

Review/Compte rendu

McCord Museum, "The River and the Bush: The Timber Trade in the Ottawa Valley, 1800-1900." Guest Curator: Gerald J.J. Tulchinsky. Designer: Luc Matter. McCord Museum, 21 May - 21 September 1981. Monograph: G.J.J. Tulchinsky, *The River and the Bush/La rivière et la forêt* (Montreal: McCord Museum, 1981). \$3.50 paper-bound.

This exhibit came as a surprise to me because nowhere, either in conversations with staff at the McCord or in reading the monograph, was it mentioned that it was primarily a display of photographs, lithographs, and paintings, augmented by about twenty artifacts. The large and heavy artifacts – mainly broadaxes, pike poles, boom chains, saws, and the like – help to provide a scale for the activities illustrated, but it is the graphic material that is the real focus of the exhibit.

A point of terminology – the Oxford International Dictionary defines timber as, among other things, "... wood used for the building of houses, ships, etc. ... or wood of growing trees capable of being used for structural purposes," while lumber is defined as "... timber sawn into rough planks or otherwise roughly prepared for the market." In other words, lumber is timber but timber is not necessarily lumber. This exhibit focuses on the timber industry in the Ottawa Valley, that is, the square timber shipped to England as whole logs where it was then cut into lumber. Not until the 1840s, with the growth of a market for sawn lumber in the expanding United States, did lumber production begin on any real scale in the valley.

The exhibit is most effective when it interprets the working life of the ordinary shantymen, *draveurs*, and raftsmen in the shanty, in the bush, and on the drive. There are many photographs available of the square timber trade and while all were taken in the declining years of the industry, the ones selected for this exhibit were well chosen to show the progress of the timber from the forest to the docks at Quebec. One is immediately struck, as well, by the technical excellence of the Notman photographs when compared with those from other sources. Presumably this is because the McCord's Notman Photographic Archives contain William Notman's original eight-by-ten-inch wet plate negatives which provide superior quality reproductions. The exhibit was originally planned, according to designer Luc Matter, partly to provide an opportunity to display some of the many documentary photographs of the timber trade in the Notman Archives. Other sources have been tapped for photos, li-

thographs, and paintings, including the Public Archives of Canada, the Musée du Québec, and the Royal Ontario Museum, but the Notman photos form approximately fifty per cent of the material on display.

The exhibit, which has been subdivided into several sections, opens with orientation to the geographical area of the Ottawa Valley and then pays homage to Philemon Wright, the American founder of Hull who took the first timber raft down the Ottawa to Quebec in 1806. Then one enters "the bush" for a series of excellent photographs documenting every step in squaring a timber – lining, blocking, hacking, hewing, turning down, marking, and swinging up. Immediately apparent is the immense, and to modern eyes, unusual, size of the logs being squared, for the white pines 175 feet in height and 6 feet in diameter have gone the way of the men who cut them.

On the opposite wall from "the bush" and rounding out the shantyman's winter life is the shanty itself. In these low-ceilinged, crude log houses, the workers slept on beds of hay or balsam boughs (with their allowance of two blankets apiece), ate their monotonous meals of potatoes with a little meat or fish, and, after working from sunrise to sunset, spent their evenings more often than not cleaning and repairing their equipment. Life was dangerous, dirty, and monotonous, and the photos have caught this bleakness admirably.

A central display in this area contains a lumberjack figure using a broadaxe to square a white pine log and a few other tools. The tools are correct, the figure is dressed properly, but on the whole it seems out of place, almost frivolous, perhaps because it cannot convey the impression of bleakness and back-breaking labour which is so evident in the photographs.

The next three sections of the exhibit deal with the river drive, the development of the timber slide, and loading at Quebec. The drive was the springtime activity of the timber trade. When the rivers thawed work crews guided the floating logs down the tributaries to the Ottawa to be fastened into cribs and then rafts. These men were the *draveurs* who spent long hours in the icy cold water keeping the logs moving and trying to prevent jams. Again the graphics in this area are very informative, illustrating a variety of activities including camping out on the drive, rolling timber in the stream, rowing the enormous timber rafts, and living on the rafts themselves.

Once the Ottawa was reached, timber slides had to be constructed around the most dangerous sections of the riv-

er. Sandra J. Gillis describes the first use of the timber slide by Ruggles Wright in 1829 as "... the most important technological event in the square timber trade...."¹ and a section of the exhibit has been devoted to this apparatus. Here among the technical drawings and photographs appears one of the exhibit's few light touches – a watercolour by C. W. Williams entitled "Prince of Wales in Canada, descending a timber slide at Ottawa, 1860," showing little figures in top hats and tails descending the slide on a typical crib in a very orderly fashion.

The final process in the square timber trade follows: loading at the timber coves in Quebec. Again, as in most sections of this exhibit, the Notman photographs are most effective in showing the magnitude of the industry. Even as late as 1872, the date of these photos, one can still catch a glimpse of what it must have been like twenty or thirty years earlier when one could see hundreds of ships in the timber coves, all loading huge squared timbers into the hold.

The last two sections of the exhibit deal with lumbering and a few of the later entrepreneurs of both the timber and

lumber industries who continued logging on the Ottawa into the twentieth century. One of these, J.R. Booth, in 1908 assembled the last square timber raft to come down the Ottawa; but it was only a commemoration of the tercentenary of Quebec for the square timber industry on the Ottawa had already died, killed by the end of British protection for colonial trade and the depletion of the timber stands.

Gerald Tulchinsky's monograph, written to accompany the exhibit, examines the history of the square timber industry and its impact on the Ottawa Valley from both a social and economic point of view. Whole sections have been taken from the monograph to be used as text for the exhibit, creating a formidable but highly informative series of text panels.

The McCord Museum hopes to make "The River and the Bush" available as a travelling exhibition.

Judith Tomlin

1. Sandra J. Gillis, *The Timber Trade in the Ottawa Valley, 1806-54*, National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, Manuscript Report Series no. 15. (Ottawa: Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1975.)