



Loggers block the border in early May to keep Canadians out.

Photos/Rural America

BORDER WARS IN THE FOREST

By Lance Tapley

WORKING IN THE WOODS, as logging is called in Maine, is statistically the riskiest of jobs: falling trees crush backs; chain saws cut off hands. And it is poor work in the poorest state outside the South. An average woodsman earns \$6,500 a year.

There are about 5,000 full-time loggers and 4,000 part-timers in this last big forest in the northeast. The wood is cut largely for seven paper companies, all headquartered outside the state. Some are huge international corporations such as Georgia Pacific, Boise Cascade, International Paper.

Most loggers work in teams of a few men for small, "independent" contractors to the companies. Woodsmen supply their own \$400 chain saws. The contractors, who work side by side with their employees, have to invest in \$40,000 trucks and \$35,000 skidders, which are special log-hauling tractors.

It is piecework, and the company sets the price. For contractors and employees there are no fringes—no health insurance, though logging destroys the health of many men. A disease caused by the chain saw is called Dead Man's Hands.

Foreign labor.

A couple of thousand full-time loggers are French Canadians in the U.S. on "permanent" visas supposedly granted for immigration. Or they are bonded labor. They are employed directly by the companies or by a few large labor contractors. They receive regular—though low—pay and some fringes.

They are grateful. Maine yields a hard life, but it is harder in Quebec. The French, long discriminated against in their own country, are loyal to their American employers. They produce. Some work 70 hours a week and put in for 40 hours pay. Some are worn out at the age of 35. Their production sets the pace and helps the company explain away the low pay of others. The Canadians will deliver to the mill if the Americans ever thought of not delivering. On weekends, the French, who never mix with Americans, go back to Canada. Their families spend an American paycheck; our dollars are worth more.

In the warm night of Aug. 17, 1977, not long after wood deliveries had been cut back at the St. Regis Paper company, about 40 Americans armed with clubs and axes approached the 20 cabins of the St. Regis logging camp near First Machias

Lake in eastern Maine. Telephone and power lines were cut. Windows were broken. Nineteen French loggers were driven away. They were told to go back to their country.

Woodsmen organize.

The protests' leader is a small labor organization, the Maine Woodsmen's Association (MWA). Soon after the First Machias Lake raid, 13 MWA men, in-

peals court that contractors were in fact employees should have eliminated the antitrust ploy, but the companies still successfully argue before the National Labor Relations Board that men who are contractors can't be in bargaining units. Thus the MWA, which considers contractors and employees in the same bind, has yet to form a unit. In company camps the predominance of Canadians prevents MWA units from being created.



cluding Wayne Birmingham, president, and Bill Butler, vice-president, were charged with aggravated criminal mischief, a felony, and trespass, a misdemeanor. Birmingham and Butler were also charged with the felony of terrorizing. Their trials may take place in the coming months. They have pleaded not guilty.

The MWA and its leaders were also charged with contempt of an injunction laid down two years earlier during an MWA-sponsored strike of several thousand woodsmen that shut down the Diamond International mill in Old Town and reduced production at other mills. The injunction severely limited picketing. Its effect was to stop the strike. For the contempt charges the paper companies have convinced the judge to allow their lawyers to be hired as prosecutors. Trials have not yet been scheduled.

The MWA strike was in October 1975. The group had been formed in July of that year by woodsmen themselves. Its goals are better pay and working conditions and better forest management. It fears that, if the companies' harvesting methods continue, after a time there might not be much woods left to cut.

From time to time the companies fire MWA activists. They have never made the going smooth for labor organizers. They shut off organizing for years by maintaining in court that contractors and their men could not strike because this was restraint of trade in violation of antitrust laws. A 1973 ruling by a federal ap-

The power of paper.

A Nader book on Maine and the paper industry is entitled *The Paper Plantation*. The seven manufacturers alone own almost half the 18 million acres of forest which covers close to 90 percent of this most heavily timbered state. The wood products industry, the largest, employs 40,000 in both woods and mills. That's a big number in a million population. There are 14 paper mills. Forty-three percent of manufacturing is from forest products.

The paper companies' influence is seen in the taxing of their land. The landowners in the "unorganized territories," the wildlands, pay property taxes to the state.

But by law they cannot be required to pay into the state any more than the cost of the "services"—six small schools, etc.—they receive. As a result the take from nearly half the land in Maine is frozen at less than 1 percent of the state's total revenues.

The MWA also protests the state's allowing the companies to cut timber as they wish. Increasingly, instead of men doing the cutting, gargantuan machines are chomping into the forest, leaving swaths of Hiroshima-like devastation. Reforestation is rarely done. The industry claims natural reproduction is sufficient. The MWA points out that the desired species naturally thrive in the shade of their own kind, and unless these areas are replanted it will be a long, long time before another crop can be harvested.

Some people believe the companies even control the unions in their domain. A few years ago the companies reportedly invited the United Paperworkers International union to move into the camps and organize the French. In consequence, the UPIU's woodsmen's units now have 1,900 Canadians out of 2,200 men. Their contracts with the companies "leave a great deal to be desired," says John Hanson of the University of Maine's labor education bureau.

A blurred public image.

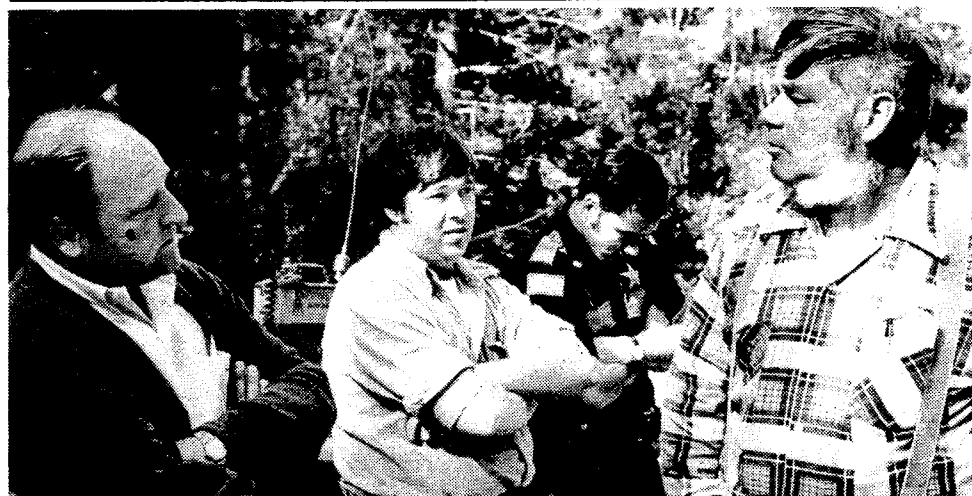
The public reception of the MWA has been mixed. A small group, Friends of the Maine Woodsmen, has raised a few hundred dollars for the MWA legal fund. Many of the public are ignorant of the controversy because the Maine press, with rare exceptions, has done little to cover the story. In a poor state popular wisdom sees the paper companies as good employers because they pay millworkers better than shoe companies. And many have been turned off from the MWA by the violence.

The MWA is beset with other difficulties. Money is one. The leaders work from their homes, financed by \$6-a-month dues which some of the members can pay. The group has yet to solve the problem of establishing bargaining units, which may require the hard decision to exclude contractors. John Hanson thinks that the paper companies have successfully diverted the MWA from collective bargaining. "The struggle should not be with other workers," he maintains. He feels that trying to chase the French out of the Maine woods smacks of "racism" and that the Canadians could be organized with Americans.

If MWA people were responsible for the First Machias Lake raid, this may indicate a carelessness about means to an end that could make them unattractive to the kind of people who rallied to Cesar Chavez.

Despite the difficulties, it seems improbable that having come this far, the movement could be easily broken. A potential for widespread support exists through the MWA's insistence that Maine people look earnestly at the future of their greatest resource. With the forest-management cause the group is making the far-sighted connection between the environment's preservation and the preservation of jobs and of Maine's economy. The forest is only as renewable as it is treated.

Lance Tapley, a free-lance writer, is also executive secretary of Maine Common Cause. This article appeared originally in Rural America.



Paper companies and police keep MWA vice-president William Butler (right) from handing out leaflets.