

SMALLPOX IN THE MAINE LUMBER CAMPS

1902-1903

Terence Harper, November 2022

With a recent global pandemic, replete with quarantines, vaccinations and long lingering after effects fresh in our memory, it's interesting to reflect on the periodic pandemics that swept the lumber camps of Maine's hinterlands. While today it's COVID-19, during the winter of 1902-03 it was smallpox that struck fear into the hearts of the lumber camps with their crowded and often less than sanitary living conditions. Combined with the somewhat nomadic lifestyle of the lumbermen of the day, remote locations far and away from medical help, a virulent outbreak could be devastating.



Upper St. John River Lumber Camp Crew

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A report dated July 28th, 1903 by the Public Health and Marine-Hospital Services noted that in October 1902 there were 28 cases of smallpox reported in one Quebec lumber camp just across the border from Jackman. The men in the camp had broken quarantine and went to their homes. The State board immediately setup an inspection station in a hotel along the Old Canada Road to intercept men coming across the border to work in the camps. Here they were stripped, given a disinfectant bath, and all their clothing and belongings disinfected, then vaccinated and given a certificate for proof of vaccination and sent on their way. In spite of these measures, smallpox still made it into the logging camps by men who had come across the border using numerous trails which could not be guarded.

Similar stations were setup at other points along the border. As effective as the stations were, there were some problems with men refusing to be vaccinated. For instance, at Glazier Lake, where a trail crossed the border over the ice of the lake, one party of 30 men “unusually lacking in respect for law or custom” simply walked past. By June 1st this camp had detained about 300 men with 200 being vaccinated.

During the remainder of the 1902-1903 cutting season the State board was kept very busy trying to squash the outbreak. For instance, instructions were sent out to the camps to inform operators on what to do if an outbreak occurred. They also sent medical teams into the camps once an outbreak was identified. For example, on December 12th Dr. Nichols – Chief Inspector for the State Board of Health, along with a nurse, was sent to the North Branch of the Penobscot River where approximately 500 men were working in various camps. On arrival he found 3 cases which he isolated. After vaccinating the exposed men, he returned home – but not for long. December 26th once again found Dr. Nichols traveling into the woods. Only this time to the Seven Islands region of the upper St. John river. Arriving by train in Fort Kent, he then spent three days traveling up river by sleigh. He found up to 58 cases of small pox in various camps in the region. After doing all he could including removing the infected persons from the camp and isolating them in a small camp built especially for that purpose. Then vaccinating the remaining men and disinfected the camp (using Formaldehyde) as thoroughly as possible he headed back to Fort Kent. It's hard to imagine having to do all this in the most remote and crudest conditions often in sub-zero temperatures.

Throughout that winter of 1902-03 there would be numerous outbreaks, not just in the camps but also in towns and villages including Ashland, Van Buren and Presque Isle. Particularly hard hit was the St. John Valley. Smallpox outbreaks flaring frequently as men returned home from infected camps. It wasn't just humans that were affected. In one community it was reported that as many as 100 horses had been infected.

Often logging camp owners, bosses and crews were reluctant to cooperate and as a result of the outbreak of 1902-03, rules were created to forbid the hiring of men that could not prove vaccination and to encourage cooperation with medical authorities.¹

Public Health and Marine-Hospital Service, "Report of Surg. P.C. Kalloch", July 28th, 1903



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