

FOOD WAS ONE OF FEW AMENITIES OFFERED AT EARLY LUMBER CAMPS

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In 1952, my best friend, Morgan Roderick, and I were given a meal in a camp operated by Finch Pryn near Blue Mountain.

The accompanying photograph, taken by Bill Weedmark, shows the camp. (Note the “cookee” by the window waiting to pounce on any empty platters.)

I have since learned that this stint qualified us both as “camp inspectors.” An old friend noticed there were always one or two strangers standing around waiting for the regulars to be seated before being directed to a seat. C.J. Strife told him they were “camp inspectors” – guys looking for a job they really didn’t want anyway.

There were few amenities in the camps and it may be said the meals were the only bright spot in an otherwise spartan life. It was no place for anyone on a diet or counting calories. However, they met the needs of hard-working men leading a most rugged life.

There were many facets of the logging business, but none was more important than the teamsters. Horses played a very important part in the business and the men who trained, worked with and cared for them were a select group. The logging horse earned his keep and was highly intelligent and valuable. Their role today, like the logger of today, has changed significantly, but since this is about another era, more about horses next week.

The Strife family moved to Big Moose in the early 30s, where C.J. directed operations on International Paper lands. In 1937, he began to expand his operations and located one final time in Old Forge. It was here he reached the high point in his operations in the mid 40s.

Strife was the largest employer in the area with many a local family tracing its early work history to him. They supplied most of his key people who supervised and directed much of his operation.

Joe Lindsay was perhaps the best known of these people. He was Strife’s trusted lieutenant directing much of his field operations. It took a great many people to plan and keep the entire operation moving.

Nearly all of the real soldiers in the woods were recruited from many different ethnic groups. They were primarily Russians, Poles and French Canadians. The Russians and the Poles were mostly refugees who fled the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, while the French were bonded workers with temporary work permits.

Most of the men were single and had little or no family, so they called the lumber camp home. The work was hard, the hours long and often dangerous. The accommodations were harsh and stark, but one thing stood out like a shining beacon: the food. It was all you could eat three times a day with staggering variety.

Depending on the size of the camp, there was always a chief cook and at least one helper, called the cookee. The meals were on time and there was one cardinal rule: No talking. You sat down, ate your fill and got out of the dining room.