

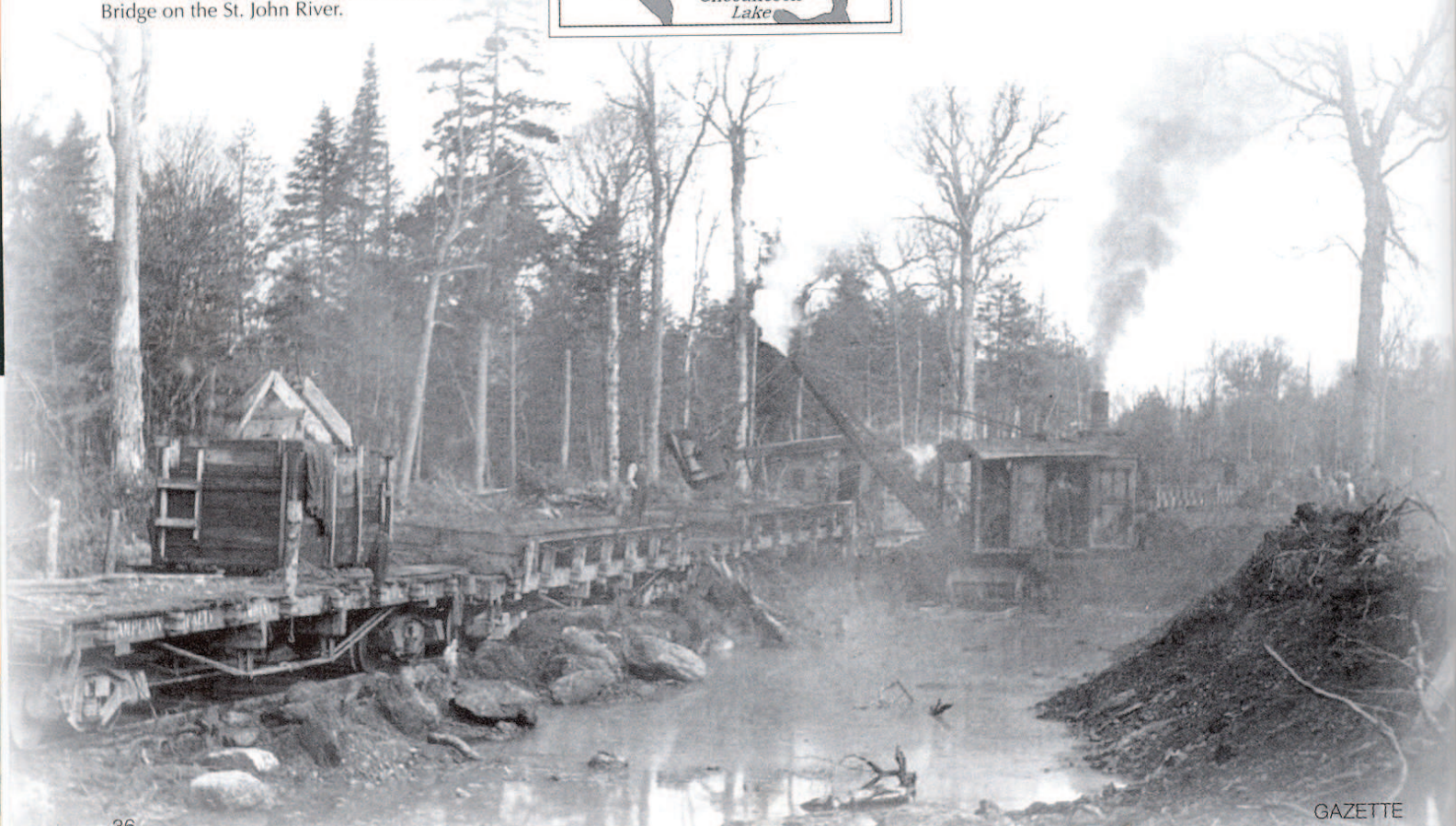
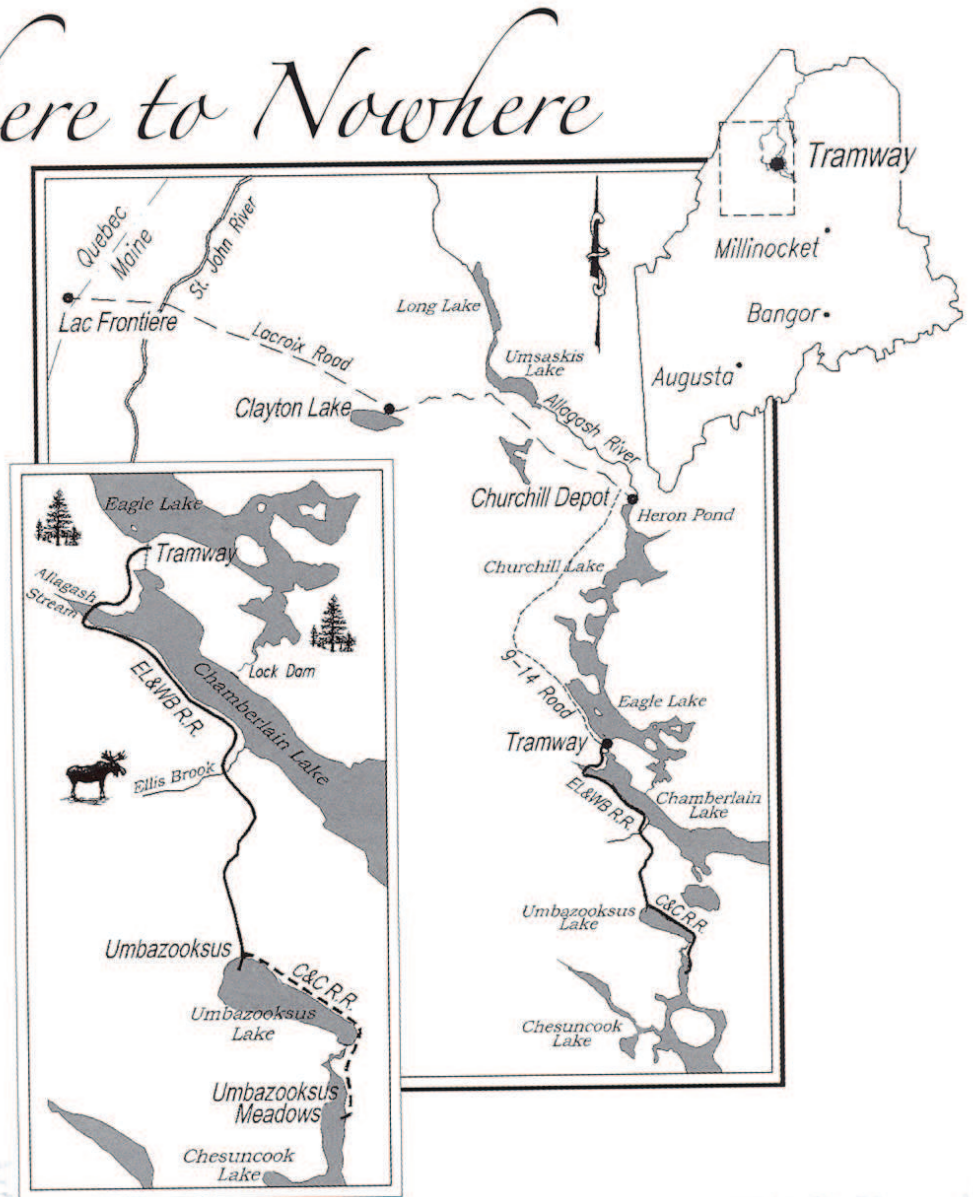
From Nowhere to Nowhere

Maine's Eagle Lake & West Branch Railroad

by Terence F. Harper

✱ 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 lead 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!" ✱

Below: The 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.



✧ Introduction

The story on page 36 was told to me by the late Edwin Robichaud in a letter dated August 8, 1992. Edwin was the last surviving employee of the 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 remembered the EL&WB. The vast majority of employees and persons involved with the line were from Eastern Quebec, most spoke only 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 1927, did seem to go from 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 the first link in the long journey of pulpwood from cutting sites north of Eagle Lake 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

mills in United States, the waterways of the Allagash Wilderness flow north – to the St. John River, and would have taken their logs into 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 in-depth information in Alfred Geer Hempstead's book, *The Penobscot Boom*.

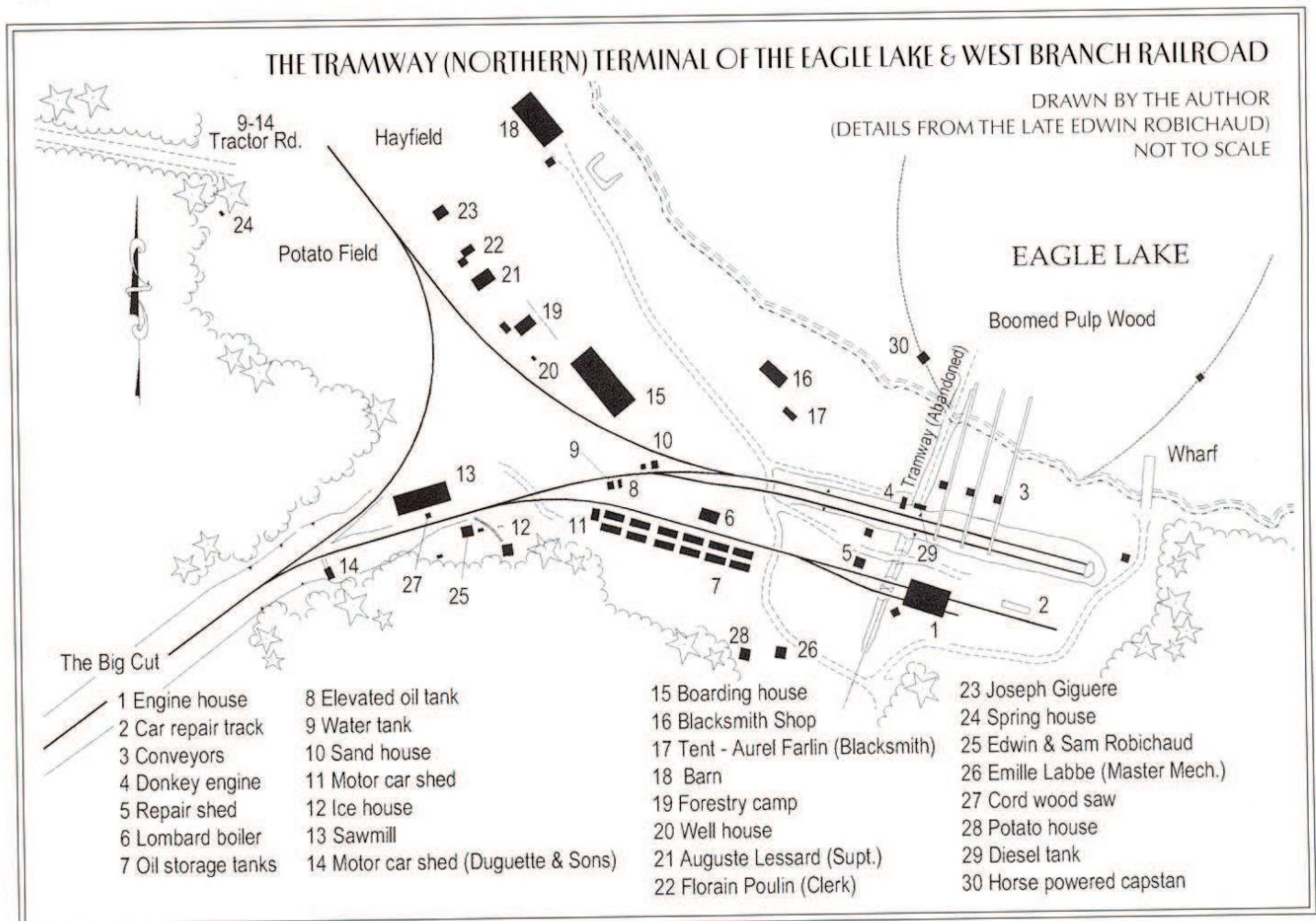
✧ A Prelude: The East Branch of the Penobscot River – Sending Logs to Bangor

In the 1840s, several dams were built to raise lake levels, and a canal was excavated. A crude lock system, known as Lock Dam, allowed timber to be raised from the northward 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 Matagmon down the East Branch of the Penobscot River to Bangor.

In 1903, a 3000-foot-long tramway was built 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.

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 6000-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 drive sprocket at Chamberlain Lake, the logs would drop off and the empty trucks returned on a lower track. Powered by a Westinghouse steam engine working at 255 rpm, the tramway moved 500,000 board feet of lumber per 16-hour working day.

By 1908, the tramway had been abandoned for a more efficient means of moving logs from the cuttings to Chamberlain Lake. Alvin Lombard's newly invented steam-powered logging tractors could haul logs long distances directly across land to the waterways. (These vehicles were built in Lombard's factory under his patent – the first usable patent for a track-driven vehicle, and my article about them is scheduled for the next *GAZETTE*.) Steam-powered Lombard tractors were soon hauling timber directly from cutting areas deep in the forests surrounding Eagle Lake to landings on Chamberlain Lake. However, by the end of 1913, the era of the steam-powered Lombard in the Allagash had come



to a close. However, the machines that replaced them, Lombard's new gasoline-powered tractors, would soon play an important role in the events to follow.

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

In 1925, the Great Northern Paper Company needed to get pulpwood to the West Branch of the Penobscot River, which flowed near their pulp mill in Millinocket. The West Branch of the Penobscot originated in Chesuncook Lake, just south of Umbazooksus Lake. But, there was a problem. How would logs coming from the Allagash Wilderness to Tramway at Eagle Lake get to Chesuncook Lake? The answer would be the 13-mile-long standard gauge Eagle Lake & West Branch Railroad. Starting at Tramway, it would head southwest, cross the upper reaches of Chamberlain Lake on a trestle, and head south to Umbazooksus Lake crossing Ellis Brook along the way.

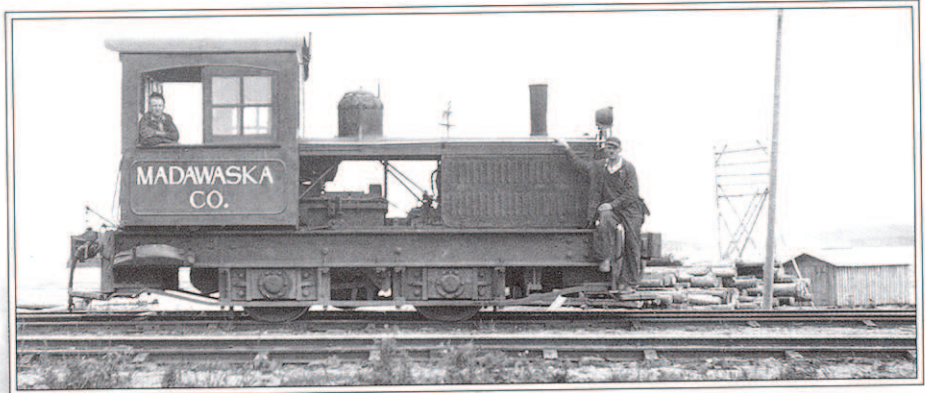
The Madawaska Company headed by Edouard “King” Lacroix, a Quebec Lumber Baron, was contracted by the paper company to build the railroad from Tramway to Umbazooksus Lake. The paper company would then build a 5-mile addition extending the line to the head of Chesuncook Lake – this section was known at various times as the Chesuncook & Chamberlain Railway or the Umbazooksus & Eagle Lake or, to those who worked it simply as “the Five-Mile Stretch.” This extension was used to bring in supplies and fuel when the lakes were so choked with logs that barges could not maneuver their way through.

In addition, “King” Lacroix was contracted by the paper company to operate the railroad, and supply the pulpwood.

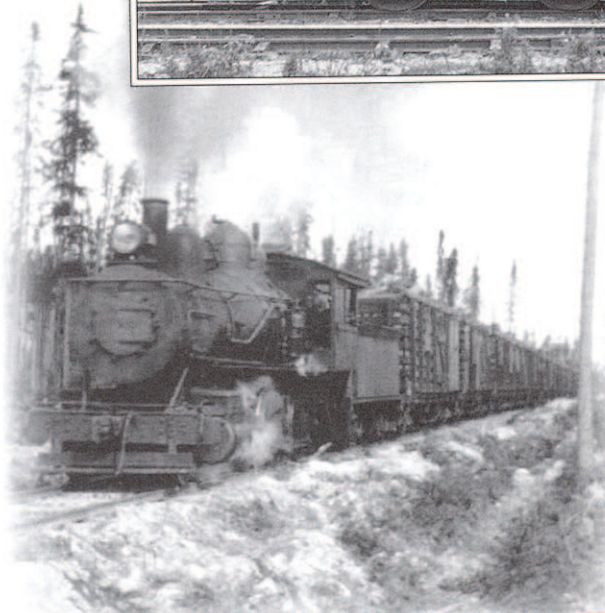
✧ Building the Eagle Lake & West Branch Railroad

In June of 1926, construction began. Building this “iron trail” 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 span the St. John River, Lacroix disassembled a large steel truss bridge in St. George, Quebec, which was moved, and reassembled across the St. John River. This bridge fea-

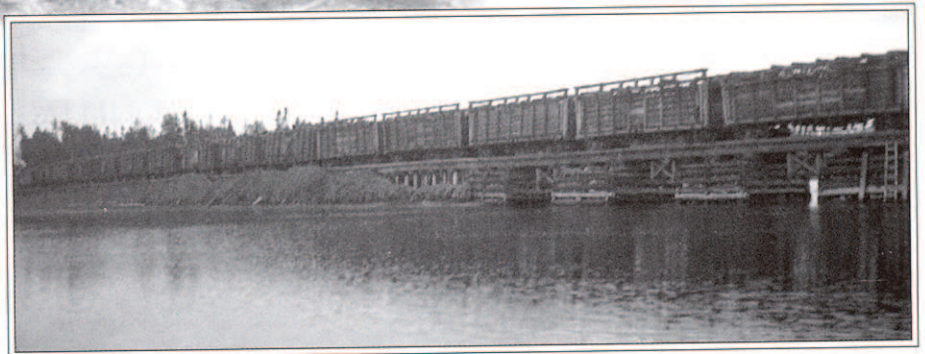


Above: One of the EL&WB's 18-ton Plymouths at Tramway. She is lettered for the “King” Lacroix's Madwaska Co., which was contracted by the Great Northern Paper Company to supply pulpwood to the line.



Left: This, the only known photo of EL&WB #1 in operation shows her heading a string of pulp cars bound for Umbazooksus.

Below: A string of pulp cars crossing the Allagash Stream Trestle at the north end of Chamberlain Lake. The trestle was 1500 feet long and 15 feet above water level. There were no guardrails and plenty of humps and sags. The four-man crew – engineer, fireman, and two brakemen – kept near the gangway ready to leap.



tures prominently in Helen Hamlin's delightful autobiography, *Nine Mile Bridge*, that tells of her life as a schoolteacher at Churchill Depot in 1933.

In addition, a rough tote road, called “the 9-14 Road,” passable only in winter, was hacked an additional 18 miles through the wilderness from Churchill Depot to Tramway.

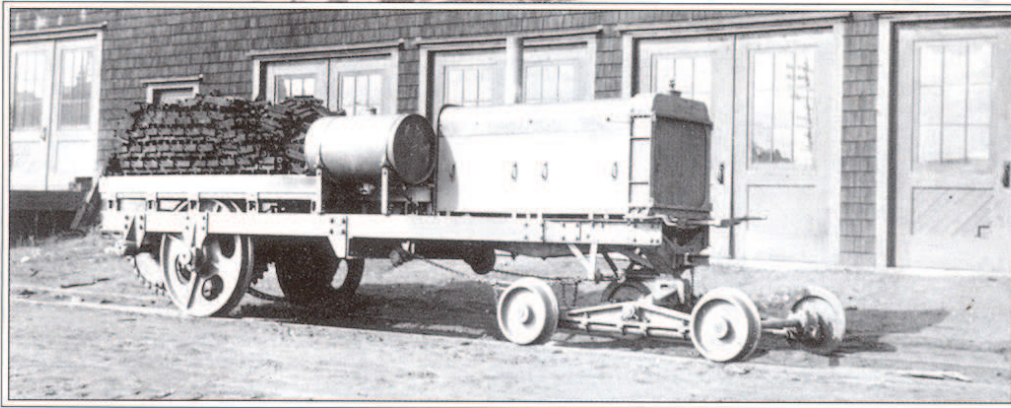
In the dead of winter, with the roads topped with a smooth layer of ice and snow, a fleet of Lombard gasoline-powered tractors moved large quantities of rail, fuel and equipment over the 58-mile route from Lac Frontiere, Quebec, to Tramway so that construction of the railroad could commence after the spring thaw.

Rolling stock moved over this same icy route after having their trucks swapped for wood skis. At least 45 flatcars, some equipped with pulp racks, and an Erie B2 steam shovel traveled this route to what was to become the northern terminus of EL&WB at Tramway.

In spite of the remote location, construction progressed rapidly – including the excavation of a 1500-foot-long earth cut leading from Tramway, and a 1500-foot-long trestle built with piling and cribwork across Little Allagash Stream at the top end of Chamberlain Lake, and a much smaller trestle spanning Ellis Brook (the site of one of the railroad's 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 along 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 Realty Company while at least 12 flatcars were transferred from Great Northern's aborted Seboomook &



Above: Looking north across Eagle Lake, you can see the horse-powered capstan that tightened the boom around the floating pulpwood, bringing it closer to the three conveyers that dumped it into pulp cars.

Left: Converted by the Great Northern Paper Company's Greenville shop, this unique rail truck began "life as a Lombard Standard 10-Ton Tractor.

St. John Railway. At Tramway each car was remodeled. Each received 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

If you waited along the tracks of the EL&WB to catch a glimpse of a Climax or Shay 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 oil-burning Plymouths purchased new from the Fate-Root-Heath Company. At least one of these was hauled overland by a Best tractor to Ripogenus Dam (at the mouth of Chesuncook Lake) where it was loaded on a barge and floated up Chesuncook Lake. The other may have arrived over land from Lac Frontiere in Quebec. After the railroad was completed, these Plymouths performed switching duties at Tramway and at Umbazooksus.

Like many backwoods operations, the EL&WB had a rail truck. Built by the GNP's Greenville shop, it began life as a Lombard Standard 10-ton tractor. As you can see from the photo above, to say it was unique would be an understatement.

The EL&WB also owned two steam locomotives; both were hauled overland from Lac Frontiere in pieces and reassembled at Tramway.

EL&WB #1, a 4-6-0, (c.n. 4552) was built by Schenectady in 1897 as #109 for the Chicago, Hammond and Western. Later, she became #15 as part of the New York Central system's Indiana Harbor

Belt. By 1912 she was working as Potato Creek #8 followed by a stint as #63 on the Grasse River before arriving at the EL&WB in early 1927. By then, she was a veteran logger far removed from her days on the CH&W where she sported a wooden cowcatcher and fancy clearstory roof. It was soon discovered that more reliable motive power was needed than this well-used locomotive.

If EL&WB #1 could be considered a typical, if a bit large, logging locomotive (at least by New England standards), then #2 was as far from typical as could be. Built by Brooks 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 January 1928 (with water scoop removed). EL&WB #2 soon became the primary motive power while #1 was delegated to backup duty.

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 well over 250,000 gallons of oil per operating season (from June through November). All this oil, as well as the lines gasoline and Diesel fuel had to be hauled during the winter by Lombard tractors from Lac Frontiere on special tank sleds. An old steam Lombard boiler, left over from the 1913 operation, served to heat the oil so it could be pumped into oil tanks lin-

ing the tracks at Tramway. At one point "King" Lacroix was importing so much oil from Imperial Oil of Canada that American companies began to protest. Fearing problems with the U.S. Customs Service, he began purchasing oil stateside, and shipping 55 gallon drums of it in via Greenville. For many years, these drums littered Tramway.

✧ Operations

During the winter, Lombard tractors, working out of large supply depots at Churchill Depot and Clayton Lake moved long sled "trains" of pulpwood from where it was cut to Churchill Depot. There it was piled into "mountains" on the ice of Churchill Lake. Come spring it was "boomed" to Tramway to begin its trip on the railroad.

As you can see from the track plan, the terminal at Tramway was quite complicated. There a horse turned a capstan mounted on a log raft that crowded the pulpwood into three conveyors. These 225-foot-long conveyors were powered by Fairbanks Morse single-cylinder Diesel engines, and just lifted the wood from the water and simply dumped it into waiting pulpwood 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 locomotives (otherwise busy switching cars to make up trains). A wye allowed the locomotives to be turned.



Above: The frame of EL&BW #2 heads for Tramway behind a Lombard tractor. After arriving at Lac Frontiere, Quebec, both of the EL&BW's steam locomotives were disassembled and mounted on sleds for the 50-mile trip through the wilderness.



Left: EL&BW #2 as she appears in 2007 in a clearing in the woods between Eagle Lake and Chamberlain Lake. EL&BW #1 is also there.

An EL&WB train consisted of 13 to 15 cars, and hauled an average of 175 cords of pulpwood per trip.

The southern terminal, at Umbazooksus, also had a Plymouth for switching and a wye, but it was in 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 floors of the cars had that 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 when Umbazooksus Lake was choked with pulpwood, awaiting the spring drive. A small building built on a cribwork pier served as a warehouse.

At first, the EL&WB railroad operated 24 hours a day, 6 days a week, 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 nearly \$2,500 dollars a week due to derailments. (Company records show a total of 175 derailments.) Eventually a 12- to 15-hour day became standard.

An ongoing problem at Umbazooksus was the large volumes of bark that clogged the unloading area. A floating scraper was constructed – it operated through cables running from the locomotive. Strong winds could hamper loading and unloading, and caused many hours of productivity to be lost. Nevertheless, over its short life span of 7 years, the railroad moved 692,825 cords of pulpwood.

On September 3, 1933, 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 shed at Tramway. Seventy years later, approximately 2 miles of tree-choked track remain. Unfortunately, through a misunderstanding, the engine shed was burned by the Maine Forest Service in 1969 with the locomotives inside, and the fire left few traces of the small community. Pulpwood cars lie rotting on the sidings where they were last spotted. The two Plymouths have gone to a private collection. Parts of the Lombard rail truck are strewn on the forest floor. EL&WB numbers 1 and 2 rest in a small clearing in the woods in the middle of what is now Maine's Allagash Wilderness Waterway.



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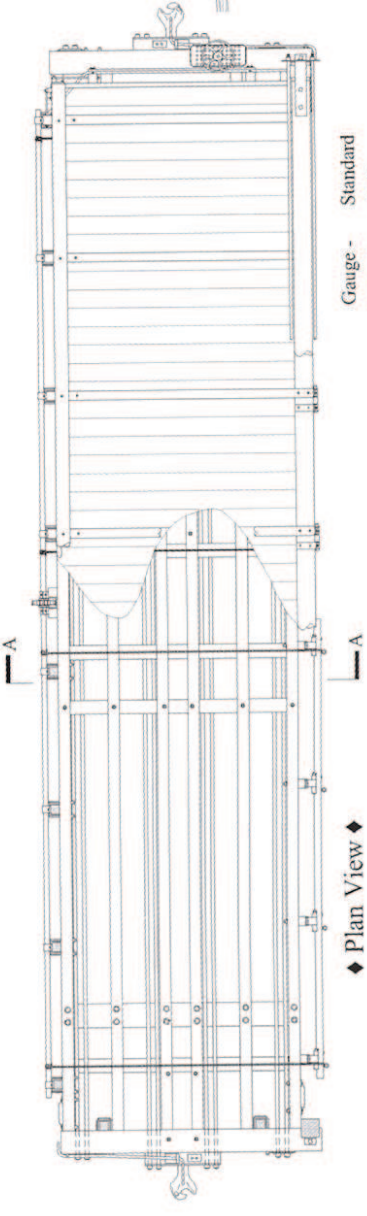
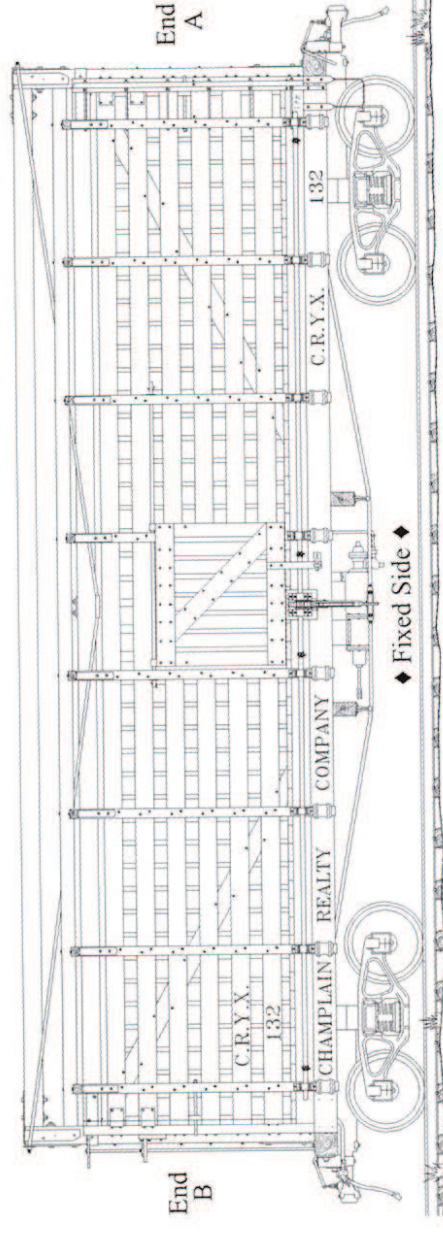
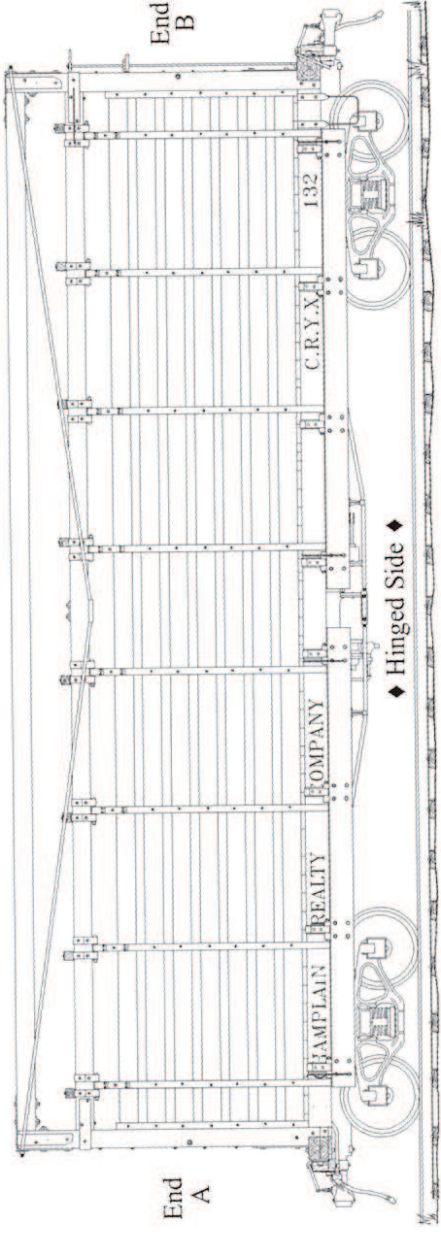
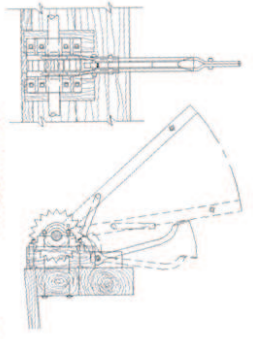
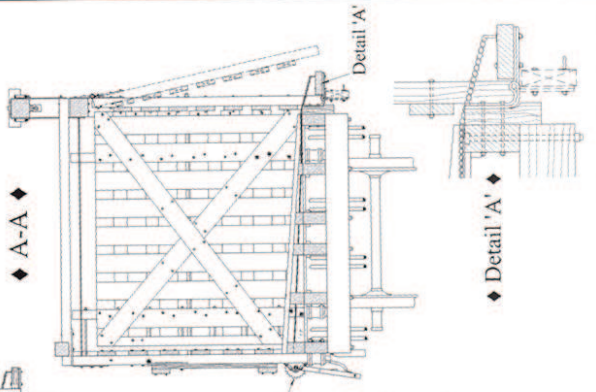
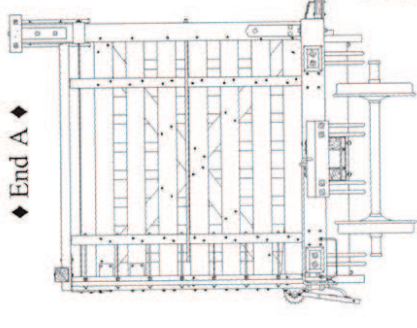
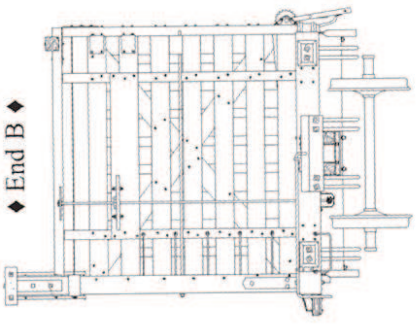
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SIDE-DUMP PULPWOOD CAR

DRAWN BY THE AUTHOR
HO SCALE



Gauge - Standard
Length - 40 ft.
Capacity - 17 Cord (Nominal)