From Nowhere to Nowhere

Maine's Eagle Lake & West Branch Railroad

Terence Harper
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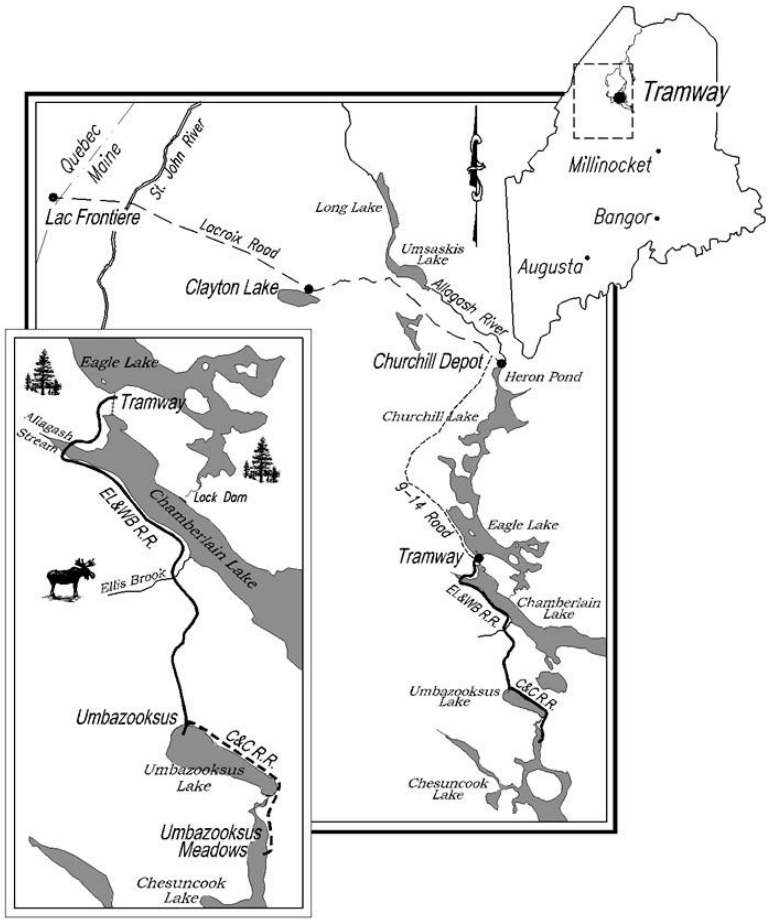


The biplane streaked out of the foggy mist and buzzed low across the field. A weighted note tumbled to earth. "Got to land." A young Edwin Robichaud quickly led the big workhorse and plow off the field as the biplane bumped and bounced to a standstill. The pilot raised his goggles, "Where am I? I follow these tracks south but they end, I follow them north and they end there too?" With his heavy French Canadian accent Edwin proudly responded, "This is the Eagle Lake & West Branch Railroad. It goes nowhere to nowhere!"

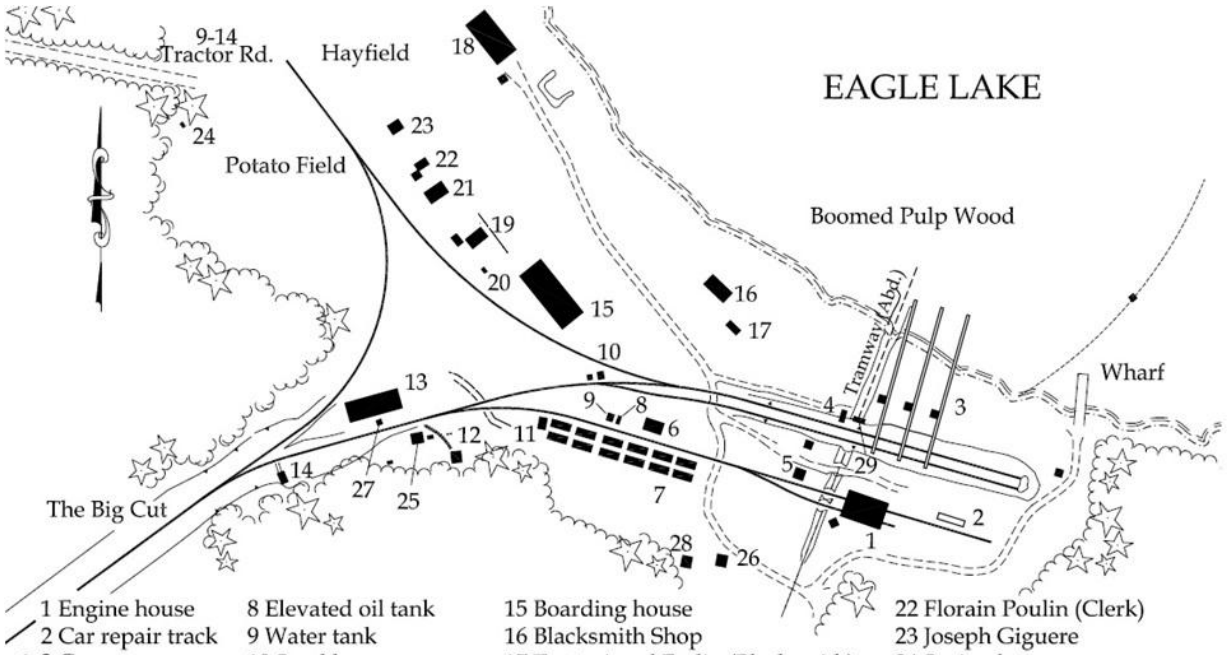
Edwin Robichaud waves from the cab of the Plymouth locomotive. The Tramway boarding house is visible in the background.
Terence F. Harper Collection

Introduction:

This story was told to me by the late Edwin Robichaud in a letter dated August 8, 1992. Edwin was the last surviving employee of the Madawaska Companies Eagle Lake & West Branch Railroad and helped me a great deal in the preparation of this article. He was one of only a handful of people I met or corresponded with who remember the EL&WB. The vast majority of employees and persons involved with the line were from Eastern Quebec, most spoke French, some were illiterate, and many returned to Quebec and obscurity after the railroad was abandoned in September of 1933.

The standard gauge 13 mile-long EL&WB, completed in August 1937, did seem to go nowhere to nowhere. It was marooned in the middle of a sea of spruce and fir in the heart of Maine's Allagash Wilderness, with the nearest railroad terminal nearly 60 miles away at Lac Frontiere in Canada. However, the EL&WB had a purpose – it was a vital link in the long journey of pulpwood from the vast cutting areas stretching north from Eagle Lake to the Musquacook Lakes region to the paper mills southeast at Millinocket, via the West Branch of the Penobscot River.

Long before the EL&WB was built, the direction of flow of rivers and lakes in the watersheds of Northern Maine had created a problem for loggers. While the loggers wanted to float their logs south to



Map of Tramway terminus of the Eagle Lake & West Branch Railroad circa 1928

By Terence F. Harper

mills in the United States, the waterways of the Allagash Region flow north to the St. John River and would have taken their logs to Canada.

Over the years, several imaginative ways of sending logs from the Allagash Wilderness south to Bangor, Maine were used. A brief summary follows, but the interested reader can find more information in Alfred Geer Hampstead's book The *Penobscot Boom*.

A Prelude: The East Branch of the Penobscot River – Sending Logs to Bangor

In the 1840's several dams were built to raise lake levels and a canal excavated to change the flow of water out of Chamberlain and Telos Lakes to south instead of north. One dam incorporated a crude lock system. Known as Lock Dam, timber could be raised from the north flowing waters of Eagle Lake to the now southward flowing waters of Chamberlain Lake. Once in Chamberlain Lake, the logs were floated via Grand Lake Matagamon down the East Branch of the Penobscot River to Bangor.

In 1902 a 3,000 foot-long tramway was built by Marsh & Ayer to by-pass Lock Dam and speed-up the flow of timber. Stretching across the narrow strip of land between Eagle Lake and Chamberlain Lake, this steam-powered conveyor by-passed the locks. The tramway gave its name to this site, and its iron remains are still there today.

A view along the Tramway looking towards Chamberlain Lake.
Vaughan Jones, Terence F. Harper Collection

The following summarizes O.A. Harkness' detailed description of the tramway that appeared in the November 1927 issue of THE NORTHERN. The tramway was a conveyor consisting of a 6,000-foot-long continuous steel cable with trucks (to carry the logs) clamped at 10 foot intervals along its length. The trucks traveled along a 22-inch-gauge track supported on a wooden trestle. As the loaded trucks revolved over the top of a 9-foot diameter sprocket at Chamberlain Lake, the logs would drop off and the empty trucks returned on a lower track. Powered by a Westinghouse Compound steam engine working at 255 rpm, the tramway moved 500,000 board feet of lumber per sixteen hour working day.

At the close of 1908 the tramway was abandoned for a more efficient means of moving logs from the cuttings to Chamberlain Lake. Alvin Lombard's newly invented steam-powered log hauler could haul logs long distances directly across land to the waterways. Patented in 1900 and built in Lombard's Waterville, Maine factory these were the first successful track driven vehicles. From 1908 through the winter of 1912-13 the Eastern Manufacturing Company had four Lombard steam log haulers moving

timber from the Russell Pond region to be landed on the ice of Chamberlain Lake.[1] Though abandoned onsite remarkably two of Eastern Manufacturing's steam-powered Lombard log haulers survive today. - one in operating condition at the Maine Forest & Logging Museum in Bradley, Maine.

The West Branch of the Penobscot River – Sending Pulpwood to Millinocket

Lacroix's fleet of 10 ton Lombard tractors ran 24 hours per day, 6 days per week moving pulpwood from as far away as the Musquacook Lakes to Churchill Lake.
Terence F. Harper Collection

In late 1924 the Great Northern Paper Company (GNP) began a pulpwood cutting operation near the north flowing waters of the Musquecook Lakes. For the time it was a huge operation with a large depot camp located on the shore of Third Musquecook Lake and employing over 700 men scattered among 15 camps.[2] Eventually, all this pulpwood would need to be transported to the West Branch of the Penobscot River where it would float southward on the spring freshet to Millinocket. The problem was how to move it from the distant Musquacook Lakes to the West Branch of the Penobscot River?

In 1925 the Madawaska Company headed by Edouard Lacroix, a Quebec lumber man, was contracted by GNP to move the Musquecook Lakes pulpwood to the waters of West Branch of the Penobscot. Lacroix was also contracted to supply vast quantities of pulpwood through 1930. A subsequent contract would extend the work for an additional three years.[3] Lacroix's solution was to construct the 13-mile long Eagle Lake & West branch Railroad. Starting at Tramway, this standard gauge railroad would head southwest, cross the upper reaches of Chamberlain Lake on a trestle, hug the west shore of Chamberlain Lake before crossing Ellis Brook and turning south to Umbazooksus Lake

The paper company would build an additional five-mile section extending the line to the head of Chesuncook Lake – this section was known at various times as the Chesuncook & Chamberlain Lake Railway or the Umbazooksus and Eagle Lake or to those who worked it simply as "the Five-Mile Stretch." The Chesuncook & Chamberlain Lake would serve as a supply route from the south to bring in supplies and fuel since boat access to the EL&WB Umbazooksus terminal would be blocked by a dam and a lake choked with pulpwood.

Though GNP negotiated and held a lease for the right-of-way which was acquired from the Pingree family, Lacroix owned the EL&WB rail, rolling stock and structures. [ibid]

[1] "Jones, Vaughn, unpublished thesis, May, 1912, University of Maine Fogler Library Special Collections
[22] "The Northern", May, 1925, pp 5 & 7
[3] Correspondence, Fred Gilbert to Edouard Lacroix, November 29, 1930

Building the Eagle Lake & West branch Railroad

During the following summer of 1925 Edouard Lacroix's Madawaska Company was busy drawing the pulpwood from Third and Fourth Musquacook Lakes and stacking it in huge piles on shore[4] Lacroix's crews were also busy hacking a 12 mile, double lane winter tractor road through the wilderness to what would become known as Churchill Depot at the outlet of Churchill Lake.[5]

Construction of the railroad itself began in June of 1926 with the clearing and grading of the roadbed. Meanwhile to the south, GNP began construction of the connecting Chesuncook & Chamberlain Lake Railway with crews working north towards Umbazooksus. Building the EL&WB through the spruce was no small task. Lacroix constructed a 40 mile, gravel road from the nearest railhead at Lac Frontiere, Quebec to Churchill Depot. Known as the "Lacroix Road" construction of this "lifeline" through the wilderness presented many challenges. To cross the St. John River, workers disassembled a large steel truss bridge in St. George, Quebec, which was moved, and reassembled to span the St. John River. This bridge features prominently in Helen Hamlin's delightful autobiography, *Nine Mile Bridge*, that tells of her life as a schoolteacher at Churchill Depot in 1937. An additional 11 mile winter tote road extended south to connect with the old Eastern Manufacturing 9-14 road log hauler road which ran along Russell Brook to the old Tramway site.

Eagle Lake & West Branch Railroad's Erie B2 steam shovel hard at work during construction of the railroad. This shovel now rests in a shallow pit near Nine Mile Bridge on the St. John River.
Terence F. Harper Collection

[4] "The Northern", June 1925, pp 13
[5] "The Northern, February 26, 1926, pp 15

With one rail of the unloading trestle set 6-inches higher than the other and in combination of a sloped floor, most of the pulpwood tumbled out when the door was unlatched.
Terence F. Harper Collection

During the frigid winter of 1926-27 Lacroix's fleet of Lombard tractors moved large quantities of rail, fuel and equipment over the 50 - mile route from Lac Frontier to Tramway so the laying of rail could commence after the spring thaw.

Rolling stock moved over this same icy route after having their railroad trucks swapped for wood skis. At least 45 flatcars, some equipped with pulp racks, an Erie B2 steam shovel traveled this route to what was to become the northern terminus of the EL&WB railroad at Tramway. By far the most remarkable move that winter was the arrival of the first steam locomotive – EL&WB #1 weighing 71 tons. The much larger EL&WB #2 (94 tons) would travel the same route the following March – requiring three days to make the journey.

With the spring thaw of 1927 construction resumed and in spite of the remote location, progressed rapidly – including the excavation of a 1,500-foot-long earth cut leading from Tramway, and a 1,500-foot-long trestle built on pilings and cribwork across Little Allagash Stream at the top of Chamberlain Lake, and a much smaller trestle spanning Ellis Brook (the site of one of the railroads construction camps). The roadbed was poor, and the rails were light - ranging from 56 pounds to 79 pounds, but on August 1, 1927 the first carloads of pulpwood began moving across the line.

Rolling Stock

The early history of the EL&WB rolling stock is unknown. However, most of the cars appear to have been lettered for the Champlain Reality Company while at least 12 flatcars were transferred from GNP's aborted Seboomook & St. John Railway.[ibid]

At Tramway each car was remodeled - receiving a new floor that sloped 12 inches from side-to-side and a full-length side door hinged at the top to facilitate unloading. Air brakes and automatic couplers were standard on all the cars.

Motive Power

The EL&WB rail truck was a Lombard 10-ton tractor converted to run on rails. Note the lags stacked on the back platform. This photo was taken at the Lombard factory in Waterville, ME.
Terence F. Harper Collection

If you waited along the tracks of the EL&WB to catch a glimpse of traditional logging locomotive such as a Shay or a Climax crawling by in a frenzy of geared activity, you would have been disappointed - but astonished at what you did see.

The first locomotives on the line were two 18-ton gas powered Plymouth locomotives purchased new by Lacroix from the Fate-Root-Heath Company and hauled from Lac Frontiere during the early winter months of 1927. They were used during construction and later for switching duties at Tramway and Unbazooksus Lake. GNP purchased a third Plymouth which was moved in August of 1926 by tractor from Greenville [6] and then by barge up Chesuncook Lake to the southern terminus of their Chesuncook & Chamberlain Lake Railway where it was used for construction and later - to move supplies to the Umbazooksus Terminal of the EL&WB and then on to Tramway.

Like many backwoods railroads the EL&WB had a rail truck or more appropriately, a rail tractor. Built by the Lombard Tractor & Truck Corporation of Waterville, Maine, it began life as one of their standard 10-ton tractors. The railroad also operated two steam locomotives, which were hauled overland from Lac Frontiere in pieces and reassembled at Tramway.

EL&WB #1, a 4-6-0, (c.n. 4552) was a bit of a traveler. Built new by Schenectady Locomotive works in 1897 as #109 for the Chicago, Hammond & Western, in 1911 she became #15 on the New York Central System's Indiana Harbor Belt. By 1912 she was working as Potato #8 followed by a stint as #63 on the Grasse River Railroad. Purchased by Lacroix from the General Equipment Company of New York[7] and arriving at Tramway in early 1927. By then, she was a veteran logging locomotive far removed from her days on the CH&W where she sported a wooden cow catcher and fancy clerestory roof.

During that late summer and autumn of 1927, it soon became apparent as frequent breakdowns caused lost time (218 hours to be exact) [8] that a more reliable and powerful locomotive was needed. In October Lacroix sent a letter to the General Equipment Company apparently suggesting that they sold him a scrap

[6] "The Northern", August 1926, pp 15

[7] Correspondence, General Equipment Company to Edouard Lacroix, October 7, 1927

[8] Madawaska Co., production records, August 1927 - October 1933

locomotive at a premium price. General Equipment countered by pointing out that they only made $300.00 on the deal and that "…*if you* [Lacroix] *are attempting to operate this locomotive 24 hours per day, 6 days per week, you are demanding from far more service than any steam locomotive is designed to perform."* [9]

EL&WB #1 at the loading conveyors at Tramway. With the arrival of EL&WB #2 in March 1928 it was relegated to serving as the spare locomotive due to constant breakdowns.
Terence F. Harper Collection

Thus in March of 1928 EL&WB #2 arrived at Tramway after a three day journey hauled on sleds from Lac Frontiere. If EL&WB #1 could be considered a typical if a bit large logging locomotive (at least by New England standards) then EL&WB #2 was as far from typical as could be. Built by the Brooks Locomotive Works IN 1901 (C.n. 4062, b.n. LS&MS 1415) this 188,000–pound 2-8-0 with its 63-inch-diameter white trimmed drivers and Brooks inside-admission piston valves was soon pulling freights as Lake Shore & Michigan Southern #780. By 1927 she had become New York CENTRAL #5780, and was running the rails out of Collinwood, Ohio. Purchased from Ferguson & Allen – a used equipment dealer, she arrived on the EL&WB in March 1928 (with water scoop removed). #2 soon became the primary motive power while #1 was delegated to backup duty.[10]

The frame and running gear of EL&WB #2 being moved from Lac Frontiere to Tramway in March 1928. It took three days to make the trip.
Terence F. Harper Collection

Both locomotives were converted to burn oil which was far easier to transport than coal. Consuming an average of 45 gallons-per-hour, they required over 250,000 gallons of oil per operating season. (from June through November). All this oil as well as gasoline had to be hauled during the winter by Lombard tractors from Lac Frontiere on special tank sleds. An old steam Lombard log hauler boiler, left over

[9] Correspondence, General Equipment Company to Edouard Lacroix, October 20, 1927
[10] Correspondence, Edwin Robichaud to Terry Harper, Oct. 31, 1992

from the Eastern's 1908 -1913 operation, served to heat the oil so it could be pumped into large 25,000-gallon oil tanks lining the tracks at Tramway. At one point Lacroix's Madawaska Company was importing so much oil from Imperial Oil of Canada that American companies began to protest. Because of a shortage of Lombard tractors during the winter of 1926-27, Lacroix was forced to move his 1927 supply of oil into Tramway during the summer months. That summer it took Lacroix's fleet of Lombard tractors approximately two hundred trips to move 181,000 gallons of oil carrying fifteen drums per trip. For many years these drums littered Tramway.

Operations:

Mountains of pulpwood piled on the ice of Churchill Lake.
Terence F. Harper Collection

In early 1926 all that pulpwood stacked at 3rd and 4th Musquecook Lakes finally began its long journey to the mill. Lombard tractors, working out of the Lacroix's depot camp at Churchill Lake, began moving long sled trains over the double track log hauler road from the Musquacook Lakes to Churchill Depot. Added to this were vast quantities cut by "jobbers" (sub-contractors) working under contract for Lacroix. The manpower requirements were staggering. In November of 1927 this amounted to 1,543 men[11] working in the various "jobber" camps. At Churchill the pulpwood was piled into "mountains" on the ice of the lake. Come spring it was "boomed" to Tramway to begin its trip on the railroad.

Anchored off-shore at Tramway was a raft with a horse turned capstan that crowded the pulpwood in close to three conveyors. These 225-foot-long conveyors were powered by Fairbanks-Morse single cylinder diesel engines and just lifted the pulpwood from the water and dumped it into waiting pulp cars. (One of the diesel engines had a generator attached that provided electricity for lighting the boarding house, engine house and loading area.)

A steam donkey engine, using a system of cables extending along the loading tracks, shifted cars beneath the conveyors saving precious gasoline, and the clutches of the Plymouth locomotive. (Otherwise busy shuttling loaded cars to the sidings at the "Top of the hill."[12] A wye allowed the locomotives to be turned.[13] An EL&WB train consisted of 13 to 15 cars, and hauled an average of 175 cords of pulpwood per trip.[14]

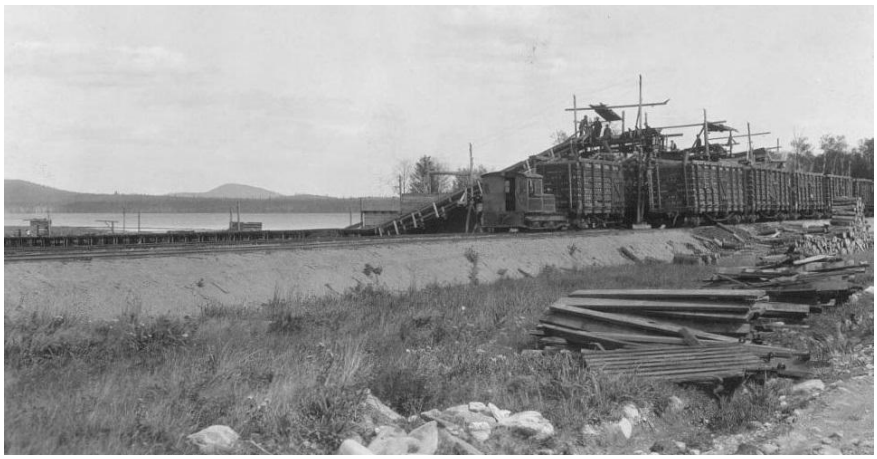
[11] Manpower report, week ending November 12, 1927

[12] Correspondence, Edwin Robichaud to Terry Harper, April 1992-Dec. 1992

[13] Great Northern Paper Co., Drawing titled *"Plan & Profile",* March 1927

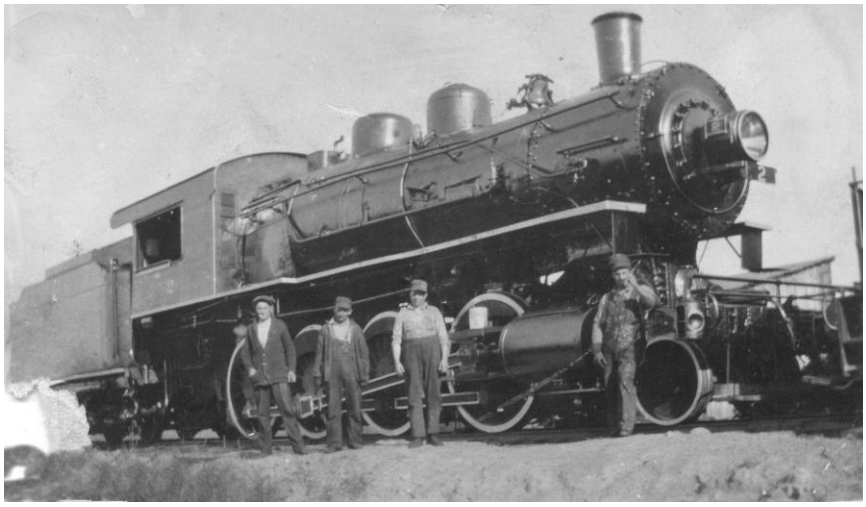
[14] Madawaska Co., production records, August 1927 - October 1933

The southern terminal at Umbazooksus Lake also had a Plymouth for switching and a wye, but it was a low-lying swampy area – not a pleasant place – especially during black-fly season. Several cabins and a crude log bunkhouse served to house the crew. At Umbazooksus the cars were shoved onto a 600-foot-long cribwork trestle extending into the lake. One rail was 6 inches higher than the other, and the floor of the cars had a 12-inch slope built in, so most of the load dumped automatically. A small sliding door allowed any stubborn pieces to be "picked out". The "Five Mile Stretch" was often put into use carrying supplies moved up Chesuncook Lake by barge. A small building built on a cribwork pier provided shelter as supplies were transferred from barge to rail and yet another wye served to turn the Plymouth around.



The Plymouth locomotive spots cars under the loading conveyors at Tramway.
Terence F. Harper Collection

During the 1927 and 1928 operating season the railroad ran 24 hours a day, 6 days a week,[15] with Lacroix insisting that 5,000 cords of pulpwood had to be moved each week. With poor roadbed and light rails, this proved hard on the equipment. At one point the operation was losing $2,500.00 a week due to derailments. (Company records show a total of 175 derailments). In 1928 the schedule was cut back to 5 trips during a 14 hour day. [16] Though the engineers had a habit of trying to get those 5 trips completed in 10 hours or less! An ongoing problem at Umbazooksus was the large volume of bark and pulpwood that clogged the unloading area. A floating scraper was constructed which operated via cables from the locomotive. Strong winds could hamper both loading and unloading, and caused many hours of productivity to be lost.



The proud crew of EL&WB #2. Circa 1928.
Terence F. Harper Collection

Regardless, during that first abbreviated, breakdown

[15] Correspondence, Edouard Lacroix to Charles E. Leardy, Oct. 4, 1928
[16] Report, "*Salary Pay scale at Tramway",* October 1927

plagued season of 1927 the railroad moved 78,429 cords. Production would peak at 163,865 cords in 1929. 1933 was used for clean-up with a paltry 4,338 cords hauled. Then the railroad went silent. Over its short lifespan the railroad moved a total of 692,825 cords of pulpwood.

With the Great Depression biting deep, and the resulting slump in demand for paper products, EL&WB #2 hauled its last load and was soon cold and silent alongside EL&WB #1 in the small engine house at Tramway. In 1935 the rails of the "Five Mile Stretch" (Chesuncook & Chamberlain Lake Railroad) were torn up and scrapped.[17] In 1942 there was a push to scrap the rail of the EL&WB from Tramway to Umbazooksus for the war effort.[18] However, the rails would remain intact until sold for scrap by the State of Maine in the 1970's. 89 years later, approximately 4-miles of tree-choked track remains. Unfortunately, through a misunderstanding, the engine house was burned by the Maine Forest Service in 1969 with the locomotives inside. Pulpwood cars lie rotting on the sidings where last spotted. Two of the Plymouth locomotives survive in a private collection Parts of the Lombard rail tractor are strewn on the forest floor at Tramway and EL&WB #1 and #2 rest in a small clearing in the woods in the middle of what is now Maine's Allagash Wilderness Waterway.

Edouard Lacroix (right) seated beside Fred Gilbert - General Manager, Great Northern Paper Co.
Terence F. Harper Collection

[17] Daily Boston Globe, August 11, 1935
[18] The Lewiston Daily Sun, August 31, 1942