

Spring Drive

A North Country Tale

Also by Chuck Guilford

Beginning College Writing

Nonfiction; Little, Brown and Company

What Counts

Poetry; Limberlost Press

Paradigm Online Writing Assistant

Nonfiction; WordCurrent Press

Photography Credits:

Cover Photo: Stephen Grant

Landing and Scaling Logs, Aroostook Woods, Maine;
Keystone glass lantern slide; author's collection

The McDonald Boys, Menominee, Michigan, 1881;
viewsofthepast.com; Superior View, 156 W. Washington St.,
Marquette. MI 49855

SPRING DRIVE

A North Country Tale

by
Chuck Guilford

WordCurrent Press

First WordCurrent Edition, February 2009

Copyright © 2009 by Chuck Guilford

All rights reserved.
Published in the United States
by WordCurrent Press.



www.wordcurrent.com

ISBN: 0-6152-6846-3

Library of Congress Control Number (LCCN): 2008911757

Publisher's note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and places are the author's imaginative creations or are used fictitiously. Any similarities to actual persons living or dead are coincidental.

Book Design: Stephen Grant
Printed in U.S.A.

I'd rear a laurel-covered monument,
High, high above the rest—To all cut off before their time,
Possess'd by some strange spirit of fire,
Quench'd by an early death.

Walt Whitman

Foreword

The ancient white pine forest of Michigan's Upper Peninsula was logged in the late nineteenth century by men like Frank McDonald and John "Ian" McDougal, whose stories follow. These two, like many others, came to northern Michigan from Canada. They came partly for adventure and partly for jobs.

In those days before chainsaws, diesel trucks, and helicopters, a season in the north woods meant working half a year at an isolated logging camp, often at thirty or forty below zero. Rising before dawn, the men fueled up with salt pork and sour-dough flapjacks drenched in gravy or syrup. Then, armed with crosscut saws and cant hooks, the loggers were hauled by sleigh to the ever-receding woods to begin another day of felling trees. Once cut and bucked into logs, the timber was loaded on horse-drawn sleighs and hauled by icy skidway to a frozen riverbank, where the logs were scaled and stamped on the end with the company's mark, then stacked and arranged like jackstraws in a makeshift dam.

In spring when the skidways went soft and runoff built up behind the dam flooding over the banks, one log, the key log, was pulled and the whole season's payload crashed on downstream. A few select loggers—called river hogs, river rats, or

river drivers—earned extra pay by guiding the timber downriver using pike poles and peaveys, wading waist deep among ice chunks and logs when occasion required, to free up a snag or break loose a jam. At a mill town like Menominee, where the river emptied into Lake Michigan, the raw logs arrived in a booming ground. There they were sorted, scaled again, and cut into lumber, then shipped south to Chicago by schooner or wood-burning barge.

Despite Menominee's frontier remoteness, the town didn't exist in complete isolation. Not only was it economically linked by ship and rail to Chicago, which provided executive management and capital for many of its timbering operations and consumed most of its lumber, it was also linked to other north woods communities in a thriving backdoor economy. Miners and drummers, hustlers and hucksters, prostitutes and preachers made their way from town to town along a tenuous network of logging trails and dirt roads that linked places like Escanaba and Ontonagon in Michigan with Hurley and Florence in Wisconsin. Many who traveled this circuit were rootless vagabonds—fugitives or fortune seekers—frequently colorful and frequently dangerous. Operating out of Florence, Old Man Mudge and his daughter Mina ran a chain of brothels. Mudge, a one time preacher, was a cultured man who dressed well and liked to entertain guests by singing and playing the violin. Though guests were entertained in high style, Mudge's operation was also reputed to have a makeshift dungeon containing a chamber of horrors where he disciplined the girls who worked for him. The girls themselves would typically stay in one location for a short period and then, as they

started to seem tired and predictable, they would be rotated along, like Burma and Lily, to another town where they would look fresher and more appealing.

During spring drive, Menominee ran over like the river. Loggers just in from the woods filled boarding houses, saloons, and brothels to overflowing. If life in the winter forest was rugged, during spring drive, so was life in town—for men and women alike. Men from different camps or ethnic groups challenged each other in street fights and barroom brawls. Tin-horn gamblers came up from Chicago to fleece the hicks. At a place like Fanny's, a man might blow a whole season's pay on whiskey and women in just a few days, or down at the Montreal House lose anything left at poker or craps. Back outside, he might lose his life. Townsfolk, braced for the onslaught, found their way of life disrupted, their streets unsafe, their tempers short.

The principal events recounted here took place in Menominee, Michigan, in 1881. Of several nonfiction accounts, the most gripping can be found in Richard Dorson's, *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers*, published by Harvard University Press. Theodore J. Karamanski's *Deep Woods Frontier: A History of Logging in Northern Michigan* from Wayne State University Press also contains an account and is an excellent source of information on the white pine logging era. In addition, the Menominee Library has a collection of materials relating to the incident.

A photograph of the two "McDonald boys" also exists. According to Dorson, "George Premo has seen the picture. He is a tough man, but he says the picture is more than the

human stomach can stand.”* Indeed, that picture is not easy to look at, but be that as it may, it is offered as “ocular proof” that the central events recorded here did happen.

Although this story has roots in historical fact, it has long since passed into legend. As Dorson says, “Echoes of the tale float around Michigan and her neighbor states, and can be heard in saloons and boarding houses when lumberjacks and lakesmen talk about knife-killings and witch-healings. No two granddads tell quite the same story, for this is strictly a family tradition, never frozen in print, and unceasingly distorted with the vagaries that grow from hearsay and surmise.”*

In this telling of the McDonald boys’ tale, the factual truth of news reporting often yields to the speculative “what ifs” of fiction: names, dates, and locations have been changed, characters and incidents invented. But the essential story is based on an actual historical incident and is accurate in its most salient particulars. Accounts of lumberjacks have always been the stuff of legend—their truth, the truth of the human imagination.

* Reprinted by permission of the publisher from BLOODSTOPPERS AND BEARWALKERS: FOLK TRADITIONS OF THE UPPER PENINSULA by Richard M. Dorson; pp. 169, 173, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1952 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College, Copyright © 1980 by Richard M. Dorson.



Landing and scaling logs.

Frank

THE SKIDWAY WAS SOFT. Sleighs bogged in the mud and slush. It was early April, the end of white pine season. The red-breasted nuthatch and shy snowshoe hare had long ago vanished, followed by the lynx, the wolverine, even most of the foxes. Tomorrow the loggers—the lumberjacks, shanty boys—would leave for town, too. The camp would soon be deserted, left to crows, mice, and chipmunks.

Today the men were restless, waiting for their camp boss, the big Irishman, Con Culhane, to announce who'd drive the logs downstream. For the others, nothing remained but to toss a few belongings in a rucksack, hitch a wagon ride to town, and collect the season's pay.

"Be naught left but skunks 'n bedbugs," Frank muttered, glancing over at his cousin Ian, who sat, knees hunched almost to his face, on a low stump a few feet away. A fine, misty rain hung in the air, but the two wore no coats. A heavy wool shirt, even a damp one, would keep them warm enough.

Frank, the smaller of the pair, didn't mind rain. Wet felt good. When he could sit outside wet and not freeze, it meant spring was near.

"Not even these t'amn lice," he went on, scratching his

SPRING DRIVE

scalp with both hands, trying but not expecting to get a reaction from his cousin. “They’ll come along for the ride. T’amn bedbugs can stay here an’ starve.”

Last fall, the camp was just a gap in the trees, a place where sun broke through the white pine canopy to the forest floor when the sky was clear. This camp, CON 1, was owned by Consolidated Lumber, out of Chicago. Such places sprang up throughout Northern Michigan each fall, first in the Lower Peninsula, then when pine ran out there, across Mackinaw in the Upper. Like the rest, CON 1 grew over the winter until nothing remained for miles but shin-high stumps and tangles of slash, land clear-cut in every direction, as far as the eye could see. In summer, branches and needles would dry in the sun. Then—maybe not this year, maybe next, or the year after—would come fire. Splintered limbs and branches would wait out those seasons till a stray spark from some flue or campfire found a nest of needles. Then would come the burn. Not just a few random slash piles, but sky blackened for miles as flames spread in every direction, devouring animals, towns, the moss on the ground—till the earth itself was a sea of flames, pitching and heaving. At last, having consumed even themselves, the flames would flicker and die into smoke heaps and charcoal stumps. That’s what happened a few years back in Peshtigo, just across the Wisconsin line. It could happen here, too.

For both men the past winter was a frozen memory of creaking stiffness and sweat and icy silence. But now water stayed water after hitting the ground. It didn’t freeze, not in the day anyhow. And days lasted longer. Tomorrow, when the key

A NORTH COUNTRY TALE

log was pulled, the river would explode in a blast of water and wood as a whole season's harvest careened downstream.

Frank turned toward his cousin, who sat silently working a bit of wet sawdust between his fingers and thumb.

Frank had stopped trying to figure Ian out, stopped wondering why he kept quiet. Times like this, Frank liked to talk. And Ian, the perfect audience, always listened, or at least sat quietly without telling him to shut up.

Frank was glad his cousin had followed along this year. Except for the previous winter when Frank left Quebec to cut trees in Michigan and Ian stayed behind on the farm to look after his mother, they'd always been together. They'd grown so close, sounded so alike with their Scots-Canadian burrs, most people thought they were brothers.

Soon, whatever Culhane decided about the river trip, they'd head out for Oregon. Ian, Frank knew, would tag along, not to find a life for himself, not even because he was unhappy with what he'd found here in Michigan. Like a child behind a parent, he'd follow, never sure where they were headed or why but trusting Frank to explain—relieved not to have to figure this life out for himself.

Well, maybe Ian *was* just a dummy like they said. Or maybe not. In all their years together Frank had never quite decided one way or the other. By now, he'd stopped trying. Ian was just Ian. That was enough.

"Say aye, y' want t' go!" he blurted suddenly at the top of Ian's lowered head. "I see it in your face. Y' don't fool this river rat."

Ian looked up, his broad face a blank.

SPRING DRIVE

“Not that y’ got a chance in hell, anyhow. It’s the seasoned men drives the green wood down. You’ll go when it’s t’other way ‘round.”

As their eyes connected, Ian’s vacant look gave way to a slow half-smile. He was twenty-two, his face broad and round with a sparse three day’s beard on his upper-lip, on his chin, and below his sideburns. His face was strong, muscular, powerfully direct, unclouded by self-doubt and inner turmoil.

“Nay, man,” Frank went on. Talking, like rain, felt good, helped relieve tension. “You’re still so green I might ride you down.”

“Aye,” Ian mumbled at the ground, hiding a smile, “y’ might hafta.”

“Cot’amn!” Frank exploded. “That Culhane. What’s he ken? What’s he ken what happens out there in t’woods? Hell, he don’t see nothin’. Just how often y’ kiss his ass. That’s all. Hell, it’s clear who’s goin’—Maki, Seppi, Valin—all them lousy Finns. They got this outfit all tied up. Them ‘n the Irish. They don’t let our kind in.”

Three years older, Frank was smaller than his cousin and darker—in looks and temper. Unlike Ian, who always rolled along at the same even pace, Frank swung between over-confidence and self-doubt, optimistic enthusiasm and blind rage: sometimes a snake coiled to strike, sometimes a clown, sometimes both at once. Other men, especially older ones, kept a distance. Frank was too erratic, too hungry. And he talked too much.

“But who’s got more call t’go? You tell me, eh! Who’s cut more wood?” He stared into Ian’s eyes. “That’s right! No one!

A NORTH COUNTRY TALE

Okay! So Culhane don't pick me—eh? So what's that say for this whole t'amn camp? Eh? You tell me!"

Ian shrugged his shoulders.

"It means we're gettin' out a this swamp for good. Goin' someplace new. Someplace where things ain't all twisted backwards like this. It means Oregon. That's what."

Ian reached between his legs for another handful of wet sawdust.

Frank couldn't believe anyone, even Ian, could be so indifferent at a time like this. The two-week bonus they'd earn running the river wouldn't make much difference—enough for a good meal, a bottle of whiskey and maybe a whore.

Still, he wanted to let go in that wild burst of water when the dams first broke, to free up a big wing building into a jam without getting crushed or tangled in ice and logs, then, on a clear, deep stretch to lie back, hands behind his head, while the river pulled him lazily along under small white clouds . . . But he could live without that. Once the logs reached the big river, the booming company would take charge anyhow, and the best of the trip would be over.

Mostly, it was pride.

Culhane's decision would be a judgment, a verdict. Last year, Frank's first in camp, he hadn't deserved to go on the river, not when so many older men, seasoned men, had earned it. He just wanted to get into town and get paid, blow off some steam and head home with some money left in his pockets. Now *he* would have tales to tell.

Back home, he told Ian how he got hired on by the tight-faced superintendent in the black wool coat, the gray silk

SPRING DRIVE

vest and high starched collar. He chuckled and told how the man's nose hooked a little, like a snapping turtle poking out of its shell, set to take off a finger.

"You go to Camp Number 3," the man had said flatly, looking down at a big gray book where he wrote what Frank supposed was his name. And Frank told how when he arrived Con Culhane, the camp boss made him prove his worth by fighting an Irish teamster.

That was it. He was a lumberjack—or a shanty boy, as he heard himself called in town. First he worked the road crew as a monkey, building skidways for teamsters. His job was to keep up the path to the river, watering it smooth and icy slick from end to end, shoveling horse manure and ashes onto downhill grades to help keep the timber-laden sleighs under control. Not that manure helped much. Though the skidways were mostly level, sleighs had no brakes and could easily rush out of control, manure or no. When that happened, the teamsters just hung on and hoped they were lucky. If not, they were dead pretty quick—no matter how skillful or careful. While they lived, though, teamsters, like top loaders, belonged to the camp's elite.

As a road monkey—"chickadee," the teamsters called him—Frank was the lowest thing in camp, the last served his meals, the butt end of every tired joke.

But he saw who ran the show, how they got there, how they held on. So he volunteered to help top load a bulging sleigh or free up a widow-maker—a cut tree that got hung on another and couldn't fall.

He flashed his dirk, a bone-handled Scottish dagger

A NORTH COUNTRY TALE

passed down by his father, claimed he'd stick it in a man as soon as a tree. He waited for someone to call him on that, but nobody did. By January, he was a sawyer. One of the men.

That was enough for one year. He'd left home a boy and come back a man. Not just a man—a lumberjack, a logger.

During the long summer nights, when his mother and aunt lay in bed, he told Ian about life in camp and about the town of Menominee—about whiskey and cardsharps and women, and all of it out in the open, magnificent brawls, eyes gouged out with thumbs, faces ground bloody by caulked loggers' boots. A dollar a day looked like plenty when you were used to nothing, and when a whole season's pay came at once.

Frank had spent most of that first season's pay in six days on whiskey and women. Sure, the whiskey was watered, the women mostly older and bored, but as long as the money lasted he had plenty of both. And no woman alive looks bad to a logger fresh out of the woods. Ability counts, and those old gals had ability, as Frank could testify in detail.

But that was last year.

This year was different. Frank picked up a twig and poked it in the partly frozen sawdust, poked a little harder till it snapped. Someone else might have eased up and let it spring back, but Frank would feel the limit and press on till it broke. And not just with twigs.

Once, back in February, he had pressed his foreman, Maki. That's when things started going wrong. It was late, about half the men in his shanty were asleep. A few gathered around the big barrel stove, smoking and swapping stories.

Frank lay awake in the blankets and straw of his bunk, the

SPRING DRIVE

middle one in a tier of three along the back wall. He dreaded the four a.m. wake-up call and just wanted to sleep, but the talk and some bad indigestion from too much supper kept him awake. He was fed up with these tales and the men who told them. He was tired of the beans and the lard and the sweat, but especially the lice crawling over his scalp.

This season the camp felt different. Having proved himself the first year, he took a closer look at the men, and when he did, he saw they were shanty boys after all. The company owned them, it used them, it destroyed them, and it threw them away. If you wanted to get up past sawyer or teamster, you had to sell more than your muscles, your skills, and your time. Frank wasn't sure what that was, but he knew he wouldn't sell it. Not even if he got an offer, which he hadn't.

He looked through the smoke-filled air and the tangle of sweaty clothes hanging like stalactites from the bunkhouse beams. His foreman, Maki, was half lost in an old tale about how he and Culhane got caught in a ground blizzard once when they were out cruising for timber, up near Grand Marais. Half-frozen, half-starved, they were found by a pack of wolves almost as desperate as they. Culhane, pretending to be injured, lured the leader in close and stabbed him in the heart. Then, while the rest crouched at a distance, the two ate the leader's raw flesh and warmed themselves with his flayed-open carcass.

Frank looked up at the bunk above his, where Ian slept. Though the night was well below zero, the shanty was hot. The stench of sweat-soaked wool mingled with pine and pipe smoke like a mask he couldn't wipe off. Lice crawled through

A NORTH COUNTRY TALE

his hair. "Travelin' dandruff," the men called them. The bed-bugs were feeding.

Yet the tale went on. Half-frozen and covered with blood, Culhane and Maki, the Irishman and the Finn, arrived in Grand Marais, looking for shelter, trying to explain to a Frenchman.

Unable to escape, Frank lay half-listening, wondering how much the tale had grown over the years, how much the old Finn himself had come to believe. The beans in his stomach struggled against digestion.

"By God," Maki always said to wrap up the story, pausing and shaking his head in disbelief, "those wolves saved our life."

This time, when the line finally came, Frank was ready. He let rip a long, low, cheek-slapping fart. The shanty convulsed in laughter. Even Ian chuckled from the bunk above. Everyone laughed but Maki. He didn't move.

"You laugh?" Maki raged.

The shanty fell silent.

"You laugh?" He crossed slowly and deliberately to Frank's bunk. "You tell me why? You tell me why I don't laugh! You laugh but I don't! You tell me why!" He grabbed Frank's long johns, twisting them up in his fist, thick with soft muscles and fat, his hot, foul breath all over Frank's face. "You say it, by God! You tell me!"

"Aye, old man! I'll say it!" Frank threw Maki's arm back, breaking his grip, getting some breathing room. "We laugh at you!" He spit the words into Maki's face. "We laugh because you lie! You 'n Culhane eatin' wolves! Hah! I ken what you eat, Maki. Beans n' lard, like a' the rest of us. And shit!" Frank

SPRING DRIVE

tightened his grip on the dirk. “You hear me, Maki? I say you eat shit!”

Maki lunged forward, his face swollen with heat and rage.

The dirk flashed out from beneath Frank’s pillow.

Maki drew up short.

“Now you hear me, shanty boy,” Maki said, backing slowly away from the knife, his voice firm and deliberate. “You think you take Maki with that dirk?” He stepped up to the bunk again until the dagger point touched his puffed-up chest. “You think so? Then you do it. You do it, by God, or you shut your fool mouth!”

Frank lowered his knife and looked away—but slowly, and only after flashing a look that said somehow wordlessly and in less than a second: “I know what you are, you old fraud, and I know how you beat me.”

To stab one of the top dogs in camp would have been plain crazy. The other men griped about Maki behind his back, and Frank had stood up to him, called him down. Now he expected the others to join in, to help oust Maki from power.

But it didn’t happen like that. Instead, the men drew away, treated Frank like an outcast.

Even Culhane, the camp boss, who had never paid Frank much mind before, was all over him now: “Something wrong wi’ yer back, boy? Ye’ can’t bend over? Cut them damn trees closer to the ground or I’ll have O’Malley teach y’ how to bend over! Y’ say something? No? Good.”

And it kept getting worse. Culhane and Maki had him beat both ways. If he fought back or if he gave in and took it—either way, he lost. They held all the cards.

A NORTH COUNTRY TALE

That's why Culhane's decision on the river drive mattered so much: it would prove what Frank already knew—that the whole damn camp from top to bottom was just a frightened pack of ass-lickers who had marked him because he saw through them beyond their shows of bravado to the deep, secret center of shame at what they'd become—not lumberjacks, but shanty boys, swamp rats.

And that's why he was going west, to Oregon—to get away from weasels like Culhane and Maki who sold themselves to the company for the right to control stronger, better men by twisting them up inside and breaking their spirits.

And that's why he was glad to have Ian along. Dummy or no, Ian stuck tight. Frank could talk to him when his mind got all tangled. And lately that seemed like always.

Frank looked down at the two broken pieces of twig in his hand. Then he lined them up next to each other and bent both at once, till they snapped between his thumbs.