

The following article was contributed by Marvin Torwalt. Marvin is a writer/historian living in the Love area and has written extensively on the local history. He is well acquainted with many of the names in the article as well as many others in the "Fire Control Program" or the "DNR" as it was called years ago.

Although this piece is not strictly about Fire Towers or Towermen, it does describe the life and times experienced by people in the area. Towermen and women typically work 4 or 5 months of the summer from May to August. Most live at the tower cabin during that time, however for the rest of the year they move back to their homes usually in the surrounding district. What little money they earned while working on the tower certainly helped but they had to find other employment to get them through the winter until next season.

Marvin has captured a sense of what life was like and some of the perils facing the average person back in those early years as they struggled to wrestle a living from the land. Watching for fire, protecting the natural resources and being an active part of the community was the Towerman's contribution to the development of the country.

- Chris

FIRE!!!

As mentioned in a later section of this history, forest fires were seen as an opportunity to make some much needed cash for the early settlers but fire was also one of the most fearsome of the dangers facing the early homesteader.

When the first settlers came to the area they were faced with the burdensome task of clearing the heavy bush from their new farms. The more suitable trees were used for the first log houses and when sawmills appeared in the district others were sawed into lumber for outbuildings, granaries and often new homes. Sometimes the larger trees were grubbed out which was done by digging out and chopping off as many roots as could be reached and then pulling the tree over with a team of horses or oxen. The remaining trees and brush were cut down, usually with a swede-saw and axe, piled and burned. Occasionally the fires that were set to help clear the land got into standing timber (often on another settlers property) and everyone who was able, including children as young as 9 or 10, turned out to control and hopefully put out the fire that could endanger the whole district.

While heading home from such a fire on the Ted Azevedo property in May, 1953, 17 year old Donald Fraser was killed when the small tractor he was driving broke a pin in the steering gear causing him to lose control on the steep creek bank near the Francis home 1 ½ miles west of the Co-op Store. The tractor upset at the bottom pinning him under it.

Another local casualty of fighting fire was Wilhelm (Willy) Sager. In 1963 while fighting a fire on his own property he was struck on the head by a falling tree which caused him to become severely disabled and he spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

As the years went by and more land was cleared the chance of a farmer's fire escaping into the forest was greatly reduced.

Another very real danger was house fires.

In the early days almost all homes used tin stove pipes. If the pipes were not cleaned regularly the creosote which sometimes became heavily coated inside them tended to catch on fire and the fire was often so hot that it could burn through the pipe and unless it was caught in time could set the house ablaze. There were many ways that a house could catch fire but a stovepipe or chimney fire was probably the most common.

The Sager home in the Moose Run District was destroyed by such a fire in the mid-winter of 1937/38. The family lost everything inside except for a box of photographs, a pan of bread dough and a few items of wearing apparel.

Mrs. Sager had been preparing to bake bread while her eldest daughter, Hedwig, was going through a box of photographs at the table. When warning of the fire was given by another daughter, Erna, the pan of bread dough and the photographs were the handiest items and they were taken out when the family fled their burning home. The fire spread so quickly that there was little time to save very much else other than a few articles of clothing.

The fire had started on the roof of the house and was probably caused by hot sparks from the stovepipe which may have been the result of fire in the pipe.

Though the pan of bread dough had been saved all the bread pans had been destroyed in the fire so one of the children walked the ½ mile south to the Norman Henderson home and borrowed all of their pans. The Sager family had a large outdoor clay oven so, fortunately, they still had the means to bake their bread.



Broadaxe

A house fire is a tragedy for anyone but to the early settler who seldom had a bank account and no insurance it was a disastrous event. In the case of the 14 member Sager family, all who would fit moved into the 172 square foot Byer home with the older children sleeping in the barn loft until a new house could be built.

This family was luckier than most insofar as one of the older boys, Berthold (Bert) already had a good supply of building logs stacked on his own homestead 1 mile to the west. The logs were moved to the site of the new Sager home, squared with a broadaxe and construction began immediately.

It was a very busy time for the whole family because their story-and-a-half house had to be completed before another winter set in while all the usual farm chores still had to be kept up.

A few of the other local homes that were lost to fire over the years were those of Moose Run resident Norman Henderson in 1948, Einer Hagglund's in 1951, Bill Preston's in 1958, Don Green's in 1964, John Runn's in 1968 and Ralph Johnson's, also in 1968. Most of these homes were lost with very little or, in some cases, none of the contents saved.

The Sager and Henderson homes were located ½ mile apart and about 1 mile east of the Moose Run School. The other homes were all located in Torch River.

Some Employment Opportunities

Forest fires were important to the local residents as a way of earning extra money while trying to raise families on land that was mostly heavy bush which needed expensive clearing.

1937 was a very dry year on the prairies which resulted in many fires in Saskatchewan forests. Midale, Saskatchewan recorded a temperature of 113 degrees Fahrenheit which was a record for the province. That year a forest fire broke out on the north edge of the newly surveyed area (Moose Run) and the Torch River district, keeping the fire fighters, which included many local men, employed most of that summer. The men worked for about 10 cents an hour and they were paid for a 20 hour day although they only worked that many hours in an extreme emergency. This gave them a wage of \$2.00 per day which was very good for that time. A man considered himself very lucky if he earned even \$1.00 per day in wages and the high fire fighters wages seemed like a real windfall.

In those days there were no ready made fire camps like there are now so, until the tent camps could be set up, the men had to provide shelter for themselves. The shelters were often pretty simple affairs created by nailing or tying a pole between two trees and then leaning spruce or pine boughs against it. This gave a tent like shelter with just enough room for one man.

One very important piece of equipment for anyone staying out in the bush overnight in the summertime

was mosquito netting. Mosquitoes were everywhere and all seemed to have an ongoing hunger for the blood of the unwary or unprotected. One man claimed after spending a night in the bush that if all the mosquitoes that were on him at any one time would have taken flight all at once they would have carried him off with them.

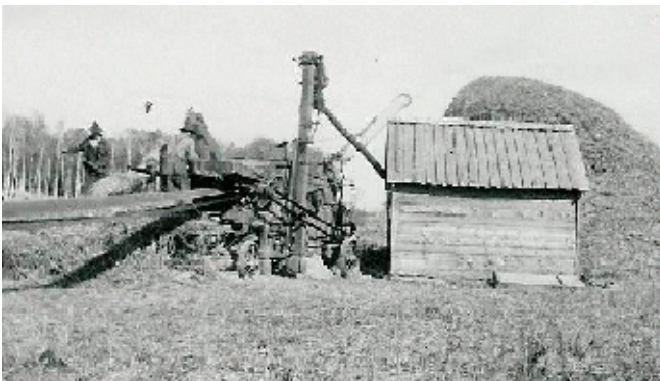
1961 again saw a major fire immediately north of the Torch River district which employed most of the local male population throughout that summer. As recently as 2002 a fire near Tobin Lake again employed many local residents. This fire started from a lightning strike in the Trail's End district in late May and the mop-up continued well into the summer months.



Early trapper Charlie Johnsons catch

Another way to earn money in the bush was by trapping. Almost every man and boy in the Torch River / Moose Run districts tried their hand at it at one time or another. The boys trapped close to their homes for spending money and a fairly high percentage of the local men trapped through the winter farther north. Before snowmobiles and ATVs arrived on the scene, the trapper would head for the trap line, either on foot or with a team of dogs, early in the fall and wouldn't go south again until Christmas to take out his furs, replenish his supplies and spend some time with his family. After the New Year or, in some cases, right after Christmas, the trapper would head north again for at least 2 months.

There are only 2 professional trappers left in the area in 2005. They are Edward Kiehn, the son of one of Moose Run's first settlers and Victor Nowlin, the grandson and son of early Torch River pioneers who had arrived in the area from the USA in 1932. They have been trapping virtually all their lives, from boyhood on.



Every fall, before combines were common in the district, the few threshing outfits that were in the area would start up and move from farm to farm, threshing the farmer's grain as they went. Not all farmers could afford their own threshing outfits so, if they had the time, they would make a deal with the outfit's owner to work off some of the cost of threshing their grain by being part of the crew. Fall was a very busy time on the farm and not all farmers were willing to take the time to help thresh their neighbour's crops so some of the young men of the district would go to work for the threshing outfit's owner. The hours were usually long and the work was hard, especially for the field pitchers who loaded the bundles of grain onto the racks on the wagons. The tops

of these loads were usually eight feet or more off of the ground. In the early years the wagons were pulled by horses that had to be looked after morning, noon and night and this added to the work load.

Harvesting could last into the early winter because a little snow would not harm the stooks of bound grain very much. The field pitchers would shake most of the snow off and by the time the bundles got to the threshing machine the snow would be gone.

Moose Run local Ed Marriot told a story of working on a threshing crew in Ontario when he was a young man. The outfit was slated to move to the next farm and it just happened to be a week-end. This outfit had a bunkhouse on wheels for the crew's accommodations and one of the teamsters decided to sleep in. After being awakened by his co-workers several times to get his horses ready for the move with no action out of the sleeping man, the foreman hit on a foolproof plan. The stove in the bunkhouse was still quite hot from the night so the foreman went in, urinated on the stove, and left. This seemed to energize the tired man and he was out in record time!!!

This story may seem a little far-fetched but knowing the pioneers penchant for practical jokes it is entirely possible.

Another story of the threshing days was related by Jim Green.

While threshing in the vicinity of the Ed Elves farm, which was two miles west and one mile north of the Torch River School, 3 of the young men who were on the crew, Jim Green, Jim Ericson and John Runn, decided to have a little fun. To help out with their plan they went into the village of Love and headed straight for the hotel bar. After staying too long and having far too many drinks they decided to head back since the next day was still a working day. After purchasing some beer for the road they set off, arriving in the wee hours of the morning.

They happened to be bunking at the home of Tom and Kate McKenzie and anyone who remembers Auntie Kate (she was Auntie Kate to the whole neighborhood) knows that she was always concerned with the well-being of her fellow man.

On this particular morning her fellow man included three very tired and hung-over young men. When she saw their condition she felt so badly for them that she insisted on feeding them a hearty breakfast and making hot cocoa to help them get through the day. According to Jim G. that was the last thing they wanted on that morning but, rather than hurt Auntie Kate's feelings, they ate and drank and declared themselves fit to face the day. Jim Ericson appeared to be suffering the most and Auntie Kate was almost in tears over his condition but she believed that she had done all that she could for him.

Gus Ericson, the owner of the outfit and also Jim Ericson's father, reasoned that all these three sick young men needed was some hard work to sweat the alcohol out of their system. To that end he nudged the throttle of the John Deere tractor that was running the threshing machine up a notch or two. This speeded up the machine a bit which meant that the men feeding the bundles of grain into the machine had to work faster. Jim E. decided that the best way to put an end to this nonsense and with the added benefit of getting a rest for himself and his wayward buddies was to stop the machine.

Bundles of grain were fed into threshing machines one or two at a time (depending on the size of the machine) and any more would plug up and stop it. Young Jim was an experienced bundle pitcher and was able to single-handedly pitch in six bundles at once. The boys got their time to rest. The machine stopped! The elder Ericson decided that pushing the boys too hard that particular morning was counter-productive and when the machine started up again it was running at its normal speed.

Sawmills were also seen as winter employment opportunities for many. As was previously noted there were many mills in the forest north of the Torch River and work in the bush was plentiful. Many local farmers had mills of their own though most of them have now been shut down, the only exception in the district being the David and Allison Halland sawmill 1 mile north of the community hall.

Logging has always been a dangerous occupation as many workers found out over the years. Accepting the risk of a logging related injury ranging from minor to serious was part of the job.



In the early 1980's, Nipawin resident Joe Branscombe met with an accident while falling trees for Torch River farmer and saw mill owner Arvid Elves. Mr. Branscombe fell a tree between 2 other standing trees causing the falling tree's butt to lift off the ground, swing around and strike him. He died at the scene.

In the early years most sawmills were of the head rig variety using a large circular saw blade which was 40 or more inches in diameter. There were a pair of rails called the track on which the carriage rode which carried the log past the saw blade causing a board to be sawed from the log. The carriage was controlled by a lever which was operated by a man who was called the sawyer. On early saw mills the lever was pushed ahead to move the carriage forward past the saw and pulled back to bring it back. Many a sawyer accidentally became attached to the carriage in some manner and was dragged into the lever causing the carriage to move ahead even faster. The lucky ones escaped from the log before any real harm was done but an unlucky few were dragged over the saw, which turned at about 750 RPM, and were seriously injured or killed.

In later years legislation was passed making it mandatory for the levers on all sawmills to be reversed so that if the lever was moved forward the carriage moved backwards. Any sawyer who was accidentally forced forward onto the lever by the carriage was immediately released by the direction of carriage travel being reversed.



The Arvid Elves sawmill

Due to the perpetual risk of injury while logging the few professional logging companies that are still operating have almost all gone mechanical. Work that would have kept a three man crew busy for a week or more a few years ago can now be done by two men in 2 or 3 days with the aid of machines.

Some of the sawmills in the area were the previously mentioned Gunder Thompson and Dave Jacobs mills, Sigurd Rione's mill, Blais and Johnsson, Bell and Blais (Basil Bell/Remi Blais) , and the A.L. Nyberg mill.

The mills at Love (Siding) also got most of their timber from north of the Torch River. Some of these were the Johnsson Brothers and Ostberg mill, the Saskatchewan Timber Board mill, Beaver Lumber, and later the Co-op mill.

When Johnsson and Ostberg (Art and Everett Johnsson/Fritz Ostberg) decided to go into the business of road construction full time in 1946 their sawmill employees pooled their resources and bought them out. This became known as the Co-op Mill.

By the mid 1950's most of the larger sawmills were being shut down due to difficulty in obtaining timber berths. This left only a few farmer owned mills in the area as was mentioned earlier. The last of the bigger operations to shut down was the King Brothers mill which was purchased by Oscar Torwalt in 1966. That operation stopped production in 1970 and the era of high volume, privately owned mills came to an end in the district.

Another employment opportunity that was exploited by a select few in the district was the manufacture and distribution of illegal alcohol (moonshining). For some it was quite a lucrative business and in the days before tax audits the proceeds were used to buy and clear land, buy vehicles and help support the family in other ways. The moonshine (also homebrew), as it was called, would be poured into beer or pop bottles and then corked or sometimes capped with a commercially available bottle capper using store bought bottle caps. A 12 oz. bottle of this exotic (?) concoction would bring about 25 cents in the 1930s and 40s and it was very popular at local parties and dances. It was relatively cheap and, if you knew the right people, easy to obtain. The manufacturer would not, in most cases, sell a bottle directly but would stash bottles in various spots near the place where the function was to be held. The buyer would have to pay his 25 or so cents before he got the location of a bottle. That way the supplier would not be caught with any of this very illegal product on hand. Occasionally some enterprising youngsters would search out a few of these hidden bottles and get a free party out of it but all in all it was a very lucrative enterprise.

One of the ways that the moonshiner could get caught was by the purchase of excessive amounts of the sugar which was necessary for the manufacture of a good quality product. (Irate neighbors and selling to unknown buyers were other ways.) These large sugar orders were sometimes reported to the RCMP and then the search would be on.

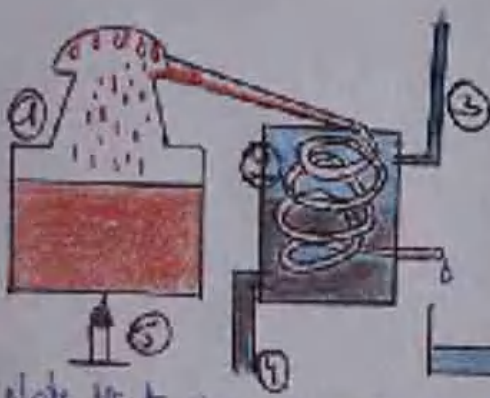
To alleviate the problem of highly visible large quantity sugar purchases some of these entrepreneurs would keep bees or would make a deal with someone who had bees and use honey instead. Although sprouted cereal grains (or in more southerly areas, corn) which were relatively high in sugar content were usually used it only resulted in about 7% alcohol content in the undistilled product so sugar or honey was added to raise the amount of alcohol in the "batch" and thereby increase overall profits.

Of the approximately 900 charges laid for moonshining in Canada in the 1930s and 40s the vast majority took place in western Canada and the majority of these were in Saskatchewan. Two in the recent past come to mind, one near Prince Albert and one near Nipawin. In both cases the sellers sold directly to buyers they didn't know and so were caught up in a police "sting" operation.

One of the dangers of buying moonshine from an unknown supplier was that if not produced using the proper equipment it could be very toxic, even deadly. Early moonshiners sometimes used car radiators to cool the alcohol vapors coming from the cooker back to liquid form. The lead used in the manufacture of radiators would combine with the alcohol and make a deadly brew. Using the wrong ingredients could also prove to be deadly, creating highly toxic methanol as apposed to its more palatable cousin, ethanol.

The distilling of illegal alcohol for resale is almost unheard of today but there are, in all probability, a few diehard moonshiners across the west who still "run off a batch" now and then for their own use.

Worm still



- ① Pot still with arm
- ② Copper tubing (worm) in water barrel. Being 20 around 20ft long
- ③ Cold water intake
- ④ Medium hot water outlet
- ⑤ Heater (electric or gas-fired)
- ⑥ Container with distilled liquid

Note that streams or rivers may also be used instead of a water barrel with water intake/outlet