

## EDGAR, DONUTS & A DROWNED LOMBARD

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1-7-2017<sup>1</sup>

It was 1928, Edgar Brochu, who drove Lombard tractors for Ed Lacroix<sup>1</sup>, and his striker were heading down the ice on Umsaskus Lake deep in the heart of Maine's Allagash wilderness. With another long winter night fast approaching, their thoughts lingering on hot food, warmth, and salvation from the deafening din and clatter of the tractor. As they neared Gray Brook, Edgar remembered that the donuts and pies made by the cook at the Blanchette camp were a real culinary delight. Nestled against a hill on the north side of the brook, the rough hewn log buildings lit with the soft glow of kerosene lamps no-doubt offered a tempting break. With the discomfort of frozen fingers and feet a reminder of the log hours spent in the unheated cab and ears ringing in-spite of the wads of cotton stuffed in their ears to fend off the noise of the open exhaust, they left the tractor idling out on the ice and hiked the quarter mile or so up the brook to the camps.



*Blanchette Camp, Gray Brook, Circa 1926-33*  
Author's Collection

Eudere Blanchette<sup>ii</sup> was one five major contractors cutting for Edouard Lacroix's Madawaska Company and employing nearly thirty sub-contractors or "jobbers". In fact Lacroix himself had first started working in the Allagash region as a Jobber for John Morrison<sup>2</sup> – a contractor for the St. John Lumber Company which Lacroix eventually purchased in 1925. By the end of the 1927-28 cutting and hauling season, which ran from September to April, this group of contractors and jobbers, employing hundreds of men, would cut a combined total of 150,000 cords of pulpwood in addition to many thousands of board feet of saw logs they were contracted to provide.<sup>3</sup>

During that winter Blanchette was contracted to provide 3,000,000 board feet of saw logs<sup>4</sup>. To be cut within township T11-R13. Once collected in the booms at Long Lake Dam, they would begin the long journey on the spring flood down the Allagash River and into the broad St. John River to eventually be collected at the Madawaska Company Saw mill (formally St. John Lumber Co.) in Keegan just north of Van Buren. At \$9.00 per thousand board feet - this alone represented a sizeable contract for Blanchette. In addition, Blanchette's contract included 5,000 cords of pulpwood which would be hauled to Churchill by tractor. That winter of 27-28 would be busy indeed.



*Interior of restored gasoline Lombard cab.*  
Image By Cheryl Johnson, Author's collection

As with many contractors, Blanchette did not own his own Lombard tractors. A Lombard tractor at \$5,500.00 along with all the sleds etc. represented a major expense. When it came time to haul timber or pulpwood from locations that were beyond practical use of traditional horse drawn sleds (about 4 miles), he would rent tractors and drivers from Lacroix as needed. While steam powered Lombard log haulers were rented at a daily rate (\$29.00 per 10 hour day including crew) gasoline powered Lombard tractors and operator, fuel, grease and maintenance were billed per hour (\$4.50 per hr.)<sup>3</sup> In addition to renting tractors, all the supplies and materials including axes, peaveys, clothing and tons of food stuff and fodder for the horses would be purchased from Lacroix as well. In fact it was very common for a Lombard tractor to haul sleds laden with pulpwood or logs for 12 hours during the day and for 12 hours at night toting supplies to the numerous camps. Whether Edgar was toting supplies to the camps or hauling pulpwood, we simply don't know.

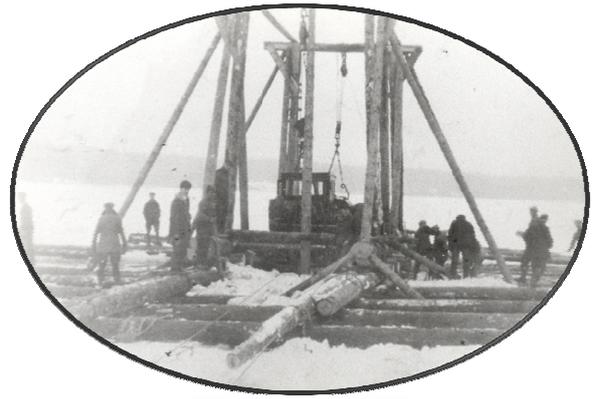
<sup>1</sup> Correspondence, Jean Lacroix, Author's collection

<sup>2</sup> Nash, William T, Madawaska Company, "Report on St. John River Above Grand Falls with Lumbering and Driving Statistics", July 8, 1933

<sup>3</sup> Vigue, Raymond, F., Unpublished manuscript, 1997

<sup>4</sup> Contract document, Eudere Blanchette St. Pamphile, PQ, and Madawaska Co. Van Buren, Maine, Sept. 16, 1927,

As was the custom, the camp cook treated Edgar and his companion to plates heaped with hearty logging camp fare topped off with large slices of his famous pie and a couple of donuts for good measure. With full bellies and bodies warmed by the red hot camp stove and several cups of scalding hot coffee, they headed out into cold clear night. Up in this region a clear winter night in the deep cold of January is an experience to behold. Illuminated by a full moon the forest and lakes are lit up by the moon light reflecting off the snow. As Edgar and his companion trudged back to the lake, if it had been such a night, they would have been accompanied by their shadows cast by a bright clear moon. In the sub zero temperatures that are frequent this time of year there is little humidity, in fact it's about as dry as a desert. As the men walked along the deathly silence would have only been broken by the squeak and crunch of the snow underfoot and the occasional pops and crack from the ice of the lake not far ahead.



*Umsaskus Lake, gantry built to raise sunken Lombard*  
*Author's Collection*



*Eudure Blanchette (near horse) Umsaskus Lake circa 1928*  
*Author's Collection*

A short time later, as they trudged out onto the ice of the lake - exposed cheeks and noses stinging from the cold - the warmth provided by the stove and hot coffee having fading fast, they realized that the big 10 ton Lombard - Edgar's beloved Tractor No. 8<sup>5</sup> was missing. Nothing but moon lit snow covered ice extending off into the darkness met their eyes. No headlights, no popping from the stacks - nothing.

That meant a long exhausting struggle to crank it by hand or at worst a long walk back to Churchill followed by a few very awkward moments with the boss - Auguste Lessard, trying to explain the lost time and productivity. As they trudged to where the tractor should be it was apparent that it was not. The big problem was not in getting it started but how to raise a massive tractor from 40 feet of icy water. Now there was no avoiding that awkward moment with the boss. No doubt the knowledge and the fact that there were many willing men waiting for his job and the \$3.50 per day pay that went with it, was insidiously creeping into his thoughts and adding immeasurably to the icy chill seeping past the collar of his jacket as Edgar stared at the black hole marking where the tractor went.

*Zut, elle a calé !* (Darn she stalled!) the thought sent dread through their hearts. If that big 1,045 cubic inch lump of an engine was warm she should fire up but.... if she cooled off too much not even the starter would budge it. That meant a long exhausting struggle to crank it by hand or at worst a long walk back to Churchill followed by a few very awkward moments with the boss - Auguste Lessard, trying to explain the lost time and productivity. As they trudged to where the tractor should be it was apparent that it was not. The big problem was not in getting it started but how to raise a massive tractor from 40 feet of icy water. Now there was no avoiding that awkward moment with the boss. No doubt the knowledge and the fact that there were many willing men waiting for his job and the \$3.50 per day pay that went with it, was insidiously creeping into his thoughts and adding immeasurably to the icy chill seeping past the collar of his jacket as Edgar stared at the black hole marking where the tractor went.



*Diver working to retrieve Lombard lost in Umsaskus Lake*  
*Author's Collection*

Eventually a diver was brought up from the coast and a gantry built over the hole. A platform made from tree length logs spread the weight ensuring that the whole rig didn't join the Lombard on the bottom. The first time they tried to lift it from the sucking mud at the bottom of the lake the iron hooks fabricated by Aurelle Ferland, the blacksmith at Churchill, bent and straightened and the bulky 17,885 lb. weight of the tractor settled back into the mud<sup>6</sup>. With his reputation as a blacksmith on the line, Aurelle went back to his shop and hammered and forged out another set.

With the new hooks set in place by the diver, eventually the tractor broke the surface and was soon on its way to Churchill to be dried out and repaired. Whether Edgar kept his job or not - we simply do not know. But we do know that his experience, as retold down through the many decades since the memorable night, has provided us with a darn good story.

<sup>1</sup> Note: a condensed version of this manuscript in letter format was provided by the author and published in *"The Ranger and the Reporter"*, Tim Caverly/Franklin Manzo, Jr., Nancy's Proofreading, Lewiston, ME., March 2016, ISBN 978-14951-9960-8

<sup>ii</sup> While researching this article the author found several different spellings for Mr. Blanchette's first name including "Huder", "Hudere", etc. It was decided to use the spelling as it appears in the Lacroix contract document.

<sup>5</sup> Photograph, titled: "Lifting tractor No. 8 from 40 ft of water" author's Collection

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Louis Pauquett, 1996, Author's collection