

January 23, 1938

So that new young book-learned clerk from the big city of Ottawa tells me he wants me to start keeping records to send back to the city office. Imagine—a cook spending his time with a pencil, not a knife! Well, fine then. But I'll do it my way.

They want to keep tabs on how I do things around here. The clerk asked, Is there any way you could run your cookhouse more 'efficiently'? Like hell. That ninny's still wet behind the ears. Well, one winter at this here camp and he'll be weaned or dead, that's for sure. And I hope he reads that, too.

How much food do forty loggers working in the winter bush eat? A lot, doggone it. They need four times more food than a regular working man. Baked beans at every meal, and usually fried potatoes, too. Then there's the salt pork and the cabbage and the turnips and the raisin pies. Wagonloads of the stuff. And bread! One loaf per man per day, with butter and jam if we've got it. So add that up, clerkie.

But the food's the only joy this bush job offers. Four months of clearing skidways and felling trees and sawing log lengths. Then there's loading the sticks high onto sleighs and goading the horses and skidding the logs out of the bush to the dump site... Heck, if these men don't eat their fill, how are they gonna keep their good humor and their wits about them? The last thing we need here, a day's sleigh ride from the nearest church, is temper and brazenness. Any turkey knows that. It was brazenness that got that young fella killed last week when his overloaded sleigh got ahead of him going down a hill. Took out his fine team of horses, too. He shouldn't have dared such a load, no matter how far behind he'd fallen. But, like I said, he got brazen. Or at least, that's what the rest of them boys have to tell themselves to get up in the mornings.

Clerk also wants to know how much wood I burn. Well, it takes almost more than a man can carry non-stop to boil scads of tea morning, noon, and night, not to mention all the cooking and baking. And as for heat, well, how much wood does it take to keep two scores of men from freezing on a winter's night? They're already doubled up two to a bunk for warmth, and I've rigged our stovepipes to run every which way for extra heat, but there are some things a Canadian winter just won't budge on, and making sure everybody's freezing cold in the morning is one of them.

Not like any of them knows what real morning cold is. It's me who's up at three o'clock every morning for the breakfast. My alarm's the only clock in the camp, and by God it never fails, no matter how much ice is on the water pail inside the door. I strike the wake-up triangle at four-thirty, when the place has been long since warming, but those men still sulk like babies being ripped from the womb. And do I get to listen to the singing or play a hand of cards after the supper's eaten? Nope, 'cause it's me who's cleaning the supper pots long after them boys are in bed.

But lord them boys do work hard in that bush, and I wouldn't trade gigs with them for anything. Take young Tommy. If he doesn't saw a hundred logs in a day with his crosscut, they dock his pay. That's sawing more than two hundred feet of fresh wet wood daily, and that stuff is hard! Or the new kid, James. He's got to ride them logs behind his horse, skidding them through all sorts of rough bush, risking life and limb to get them logs to the sleigh before the next warm spell rots the snow.

Nope, it never fails to amaze me how those young fellas can keep a sunny outlook about them when they're working like oxen, all for \$1.40 a day. When they come in after twelve cold, backbreaking hours and smell the hot food, they look at me like I'm the Madonna come to save them. I don't get that kind of respect from the wife at home, no siree.

Come to think of it, maybe I'll take the foreman up on his offer and join the best of those swift-footed lads for the spring log drive this year. Those boys'll need a good cook as they float all them logs down to Ottawa. Doing the spring drive wasn't so bad last time. All I had to do was have a good hot meal waiting for them and a nice warm fire to dry their boots before they headed out into the cold spring winds to do their darndest to stay dry as they danced across the floating logs like marionettes. Hell, at least I know how to swim, and that's more than I can say for most of them. Last time we had to dig three pauper's graves into the riverbank and go on like nothing had happened, leaving measly driftwood crosses to mark the spot—like anyone will ever be back to pay their respects. Them Ottawa River rapids and jams claim logs and men with a mighty hunger, it seems.

So, clerk, is my account efficient? Men and horses are pushed to their limits, but with all the fires this country's been having lately, and all the railroads they're building out West, more and more logs is what they want. So I do my best to keep those lads satiated and warm and give them something to look forward to so they'll have half a mind to sign up for this thankless job next year when winter rolls around and you're looking for men to fill the ranks in your fight to tame this here forest.