

John McLeod

"Mustache Jack"

A True Northern Minnesota Lumberjack

Craigville, Minnesota

By Bill Marshall-- 1998

John McLeod - "Mustache Jack"

There is a certain amount of emotional baggage that accrues when one is privileged to live through 74 winters (with the prospect of another spring to follow). A few quiet moments in the upstairs room of a home of 42 years, surrounded by artifacts of those many seasons, brings a barrage of memories of events that seemed pedantic at the time but now assume poignant proportions as the figures in those events of long ago flood before me.

One such person cries out for acknowledgment from his unmarked grave in a potter's field in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. Lest the world completely forget him, I want to report that he lived and he was a good man!

John McLeod was born July 2, 1873 in Clare, Michigan to Philip and Maggie McLeod. When he was about 11 years old, his parents both died; and he was sent to live with an uncle. 'Jack' said his uncle was drunk most of the time, and it was miserable living there. He pulled out and hired on as a cookee's helper in one of the nearby logging camps -- a little boy fast becoming a man. The lumberjacks were good to him and the camp became his home. Later, when he was about 15 (ca. 1888) he hired out to a timber cruiser who needed an axe man and helper as he left for the wilderness of the Bigfork, Minnesota country. The Government Land Office was getting pressure from logging interests to get the townships with reputed big stands of pine surveyed and had succeeded in surveying T62-R23, T62-R24 and T63-R24 in 1882 and T62-R22 in 1883.

The timber cruiser was a wizened older man that was not given to high living in the woods. They carried a blanket apiece, 2 axes, compass, note books, etc. and two pails. One pail was for boiling tea water, the other for mixing flour with water to a thick consistency so a dough ball could be formed around the end of a green stick and roasted in the fire. This was all the food they had for the three weeks they were out in November. Jack said he almost starved to death but the old guy got along on this ration. When they returned to Bigfork the boss bought a little ham, green with age, from a trader there. Jack said he fondly remembers how good it tasted.

Jack worked all his adult life in logging camps in the Lake States. While living in Calderwood, Michigan (no longer on the state map) as a Woods Foreman, John, now 47 years old, married Susanna B. Dishaw, a Milliner, 30 years old, in Ontonagon on July 1, 1920. The marriage was performed by Percival C. Bailey, Priest. Apparently some 21 years later they were divorced (1941). Jack never talked about it, but I could believe his life in the camps was not amenable to married life, especially when his later employment centered around Craigville - once

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described as the toughest town in Minnesota. By this time Jack had become a well-known foreman and expanded his expertise to laying out railroad construction projects, not the least of which was the Cut-foot Sioux grade which left Camp 29 north of Craigville and penetrated the timber of Northwestern Itasca County and southwestern Koochiching. It crossed the Bigfork River in Section 22 T 63N, R 26W. The bridge was designed and built by Jack and his crew in about 1915. Ed Backus of Backus and Brooks notoriety was the kingpin for the M&O Paper Company and the Minnesota, Dakota and Western R.R. company. It was this company that Jack worked for. Pilings from this old bridge are still in place at the end of the D.N.R.'s trail along the old grade east of Hwy. 6.

Some twenty years later our paths first crossed. Jack was 79 then. He lived in a little shack on a back road in Craigville. Next door to the North was another shack occupied by Hughie Matthieson, another old lumberjack with a very deep voice and a gentle nature. He was a brother of the renowned "Tamarack Slim" - known for his fearlessness on the spring drive. In a shack to the South was Tom Helle, another worn-out lumberjack.

To a young guy in his twenties, enthralled by the woods and rivers of this 'Up North' country, these fascinating last living comrades of the old logging era stood out as giants in an enterprise that would never be again. They had a depth of personality honed by years of back-breaking work in the woods and camps.

My great friends from Effie and I noticed one time that old Jack seemed especially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of growing old. He needed a cane to get around and would haul a chair out into a nearby cedar swamp when he was cutting a few cedar posts. He could sit in his chair and saw with his Swede saw (bow saw). When he was fueling the woodstove in his shack he stumbled around and looked like an accident waiting to happen. We decided to build him a shack behind our house in Effie with an oil stove and his own outhouse. Also hooked up an electric cord so he had electric lights - a big improvement over his kerosene lamp.

It was fun having Jack living with us. Jimmy was 2 years old then and Jack would always order bananas for "Jimma" when he got groceries down at the A & C store in Effie. He never lost his foreman mind-set as I found when I was building a garage with some old lumber Dad had gotten from packing crates for condenser tubes during a construction phase at N.S.P.'s Riverside station. Jack felt pretty frustrated watching a neophyte like myself up on the framework making

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every mistake in the book while he was essentially immobilized on the ground. Believe me, he could still holler out orders with some occasional desperate swearing when he was really disgusted. His foreman qualities were in fine form when one of his old workers came to live with him in his shack. Joe Hamel was assigned a small mattress on the floor - about the same standing as a stray dog. During the day Joe was allowed at the table and since both guys chewed, a 10-quart pail was placed between them.

Jack decided one day to get some 'store' teeth as his own were few and far between. We took him to the dentist in Bigfork - a not-recovered alcoholic - who supplied him with a big set of choppers that clicked like a typewriter when he talked. He only wore them on formal occasions such as going downtown Effie to the store or the Corner Cafe. That mouthful of ivory really changed his appearance.

One mid-winter day with lots of snow around we found that Jack had had a big problem getting up out of the snowbank on the trail to his outhouse after falling on one of his numerous nightly forays. We were really afraid of his freezing to death and talked him into going into the county home at Grand Rapids until the spring breezes melted the snow. He thought it might be O.K. as he was tired of cooking. A couple of weeks after we'd hauled him down there I got a telephone call from him: "Billy, come and get me! I hate it here! After 3 months they give you a big, black pill to get rid of you!" He firmly believed it and in looking the place over when I came to get him the next day, I could see why. He had an iron bed on a cement floor and the place reeked of Pine-sol. The old harpy that ran the place nixed indiscriminate spitting and was as crabby as they come. We decided it was more humane to die in a snowbank, if necessary, than to live that nightmare. Boy, was Jack glad to be home!

The months went by and Jack began to fail in health. One day he was so bad we took him to the hospital in Bigfork, and ministered by a no-nonsense spinster with severe religious convictions, Jack began to holler and swear which greatly offended this puritan and she had his harred hed moved to the darkened basement where he looked like an animal in a cage. A couple of days later he mercifully died - May 2, 1955.

After a brief service he was buried in a potter's field in Grand Rapids. I saw the little marker for his grave a few times after that but many years later went to look for it, and they were all gone. Apparently it was easier to mow with them all out of the way.

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Now all that is left is a memory, a few scraps of paper from his life and his old pocket watch. Somehow I feel better, though, in providing an attestation to the fact that, as one of God's beloved children, he was here and the world is a better place because of it. I really miss you, Jack.

Bill Marshall

November, 1998

SOCIAL SECURITY ACT	
ACCOUNT NUMBER	
468-12-3334	
HAS BEEN	ESTABLISHED FOR
John McLeod	
7-30-37	
DATE OF ISSUE	EMPLOYEE'S SIGNATURE

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

McLeoville, Minn.
EMPLOYEE'S ADDRESS

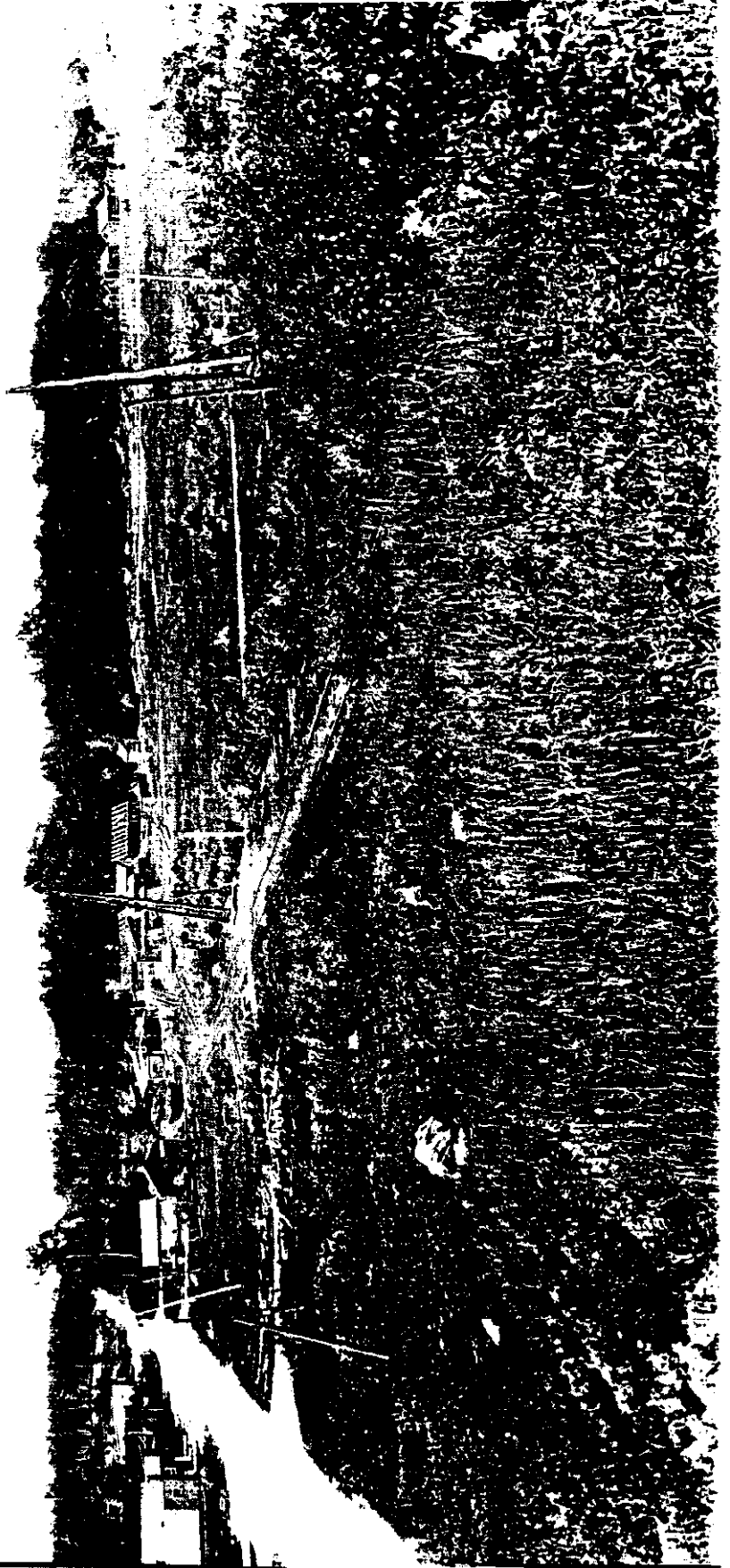
CARRIER'S NAME
John McLeod
Minn. Art Paper Co.

PAYROLL DATA

EMPLOYEE'S OCCUPATION

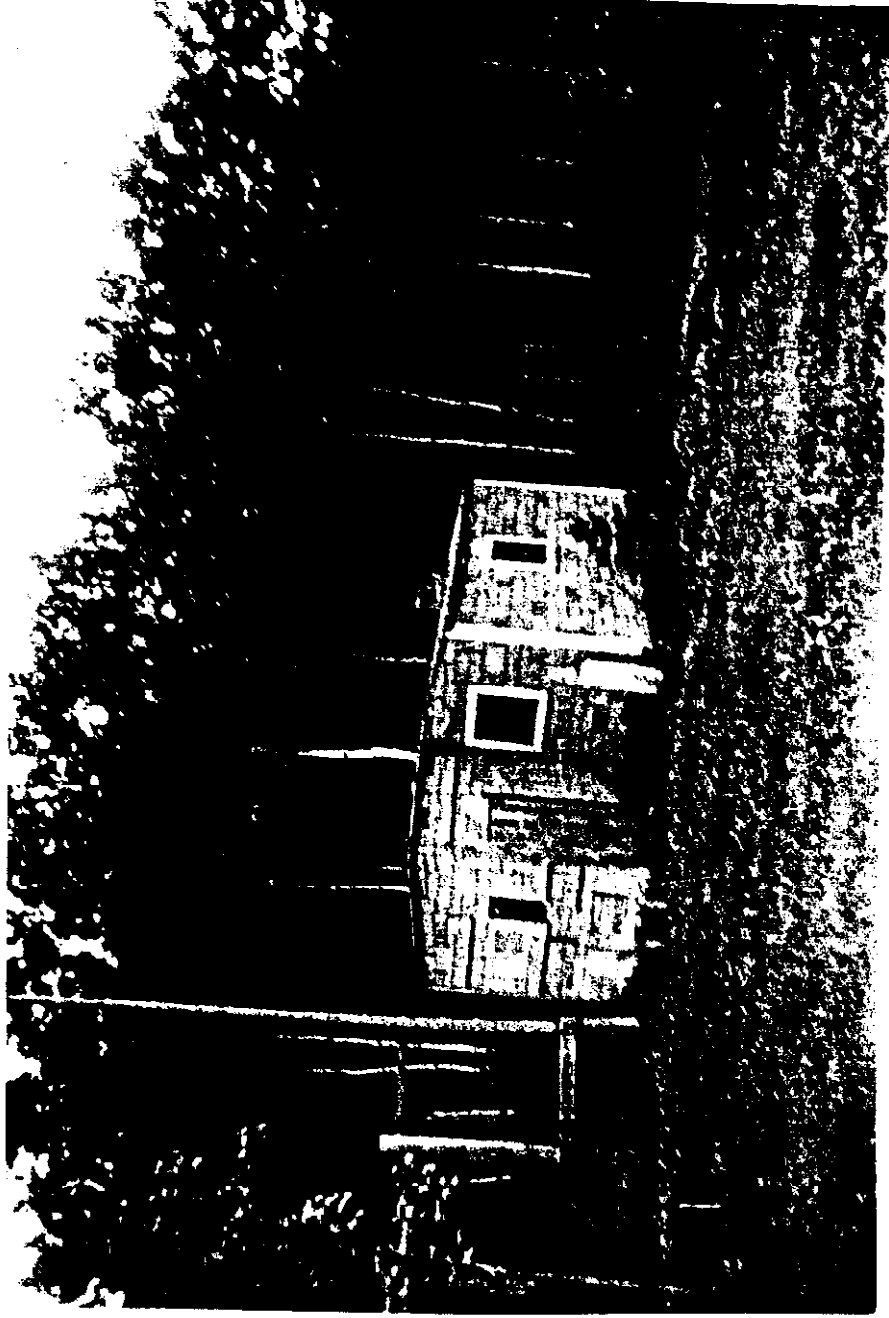


Building International Lbr. Co. (later M&O) bridge over the
Bigfork River - Sec. 22, T63N R26W (A 1915 (?)



CRAIGVILLE, MN looking North. Mpls. & Rainier River R.R. tracks

SUMMER 1954 - EFFIE, MN



12' x 14' - 6' x 6' Entryway

A WREN BUILT ITS NEST IN JACK'S COAT POCKET IN THE ENTRYWAY

Jack's Shark in back of the house.



JACK McLEOD

HUGHIE MATHIESON

RUSTY NELSON



K - 11

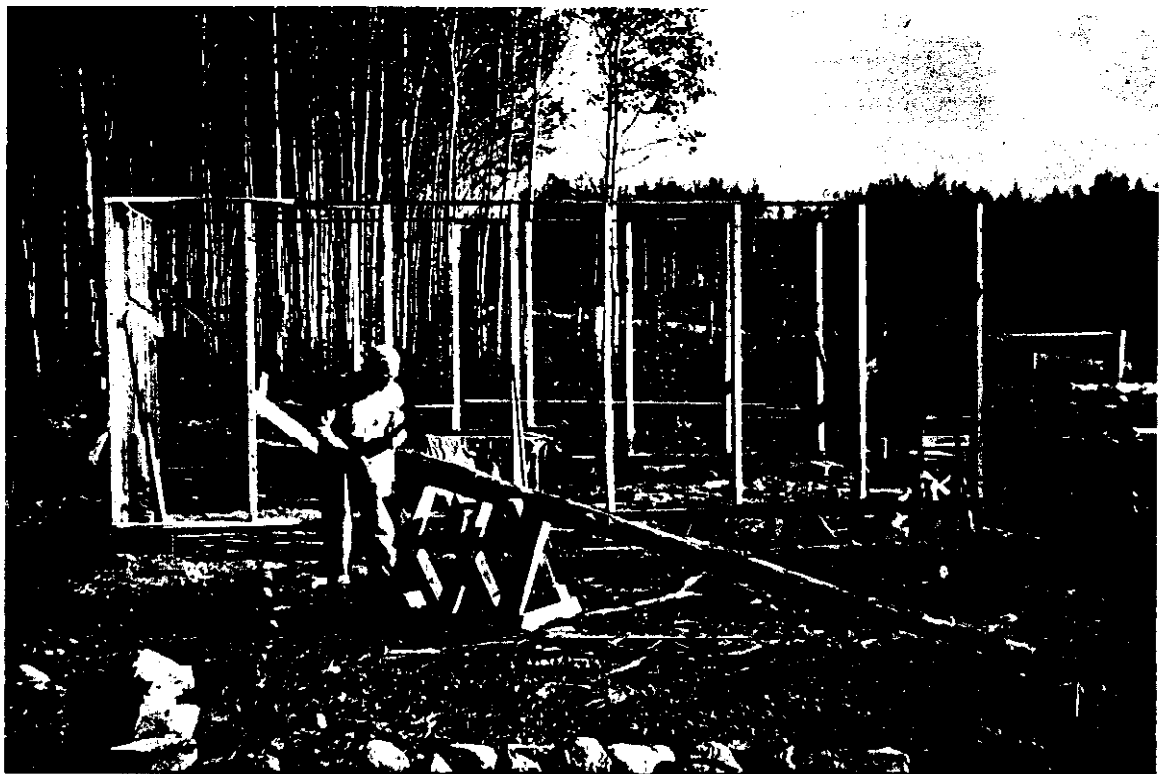
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RUST HUNT

JOHN McLEOD
1873 - 1955



THE WOODS FOREMAN - 80 YRS. OLD
EFFIE, MINNESOTA AUG. 1953



JACK PEELING RIDGE POLES FOR OUR
GARAGE IN EFFIE, MINNESOTA
AUGUST 1952