winter, Ben asked me to drive him to Northville for some medicine. When he told me to pull up at the Avalon Hotel, I discovered what was ailing him. We went in, and he started some heavy loggin' with a bottle and a glass. I soon had my harmonica out, and a crowd had gathered around. Next, some one asked me to do a little dance, and, forgetting my calked boots, I went to work on the Avalon's new linoleum. Someone gave me a hearty assist and I soon found myself outside, and I haven't been back since.

In those days, the workman's compensation laws, if any, could be avoided by letting the work out on contract. I have cut thousands of cords of wood in my life, with a partner or partners. Most of it, or as we would say, the "heft" of it, was for 200 cord at a time. The best stand of hardwood we ever cut for cord-wood was back in 1928. We had one pile, right in the choppin', that measured 35 1/8 cords! The best we ever hit for pulp was a stand of spruce where the best trees measured 36 inches on the stump and had 22 sticks or 88 of wood. I have bought standing timber from landowners and converted the trees to logs or pulp, whichever was wanted. I would pay the owner by the cord, or by the thousand feet, if logs. I sold logs to the local sawmills, and the pulp went to one of the local paper mills.

Choppers could and did fit in with life in the big lumber camps any time there was any of that activity in the area. We "loners" worked piece work and could stay at it as long as we wanted. In those camps the work one did was based on a scaler's estimate. Although they were supposed to be honest, I never could be sure. But there was never any requirement in those parts that a boss had to be able to lick any of his men. That was just an interesting story. One former lumber and wood dealer, however, never missed a chance for a fist fight, and he never won one either!

Around the middle of the last century the inhabitants of the Factory were largely Scots, Irish, English, French and French Canadians. From their children along the plank road and near the

Factory, I learned many songs and fiddle tunes. Just to the north of the Factory is Mulleyville Lake where a lumber camp was operated one winter. At that camp originated the song *Them Mulleyville Boys*. My thanks go to Howard Neahr, of Galway, for it.

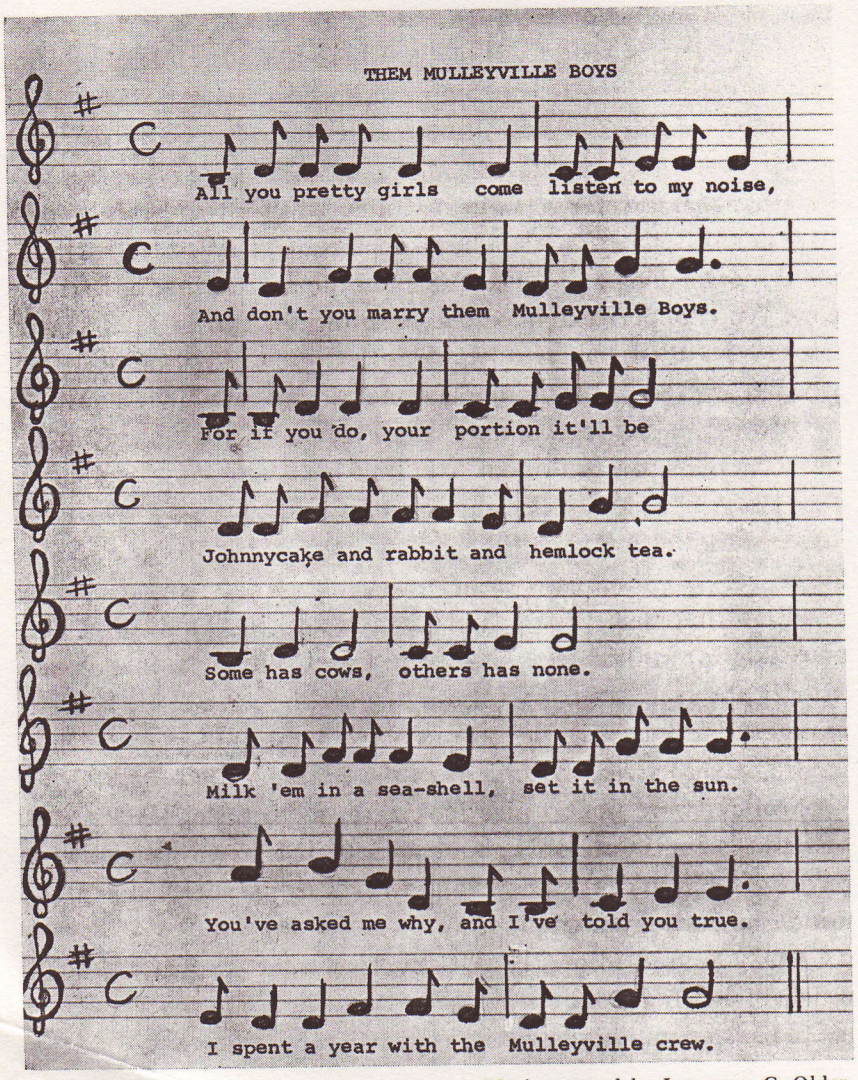
I have not the slightest idea how the lake came to be named, but we always prefer to write "Mulley" rather than "Muley" or "Mooley." It is always "Mulley" on the maps. Webster includes all three versions and gives them the same meaning: a hornless cow. We choppers extended the meaning for fun so that a cant-hook was called, facetiously, a Mulley, etc. (A cant-hook is a wooden lever with an iron hook at the end and used for "canting", or, turning, heavy logs. Since a cant-hook has a hook it can hook, but a hornless cow can't hook, can it? This is an example of chopper humor). We also called the best of our big sleighs the Mulley.

A Mulley sleigh could be made with simple tools: a couple of augers, two or three bits, an axe, saw and sledge hammer. They are about four feet wide at the runners, and the bunks (bolsters on a wagon) are six feet wide. The front and back bunks were usually about ten feet apart. Logs for hauling were loaded directly on the bunks. A rigging on top of the bunks was needed when hauling shorter wood or freight to the camps.

Mulleys were not so nice looking as factory sleighs. Factory, or frame, sleighs were only about three feet wide with a high center of gravity, and a teamster almost had to part his hair in the middle to keep from tipping over.

Back about 1918 or '19, a "Canuck" was working at the Newton Falls lumber camp on Mt. Pleasant where my mother was a cook. He spent all his spare time that winter making a set of Mulley sleighs. The result was, to say the least, a very heavy, homely set. When someone remarked, "They're kind of rough lookin' Joe," Joe replied, "I don't make him nice for pretty, I make him hell for stout!"

Another type sleigh was a jumper, made by selecting two trees that had a curved runner shape at the bottom. We bored them at



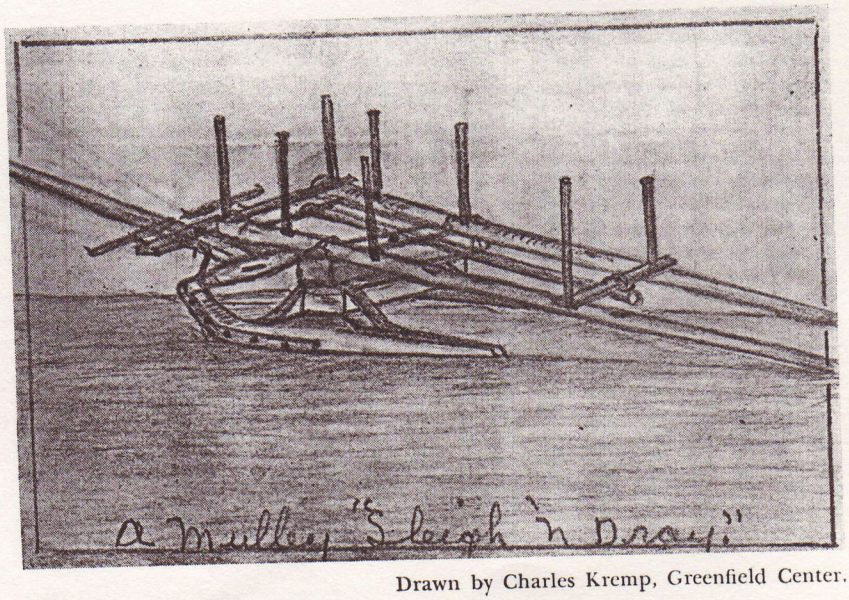

Music notated by Lawrence C. Older.

intervals with an auger and then drove into the holes stakes about a foot in length. Over the stakes we drove, with a sledge hammer, a bored round beam. The runners were spaced about four feet apart and joined together at the beams by more stakes, called

"rounds." To hold the wood, more stakes were let down into the beams. After adding a roll rod and attaching a tongue, the jumper was ready to go. An improvement was the addition of a wood runner to the bottom which could be replaced when it wore out. This type we called a "wood-shod" sleigh.

One final word about sleighs: *sled* had little place in our vocabularies. We always called them *sleigh* or *sleighs*. Part of the old song, which was common in the Adirondacks, "Once More A-Lumbering Go," that I first heard when I was 15, sung by George Madison, who was also a fiddler, of Barkersville, had the lines:

> But pity us poor lumber boys
> Go jouncing in our sleighs.




Drawn by Charles Kremp, Greenfield Center.