# HUBBEL'S MILL AT OXTONGUE LAKE
## Lot 4, Concession 11

***Submitted By: Jack Hubbel***

In the mid 30's my grandfather, Urbane Hubbel, lived near Paudash Lake in the Bancroft area. Prior to that time he had been out west and raised beef with his brother Wesley near Drumheller. I don't know what his motivation was – I suppose roots run deeper than most of us like to believe, however, he made the decision to move back east. I do know he started a cheese factory in Madoc after his return and then ventured into the lumber business with his son Frank (Hence Hubbel and Son Lumber Co.) at a later date. I believe it was 1935 when they tendered for government timber limits in Haliburton and, much to their surprises, actually won the tender. The limits contained some two hundred square miles and included parcels of land in Sherborne, Livingstone, McClintock, Finlayson and Nightingale townships. Two hundred square miles sounds like a lot of land, but when you think about it, we're only talking about a square area slightly greater than 14.1 miles. Even so, I recall Frank saying the limits were big enough that once cut over, the original cut would be mature enough to start all over again.

Urbane and Frank built two mills before moving to Oxtongue, with one at the Park Gate Lake (Long Lake) and the other at Hollow Lake (Kawagama Lake) near Russell's Landing. At that time all logging was done during winter by horse drawn sleighs and logs were simply hauled to the "home" lake, dumped and boomed (encircled with a string of logs chained end to end) on the ice and left until milder weather arrived. After spring break up, when lake ice had pretty well melted, all the log booms were pulled individually down the lake to the mill site and securely chained to shore. Usually homemade steam boats, up to 30 feet long, were used to tow these booms across lakes. I can remember the old paddle wheeler at Park Gate Lake, although I never have had a ride in it.

Trucks, especially after WW11, became larger and more powerful, so by the fifties they had replaced sleighs even though horses were still used to skid logs from where trees were cut to the landings that were accessible by truck. No longer was it necessary to boom logs across lakes when they could be trucked directly to the mills.

One interesting memory of the mill on Park Gate Lake involves Pig Island, located at the western end of the lake. In those days mills grew most of their food, pigs included, and Frank thought he would try an experiment setting pigs loose on this little island to fend for themselves. The island really wasn't an island; it was an area of higher ground mostly surrounded by bog, which would prevent pigs from escaping. The idea worked fine and the pigs

*Gate to Hubbel & Son's Mill, Oxtongue Lake 1948-59*

ate everything in site. There wasn't a snake, toad or bug left undevoured by the pigs and they dug up roots and ate every bit of foliage they could reach. They thrived and flourished, but they also went wild and it was worth a person's life to go on the island without a rifle, which had to be done, if any pigs were going to be eaten. Sadly, the Pig Island Project came to an end, not so much because the land area couldn't support many pigs, but because Frank tired of the ribbing he took from all the men at the mill.

I don't recall any other mills situated on Park Gate Lake in the early part of the century, however the Purdy Mill was on Frank's mill site during the 1960's. There were other mills on Hollow Lake, yet I'm not familiar with the history of that area. As well, I'm not aware of any other mills on Oxtongue Lake and I'm certain there were none after 1920 at the latest.

With the advent of the first two mills, many families moved from the Bancroft area to Haliburton. When the mill was built on Oxtongue Lake in 1949, many of these families settled right around the Oxtongue area itself. The following is a partial list of folks who worked at Oxtongue and most of them lived there: Cliff Farnsworth was the mill manager and his wife Julia looked after the cookhouse with the help of Mr. Chambers. Alex Campbell was the steam engineer and Doug Puffer was the fireman who fueled the firebox with wood. Gordon Godfrey was yard foreman and Bill Cassibo helped Gordon to scale millions of board feet of lumber. Sam Baumhour acted as millwright and he also directed many of the logging operations taking place during the winter. Sam was one of the smartest men I ever knew around machinery and was heavily involved with the construction of the sawmill. Lester Woodcock was the walking boss, as they were called in those days; he was responsible for road building in the bush along with the overall cutting operation – again during the winter. In summertime, he timber cruised for the next year's cut and
determined the best road access to the new cutting area. Morley Card operated the garage and carried out all mechanical repairs; George Godfrey was the sawyer; Ray Creighton hammered away as blacksmith; James Linn tooled all the leather harnesses for the teams of horses; George Lowry, with his big infectious smile, operated the large jack ladder which fed the mill with logs; finally, Wes Clarke, along with other drivers, trucked lumber over countless miles of highways. Other family names associated with the mill if not the Oxtongue area, are: Keown, Mackey, Vardy, Wilkes, Bruce, Hayes, Foran, Switzer, Traves, Lockwood, and Barnhart. There were many other names and I apologize for not recalling them at this moment.

*l-r: Gordon Codfrey, Frank Hubbel- mill owner, Cliff Farnsworth, Lester Woodcock - 1955*

The mill at Oxtongue Lake was large and ahead of its time. I believe the average daily output, during the second year of running, was 34,000 board feet in one shift with a top performance of over 50,000 board feet. The mill only ran for ten years, yet the output improved each year. The sawmill was a two storied structure, powered by a triple expansion steam engine. The tale concerning the boilers origin is interesting, since the massive chunk of metal came from the Old Colosseum building in Toronto Exhibition grounds and it weighed 40 tons, much to everyone's concern. The Department of Highways wasn't happy about the heavy monster being transported across Severn Bridge on highway # 11 – in fact they wouldn't allow it. Frank decided to carry out an engineer's survey, as he called it, to determine if the bridge could withstand the

*Hubbel's Mill, areal view, note the large area cleared on west side Hwy. #60 - 1958*

weight, meaning he went by himself to have a good look at the bridge. His independent survey concluded the bridge was plenty strong enough and he decided to have the boiler loaded onto a tractor trailer and readied for transportation. Wes Clarke was the driver and he had reasonable concern because he knew the Department of Highways was watching the bridge and would prevent any attempt to cross it. In other words, they knew the boiler was coming.

"What will I do if they wave me down?" Wes asked, "Wave back and just keep driving" was Frank's answer, "and we will sort things out later."

Wes started out from Toronto, with what was considered an extremely heavy load in those days, and sure enough when he got to the Severn River the Department of Highways was waiting. The official got out of his car. It was two o'clock in the morning and the official frantically waved with his other hand. Wes respectfully waved back and continued to lumber past the official and on over the bridge. The engineering survey proved accurate and the bridge stayed intact. I'm not sure what the fines were, but I don't know if any other bridge on the circuitous route to Oxtongue was deemed safe enough for the boilers weight.

The sawmill had plenty of power from the boiler and engine to turn the five inch shaft that spanned the entire length of the mill and ran all the machinery. Essentially, the mill was on the second level, with the power plant and power train all at ground level. This was an extremely dangerous place to be around with all the shafting and belting running crazily about, and I learned at a very young age you could be a kid outside of the mill, but you had to be a grown up inside that ground level.

With a 12 inch double-edged bandsaw and an 8 inch resaw, the mill had an insatiable appetite for logs and spit out every species, both hardwood and softwood, that the countryside had to offer. I can remember one occasion when a pine log with an eight foot diameter went through the mill with a burp, but that was exceptional. The carriage, powered by compressor, seated two men and because of the equipment's speed up and down the track, they were seldom hot even on the warmest of days. The mill had its own saw filing room, blacksmith shop, planing mill and dry kiln. There was also an incinerator to burn any wood the boiler didn't need and I can recall on different occasions seeing the smoke at Oxtongue from the Dorset fire tower. Those were the days when air pollution was of little concern.

So the sawmill was active and it supplied lumber for almost every imaginable use. Lumber went to the furniture makers, to house builders, to ship builders, to the Toronto subway when it needed timbers for construction, to bowling pin and pallet manufactures, to toy makers – even to makers of unusual items such as piano keys and beehives. In fact, lumber from the mill can be found to this day in some community building at Oxtongue Lake.

Separate from the mill itself, was the two story bunkhouse complete with billiard table and comprehensive library. The men used to play horseshoes by the bunkhouse nearly every evening and Mel Quinn could handle most challengers. The cookhouse, or cookery, was a great place just for the smells of baked bread, tarts, bacon and eggs, pies, chops, roasts and countless other treats. It had a large-walk in freezer for chilling sides of beef and pork, bacon and eggs, poultry, mutton and all other food items needed for a feast. Julia and George often baked 30 pies at one time in the two galley stoves and they had a machine to peel 20 pounds of potatoes in one minute. When preparing for breakfast the night before, they would crack eggs and plunk them undamaged into a large canner partially filled with vinegar. In the morning

*Hauling giant logs from bush by bulldozer - 1946*

they could lift the eggs out individually because the vinegar had gelled them. A person couldn't taste any of the vinegar after the egg was fried and it looked just like any other self respecting fried egg. So there's a good trick to remember the next time you are cooking breakfast for eighty people or more.

Many parties took place at the cookery and bunkhouse. One was a church group – the old Fortnightly Club from Huntsville United Church. Once Frank invited a visiting troop of boy scouts for dinner and they later surprised him by sending him a trophy of appreciation, which he didn't expect. Many people from all over the world ate at the old cookhouse at Oxtongue and we still talk about it to this day.

I suppose, as a young teenager, my best memories of the mill included those of running out over the boom and helping to shove logs onto the jack ladder with a 16-foot pike pole. I fished there often with my friends Bev Goldthorpe, Mike Hawkins and John Robinson and it was easy to catch three pound bass hiding under the logs to hook enough mudcats to make buckets of steaming mudcat soup.

The mill, during winter months, took on a much different mood and most of the men left for the logging camps where they cut trees and hauled logs back to the mill by truck. The mill still operated the garage because machinery was constantly in need of repair. Morley Card not only kept the garage going at full tilt, but many practical jokes as well. Morley was one of the funniest and most pleasant men I ever met. The cookery stayed open to feed all the men traveling to and from the bush and there were also men who stayed right at the mill to handle and sort out all the logs coming in, which meant there was also life in the bunkhouse to help offset the winter feeling of total desertion. One man was needed just to flood a strip of ice across Oxtongue Lake where trucks drove back and forth from the mill to the far shore. In spite of the flooding, several trucks and one bulldozer went through the ice at various times. The bulldozer, though, proved to be the most difficult to recover. First the ice had to be flooded until four feet of ice encircled the area where the dozer fell through. Timbers were then set up to make a tripod and a hole was cut in the ice with a chain saw directly above the sunken dozer. The machine could not be seen in the dark water, but it could be reached with long poles. It is difficult to understand how the men did it, yet a cable was lowered and actually tied to the winch of the bulldozer before it was hauled out of the water. While hanging above the surface of the ice, other timbers were shoved across the open hole to support the dozer's weight when lowered from the tripod. Morley had it running in short order and the machine soon clunked and clinked to shore indignantly as if nothing had happened.

There were a number of logging camps throughout the timber limits, with the main ones located on Crown Lake and Crozier Lake (McFayden Lake). The men stayed at the camps for five work days then went home or to Huntsville on weekends. They would work from before dawn right through to dusk, in sometimes dangerous conditions, and I don't believe their efforts to supply lumber for the economy was ever fully appreciated by the average person. Some of them cut logs; some skidded and hauled; some built roads; some sanded and maintained the roads. I must say at this time there were many young lads, some only 15 years old, who drove truck on the weekends when there wasn't school and a license wasn't needed to drive in the bush. These lads, in spite of their age, were men. They talked like men; they acted like men and they were men who went out to help their families earn extra money.

The cutters used cross cut saws before chain saws came along; however, I can remember them trying to use air driven saws with limited success. It was difficult for cutters to wade through waist high snow dragging heavy saws and an air compressor to boot. Bulldozers and horses were mainly used before Timberjack
skidders evolved, yet Frank tried everything from Sherman tanks to Bren gun carriers. Bulldozers worked the best of all, though horses really shone for areas of bush with bad terrain. One time Frank bought a good looking team from a horse dealer he didn't trust. The team was big and the horses looked smart (believe me there is a difference), but they acted stupid out in the bush and wouldn't obey commands. Finally, one of the teamsters, who was a French Canadian, asked to try the team. He gave them commands in French and, sure enough, the horses responded and worked out fine. One doesn't normally think of a horse as knowing a language, but these two horses actually ended up bilingual.

The logging camps were fun places too, with many stories about good times, countless jokes and humorous episodes. Many men still recall, with reserved nostalgia, the red hot woodstoves that cooked a person in the early evening, then froze him in the middle of the night after the wood had burned down. There were socks and boots hung up to dry over the woodstoves and there were outhouses that had to be used even though temperatures dropped to 40 below. And talking about humour stories, Frank was involved one time with road building and the blaster became ill. When they built roads and had to remove a stump, it was too time consuming and hard on equipment to use a dozer, so they just popped the stump with dynamite and it didn't even leave a hole in the ground. Frank asked if anyone could take over for the blaster and one of the fellows said he had worked for the Highways and could handle explosives. I was there as well and we were all waiting patiently at a normal distance for the charge to go off. We waited and waited until the men started giving each other knowing looks which betrayed their suspicions that the fuse had gone out and some brave soul would have to walk up and check the charge. Then, when least expected, off it went with a KERRR WHUMP. I can still see that big old stump rocketing out of the ground never to be seen again. Boulders, sticks, mud and dirt flew into the air and it all began to rain down on us. Everyone was running and scratching to find cover, and Frank, like a good father should, turned to see if I needed help, but decided I was doing just fine on my own getting under cover. Our new blaster, as it turned out was used to charges all right, only where the original blaster would have used two sticks for a big stump, this chap used eighteen. If he did nothing else that day he certainly picked up our excitement level greatly.

*Jack Ladder, moving logs from Oxtongue Lake into mill - 1955*

I suppose some would say the mill was a bad thing for Oxtongue Lake and others would say it was a good. Some wouldn't say or care one way or another, but the mill was a fact and it did exist even though it's difficult to believe it after all these years. The mill affected many people in it's day – not just the families who came there because of the work, but for all the people who visited it; bought lumber from it; contracted for it and who outfitted it with supplies, truck repairs and machinery. No matter how one looks at it or how one adds it up, the mill was Frank Hubbel and all I can tell you is that Frank respected and thought a lot of the people in Oxtongue Lake. I believe the sawmill's spirit still exists on the old mill site because strong memories just don't die that easy – even after physical disappearance. Whenever I drive through Oxtongue, I can easily still hear the determined puffing of the steam engine, the laughing and talking of the men and the roaring of old army trucks in low gear as they moved lumber and slabs about the mill yard. I think about all the happy times and all the sad times and all the events that took place before time swallowed up what was then the present.

*Inside Hubbel's Mill, carriage and band headsaw - 1955*

*Boiler room, Alex Cambell-steam engineer, Doug Puffer-fireman*