THE TELOS CUT

by Elizabeth Bennett

In the 1840s, the need to drive logs down the Penobscot River and into Bangor was so strong it motivated wheeling and dealing, sparked violence, pushed innovation, and ultimately turned a river around.

In the 1840s, Bangor was the lumber capital of the U.S. Twenty years later, by the Civil War, it was the lumber capital of the world. Maine, with her virgin stands of majestic white pine, tall and straight for ship masts, had developed a booming industry, and much of it was floated down the Penobscot River to Bangor.

On the Penobscot, a lumberman could fetch a good price for his hard work—better than anywhere else. Thoreau tells us that, even as early as 1837, there were "two hundred and fifty sawmills on the Penobscot and its tributaries."

Sadly, not all of Maine's waterways emptied out through the Penobscot into Bangor. The rivers of the northern forests flowed into the St. John River, which wound along Maine's northern boundary with Canada and then east and south to the Atlantic at the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick. Lumber sold here was at a lower price than lumber on the Penobscot.

When the U.S. and the British crown finally settled the contentious northern boundary, New Brunswick decided to tax the lumber that came down the St. John. This wasn't a problem for Canadian lumbermen—the British government gave a rebate on lumber chopped in their provinces. It was a problem, however, for Maine lumbermen.

The situation was ripe for a little Yankee ingenuity. It was common knowledge that Telos Lake, the headwaters of the Allagash River and part of the St. John watershed, was just a mile off from Webster Lake, part of the Penobscot watershed. From Telos to Webster was an ancient ravine, once a stream bed that flowed downhill the whole way.

So in 1838, three Bangor lumbermen, Amos Roberts, Major Hastings Strickland, and his brother Samuel Strickland, petitioned the Maine legislature for a charter, or an act of incorporation, to build a cut between the two lakes. This project seemed of obvious interest to the state, because a cut like this would open up a large tract of white pine to the Maine lumber market and whisk it away from New Brunswick. Surprisingly, the state declined.

Undaunted, the men took another route: they decided to purchase the land. In 1840, T6 R11 was an undeveloped square of raw, wild land. It was owned jointly by the states of Maine and Massachusetts, Maine having only broken off from Massachusetts twenty years earlier. Within its boundaries lay the mile between Telos Lake and Webster Lake.

However, when the men tried to buy from the land agents, they sparked a bidding war. It was Lewis Hancock who clawed his way to the top, with a hefty bid of $35,000. Here begins some tricky business, because really, Hancock was a business partner of Roberts and the Stricklands. Hancock paid $7,000 up front, given to him by his three business associates, and gave his personal notes for the rest. Then, as a slight-of-hand, he quitclaimed to Roberts and the Stricklands, bestowing the land, but retaining the debt. However, Hancock was broke. He was incapable of paying the debt, and his partners refused to pay it either.

Even with creatively discounted land though, the men were about to make a shaky investment. For one, T6 R11 had the mile between Telos and Webster, but it did not include the place on Chamberlain Lake where a dam would have to be built to supply water to the cut. That land still belonged to the state. Also, the men did not have the legal right from the state to build the cut on their own land. The land agents sold T6 R11 with a clause in the contract that reserved the state's right to build a cut or to buy one made by private owners, paying the builder only the cost of construction. The land agent said that this meant the owners could build the cut, only

if they had permission from the state.

Roberts and the Strickland brothers decided to build anyway. In March and April of 1841, Hastings Strickland hired Shepard Boody, an explorer, and highly knowledgeable surveyor, capable of surviving in the Maine wilderness. Together, they built a dam on Telos Lake. It appears, though, that they were hesitant to build the other dam at Chamberlain Lake dam on state owned land, but it was unavoidable. Once the Chamberlain Lake dam was built, the waters rose 11 feet and overflowed down the natural ravine. Their logs sailed into Webster Brook and onto the Penobscot. They charged their lumbermen 50 cents per thousand board feet.

In the fall of 1841 and into the winter, Strickland and a crew of men cut trees between Telos and Webster and dug out the Telos Cut. That spring in 1842, Roberts and the Strickland brothers allowed more lumber to go through the improved cut, again charging 50 cents per thousand board feet.

Frustratingly though, the Chamberlain dam blew in the spring of 1843. It took some of the shoreline with it, and the replacement dam had to be longer and more expensive than the first. However, the second dam wasn't tall enough.

A few years later, a wealthy Massachusetts lumberman, David Pingree, began buying Maine land. Rumor had it that he owned 25 townships in the Maine woods. Pingree bought six territories near Roberts, including the one with the Chamberlain dam. Pingree replaced the useless dam and drove lumber down the Telos cut, paying the same 50 cents per board feet toll. Somehow, however, Roberts, now the sole owner of T6 R11, began to sense trouble over the tolls. He offloaded the property to Rufus Dwinel.

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Unlike Roberts, Dwinel was not shy about trouble—and trouble came immediately. Most of the lumber headed down Dwinel's cut was harvested by lumbermen working on Pingree's land. As Dwinel tried to arrange matters before the spring lumber drive, all of Pingree's men refused to pay Dwinel's introductory rate of two shillings (33 1/3 cents). They said it was too high and that Dwinel should get the legislature to assign the toll. Dwinel suspected that Pingree's lumbermen intended to run their harvest through the cut without paying, and that Pingree had put them up to it.

But Dwinel wasn't going down without a fight. When Pingree's loggers made it to the cut, Dwinel had entirely blocked it off with a boom, a string of linked logs used for corralling floating lumber, doubled over six or eight times. Dwinel would not let them through without paying the two-shilling toll. Dwinel had hired fifty to one hundred men, some of them straight from prison, armed with butcher's knives. Lumberman Samuel Hunt said, "I had rather face a piked hand-spike than such knives." The other lumbermen must have agreed, because they all coughed up the toll before moving down the Penobscot. This was called the Telos War.

Though Pingree had lost the first battle, he won the war. In 1846, Pingree's loggers petitioned the state legislature to give them permission to build a sluiceway from Telos Lake to Webster Lake and charge 10 cents per thousand board feet. This slick move would have

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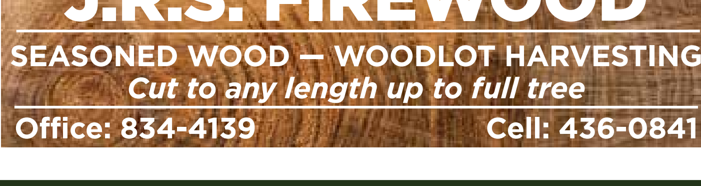

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effectively taken the cut from Dwinel and transferred it to the lumbermen, without any compensation to Dwinel. An extensive hearing before the Committee on Interior Waters followed. Boody, Roberts, Hastings Strickland, the land agents, and many lumbermen were called to testify over the course of several days. The state offered Dwinel a compromise. He got to keep his cut, if the toll was reduced to 24 cents per board feet. Dwinel conceded defeat.

Lumbermen spent the next century looking for other ways to send more of the timber on the Allagash River down the Penobscot. More dams were built. Steamboats ferried logs between lakes. So much water was driven away from the Allagash and St. John Rivers that twice infuriated northern lumbermen with their logs sitting on rocks in dry river beds dynamited dams. In one instance, when the dam was destroyed, the St. John River in Grand Falls, Canada, 165 miles away, rose three feet. Eventually the machinery to build a tramway and a railroad was hauled into the trackless wilderness, assembled, and tended, allowing the lumber to be transported to the Penobscot waters by rail. Moving the lumber by rail was derailed when logging trucks came into use. Maine loggers, you might say, have always been able to get lumber to the Penobscot by hook or by crook.

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