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## John Mitchell: Journeyman-Poet

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This late-nineteenth-century photo suggests that Maine woodsmen were better schooled in the pugilistic arts than they were in the fine arts. Yet workingmen had their poets, as Edward D. Ives points out. The few scraps left behind by work-a-day writer John Mitchell reveal the wit and irony that was no small part of daily life in rural Maine. Photo from the Great Northern Paper Company Collection, Special Collections Department, Fogler Library, University of Maine.

# JOHN MITCHELL: JOURNEYMAN-POET

BY EDWARD D. IVES

*In this article folklorist Edward D. Ives traces the life and work of journeyman-poet John Mitchell, who moved from job to job in northern Maine at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ives uses oral history and a few extant poems to give us a glimpse at the life of the common laborer on the raw northern Maine frontier. Mitchell was a wanderer, but he knew the world of the ordinary working man from the inside out, and his poems express the hopes, fears, humor and irony of daily life as he saw it. "Sandy" Ives is professor emeritus from the University of Maine, where he taught folklore and oral history and served as director of the Maine Folklife Center. Among his many published works on rural Maine life are FLEETWOOD PRIDE, 1864-1960: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A MAINE WOODSMAN (1968); JOE SCOTT, THE WOODSMAN-SONG-MAKER (1978), and GEORGE MAGOON AND THE DOWN EAST GAME WAR: HISTORY, FOLKLORE, AND THE LAW(1988).*

THE MAINE PIONEER overcame the hard conditions of daily life through his ability to do things himself, said Fannie Hardy Eckstorm and Mary Winslow Smyth in the introduction to their pioneering *Minstrelsy of Maine*. He had to be farmer, carpenter, blacksmith, mason, hunter, trapper, lumberman; upon occasion he was doctor and surgeon; and he was also his own poet:

The idea [they continue] that a select few are ordained to write poetry for others to read would not have been well-received by the pioneer; anyone ought to be able to do that himself—and he proceeded to do it. All he asked was a good tune, a little time to think, and an idea which for its best expression did not require profane swearing. Give him time and he could produce the verses.<sup>1</sup>

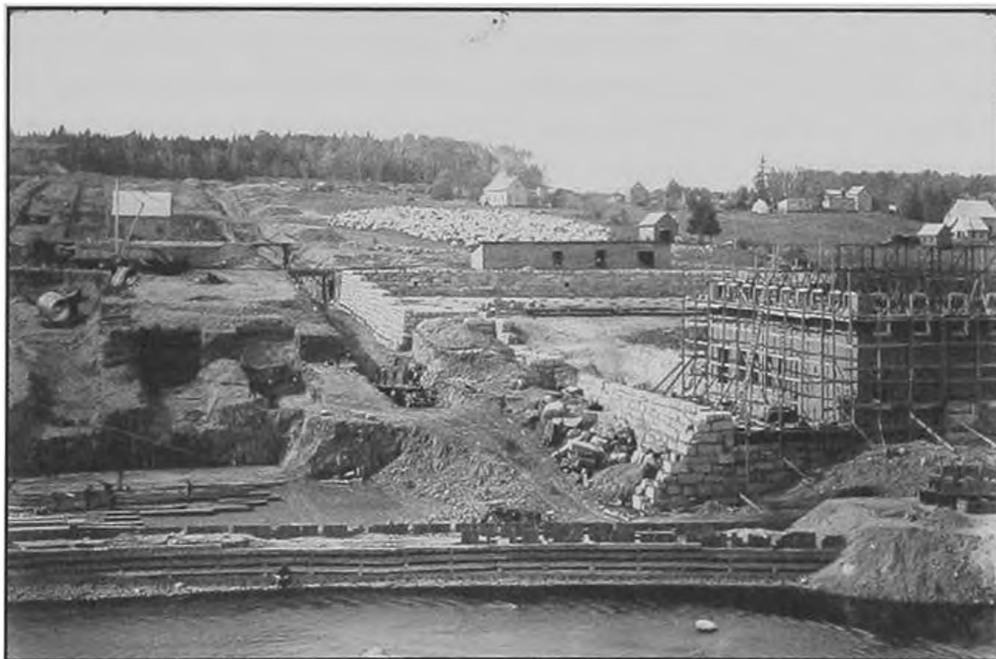
Their book contains numerous examples that are testimony to this widespread and occasional ability, but on the whole it bears even

stronger testimony to the fact that, among workingmen as among elites, there are those who are specifically recognized by their contemporaries as poets, and it is they who are chiefly responsible for creating a culture's songs and poems. My own intensive study of the lumberwoods singing tradition as found in Maine and the Maritime Provinces of Canada strongly supports this idea.<sup>2</sup> Given that there was always a substantial repertoire of "old" or "traditional" songs, and that an occasional piece "trickled down" from popular and even elite culture, the chief creative energy for new songs and poems lay in the woodsmen themselves, particularly in certain men of a poetical turn of mind like Larry Gorman, Joe Scott, John Calhoun, Joe Smith, Michael Whelan, and—the subject of the present study—John Mitchell.<sup>3</sup>

We don't know much about John Mitchell. The 1900 census shows him as forty-six years old, single, born in Maine of Maine-born parents, living in Millinocket, and working at "common labor." Then in October of that same year—less than four months later—we find him some twenty miles up the Bangor and Aroostook line in Sherman Mills, where he worked in a sawmill for just twenty days and earned \$27.68.<sup>4</sup> That is all we know for sure, and admittedly it's not much to go on, but it squares rather well with the judgment passed by the few people who happened to remember him at all: he was "just a drifter." His poems, too, are consistent with this image, dealing as they do with the world of the seasonal day-laborer: potato picker, sawmill hand, woodsman, river-driver.

He was a day laborer, then—a drifter, if you will—one of thousands who went where the work was as the season or the market determined, most of them leaving no mark at all, save as they may swell some statistic. But John Mitchell did leave a mark. He was a poet, and that both set him apart and gave him a special place among his contemporaries, special enough so that when that Sherman Mills timekeeper put his name in the book, he put it as "John Mitchell Poet." No one else in that whole year's record was listed by anything but his name. The accolade may have been bestowed straight-faced or tongue-in-cheek. It doesn't matter; either way it shows John Mitchell as a special person. Marjorie Crandall's testimony, in speaking of her late husband Harvey Crandall, suggests much the same thing:

He [Crandall] had lumbering operations at different times and places—Shorey's Siding, Weeksboro, and Howe Brook, all in Maine, and all types of men working for him. He brought home poetry, we called them, for they had no music, that one of his crew, John Mitchell,



Millinocket in 1899 was a raw, backwoods town that revealed none of the magic that journalists ascribed to its rapid ascent from the wilderness on the West Branch. Millinocket's heterogeneous workingmen and the unsettled conditions their families endured became grist for John Mitchell's "The City of Millinocket." GNPC Collection.

had written and had them printed, and was selling for ten cents a copy.  
I never saw or met the man and know nothing about him.<sup>5</sup>

Not only do we know very little about him as a person, the five poems we have surely represent only a tiny sample of his life's poetical production. There is nothing surprising about this scarcity; it is one of the facts of life for broadside poetry. Such poems were job-printed, usually on cheap paper, for local and immediate sale, and their preservation in any form was largely a matter of chance. That we have as many as five poems attributable to this one man can be seen as rather remarkable in itself, even as some measure of his local reputation.

Before going any further, I should say something about the use of those often-linked terms poetry and song. On the one hand, among those who shared the old lumberwoods tradition, the distinction between them was clear: poetry's "got no air on it," as lumberwoods singer Wilmot MacDonald said. It was meant to be read or recited, and on that same basis the Crandall family of Oakfield, Maine, called John Mitchell's work poems, "for they had no music." On the other hand, the line between the two genres was frequently blurred to virtual nonexistence: words to songs were often recited as poems, and poems were sometimes set to a tune and sung, a process made easy by both genres sharing a common and limited prosody. At least four of Mitchell's "poems," for instance, *could* have been sung to any number of available traditional tunes, but since there is no evidence they ever *were*, I will call them poems for now.

It is time now to turn to the poems themselves. Since no better order suggests itself, I have taken them up in a roughly south-to-north order. That has the coincidental virtue of following the development of the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad—and it is worth pointing out that John Mitchell himself appears never to have strayed too far from those tracks.

The headnote to each poem begins with a brief account of my source or sources, followed by a discussion of any terms that may need explanation. On occasion, rather than explaining the poem I have allowed it to act as a lens through which we may view certain problems—such as whiskey and hoboes—of the time and place.

## The City of Millinocket

*"A SONG FROM MILLINOCKET. John Mitchell, a Workman There, Sings Its Charms in Verse." So reads the head and subhead to this clipping from*

an unidentified newspaper, and in the article's first paragraph the editor explains a bit further: "The new Maine settlement and coming city of Millinocket has inspired many a descriptive article, and now one of the workmen there, John Mitchell, is moved to sing the charms of the village in this way." The eight-stanza poem itself follows.<sup>6</sup>

A little history will put Mitchell's poem in context. Two separate thrusts—one to develop the area's waterpower potential, the other to build a huge papermill—fell together on the banks of Millinocket Stream in 1899, and the Great Northern Paper Company was born. Five hundred men were hard at work there by June of that year; two months later that figure had doubled, and within a year it had increased to better than two thousand. Dorothy Laverty's *Millinocket: Magic City of Maine's Wilderness* gives a good sense of what was going on:

A fever of activity went on in all directions that summer of 1899. Bull gangs were building an extensive freight yard in the Iron Bridge area. The railroad was now transporting construction supplies to the mill. Steel, stone, and brick were taking shape along Millinocket Stream, right in the old Fowler farm dooryard. At Rines Pitch, the outlet of Quakish Lake, a dam to be known as "Stone Dam" and a canal were being built to control the waters coming to the mill. Ward's Dam and other dikes were hurriedly built to create Ferguson Pond, for water storage and wood handling. From the headgates of the canal, water plunged downhill through six huge penstocks to the mill. At this final point, power and manufacturing were united. The waters of the West Branch of the Penobscot River at last were harnessed for the great Millinocket Mill.<sup>7</sup>

The company's chief interest was getting its mill built, far less than building a town to accommodate the swarms of laborers who came to build it. As is generally the case with boom towns, whatever town there was sort of built itself as the work went along. As a result, conditions were generally godawful: whole neighborhoods of tents, hovels, lean-tos, and tarpaper shacks, not to mention hastily constructed boarding houses, all of them overcrowded with young and mostly single men from everywhere. Most notable were the Italians, not from Boston and New York but straight from the Old Country, who soon developed a Little Italy (replete with home-made wine), but there were plenty of French-Canadians, "P.I.s" (Irish from the Maritimes), and assorted "Polacks" as well.<sup>8</sup> Terms like "raw" and "frontier" might have suited Millinocket better than "magic," but it must have been an exciting place, and work was plentiful.

As for the names Mitchell mentions in his poem, all of them are identifiable. Among the very early arrivals was one Bernard (Barney) Kelley. A native of Bangor's heavily Irish tenderloin, we first find him there in the late 1870s as a blacksmith, but over the next twenty years he rose to become proprietor of a boarding house and even of a hotel "near the depot." At the same time he ran an employment agency, "doing business with nearly all of the large lumber firms of Maine and New Hampshire."<sup>9</sup> Then in 1899, while keeping his employment agency in Bangor, he moved his boarding house to Millinocket, and the 1900 census shows him there as "hotel keeper." That same census lists one Albert Carlisle, a young man of twenty-eight, as a truckman. He may have helped Kelley keep his cellar stocked, but that is more than we know for sure.

"Gates" is easily identified as Fred M. Gates, not only Millinocket's first chief of police but its first fire chief as well. Lavery describes him:

Mr. Gates had been city marshall in Old Town and the [Great Northern] Company had called him here for a brief stay in 1900 when Millinocket was a huge construction camp and not yet a town ... until [he] came to stay in 1902. Tales of Gates's handling of stabbings in Little Italy or drunken brawls on Tin Can Alley and in the railroad yards are part of Millinocket legends. The churches were busy teaching the fear of God, but parents were teaching the fear of Fred Gates. When he appeared on Penobscot Avenue at curfew time, youngsters scattered like scared rabbits. He had only to sit in front of the fire station to let this town know that law and order prevailed.<sup>10</sup>

The Company insisted that Millinocket be a dry town, and Gates's biggest problem was how to keep it that way. Considering the presence of a couple of thousand single young men living under crowded conditions—a good portion of them Italians insisting on their wine—that was no small task. Mitchell's punning on his name in stanza six suggests that Gates may have manipulated this situation to his own advantage, and while I can find no evidence to support that idea, maybe that is how it looked to the working man.

When was this poem written? My best guess is the late summer or very early fall of 1900. First of all, John Mitchell was in Millinocket in 1900, at least in late June when the census enumerators were making their rounds. Second, even though Mitchell calls Millinocket a city—something it did not in fact become until 1901—his editor more circumspectly speaks of it as "the new Maine settlement and *coming* city," and I am inclined to take his word on such a matter over the poet's. On the other hand, when Mitchell describes the coming of "autumn tints," I



see no reason not to take his word for that, especially when we find him a month later some twenty miles up the tracks in Sherman Mills. But we'll take that matter up presently.

### THE CITY OF MILLINOCKET

[1]

'Way up the Penobscot river, where the waters fret and fume,  
Where the hum of busy workmen tells of an eastern boom,  
Where buildings of all kinds and styles go up just like a rocket—  
    Where the rock-crowned hills  
    Frown on the mills  
    Is the city of Millinocket.

[2]

There are workmen here from every clime beneath the glowing sun;  
They all come here to labor—they never come for fun;  
And some were forced to beat their way, with nothing in their pocket—  
    They trusted fate  
    And jumped a freight  
    For the city of Millinocket.

[3]

Here you'll find the Italian digger from Boston and New York;  
French, Germans, and Hungarians, and Yankees, too, from Cork;  
But this embryo city—it takes all kinds to stock it—  
    And if you stay  
    You'll earn your pay  
    In the city of Millinocket.

[4]

There are lots of boarding houses in this city in the wood;  
Some of them are up-to-date, while others are not so good;  
But Barney Kelley keeps the best, with Carlisle here to stock it—  
    He can't be beat  
    For something to eat  
    In the city of Millinocket.

[5]

When our day of labor's ended, we sit by the firelight,  
And talk about the yacht race or about the coming fight,  
And men back up their favorite with money in their pocket—  
    There's lots of sports,  
    All kinds and sorts,  
    In the city of Millinocket.

[6]

No whiskey finds its way in here, by passenger or freights';  
It can't get in the city unless it passes Gates;  
And, as its gates are moveable, no use to try and lock it—



Millinocket's "Little Italy." GNPC Collection.

So we drink on the bank,  
From the West Branch tank,  
In the city of Millinocket.

[7]

The autumn tints are falling now upon the forest trees;  
The notes of coming winter are borne upon each breeze;  
And men are leaving everywhere, with money in the pocket—  
Far, far away  
They long to stray  
From the city of Millinocket.

[8]

The days, just as the river, swiftly glide along;  
We often catch the drift of a joke or a table-girl's bright song;  
And when we leave for other scenes we may not have to walk it—  
We'll part with regret  
From the friends we've met  
In the city of Millinocket.

### The Great Molunkus Drive

*This poem was given to me by Jane Greenlaw, a student in one of my folklore classes. It is printed on a slip 5 by 10 3/4, headed by the title in large*

*boldface; below that, in smaller boldface “BY JOHN MITCHELL,” and beneath that “PRICE 10c PER COPY.” The whole is pasted on a sheet of light cardboard trimmed to fit. Clearly someone meant that it should be saved.*

Molunkus Stream isn't much, as Maine lumbering rivers go. The East Branch takes its rise in what is known as Thousand Acre Bog, south and east of Patten, and after flowing southerly some forty miles it enters the Mattawamkeag River just below Kingman. The West Branch comes down from Blackwell Bog through Sherman Station and joins the East Branch about two miles upriver from Sherman Mills. Officially Molunkus Stream proper begins at that junction, but whether the “drive” referred to started there or some distance up one of the branches doesn't matter much. In either case, we are dealing with a leisurely stretch of water, a “stream” perhaps ten feet wide at most, much of it meandering deadwater. In fact, so far as I can determine, it received only minimal use as a driving river, most of the wood for the Sherman mills being hauled in by team.<sup>11</sup> But it was driven once for sure—and that drive formed a perfect setting for poet Mitchell's mock-heroic approach.

The irony begins with the title. Since in the late-nineteenth century drives on the Kennebec, Penobscot, and Saint John regularly measured between one and two hundred million board feet each, it is a bit thick to call any drive on the Molunkus—especially one of only half a million—“great.” Mitchell's readers would have picked up on this, and they would have picked up on the curious fact that this “drive” took place in October (log drives normally taking place in the spring), and that it only took a day—or even just a morning—rather than the usual weeks or months. Anyone even minimally savvy about woods work—and that would include just about everyone Mitchell could have conceived of as his audience—would have realized that something offbeat was going on.

As I read it, here is what the poem is all about: due to low water, a small spring drive got hung up in Molunkus Stream not too many miles upstream from the mill it was headed for. Normally a hung drive would stay where it was until the next spring's high water, but in the present instance heavy fall rains gave the owners a brief chance to get their logs out, and they sent the sawmill crew upstream to poke the logs along. It all turned into a hilarious, hurrah-boys lark, with everyone cutting capers and doing things wrong. Three calks in a driving boot is a ridiculously small number, and a man who pushes on a log with a peavey and then falls in isn't much of a driver. The basic technique all the way through the song is that of good-natured ironic hyperbole. Every personal reference was probably worth a laugh or two by those in the know, but of course most of the references are lost to us now.

A few notes: “the bold St. Croix” refers to the river flowing northwest into the Aroostook River at Masardis, not to the St. Croix that forms part of the U.S.-Canadian border. “Horsmans falls” is problematic; no one I spoke to recognized such a place-name, and while some said there had been Horsmans around Sherman at one time, neither the 1900 or the 1910 census lists anyone by that name. However, the 1900 Time Book referred to above shows that “H. Horsman” was a year-round full-time sawmill hand. My best guess is that Horsman was the sawyer’s name, and sawyer Horsman had chosen a particularly cushy spot to “tend out,” from which he could poke the occasional log that came his way into the riffles below his rock, which riffles poet Mitchell dubbed “Horsman’s Falls” in his honor. It’s a bit of guesswork, admittedly, but it would be in line with the whole poem’s tone of playful exaggeration.

### THE GREAT MOLUNKUS DRIVE

[1]

One crisp October morning,  
     In the good old State of Maine,  
 Where men toil in woods and mills,  
     A livelihood to gain.  
 ’Twas early on this morning,  
     By daylight’s faintest gleam  
 That a crew of hardy men struck out,  
     To drive Molunkus Stream.

[2]

This little stream with tree lined banks,  
     Most of the time was quiet,  
 But swoolen [*sic*] now by heavy rains,  
     It was inclined to riot,  
 And Frank the boss said to the men,  
     Come boys, don’t stand and dream,  
 For I want a half O’million logs  
     Drove down Molunkus Stream.

[3]

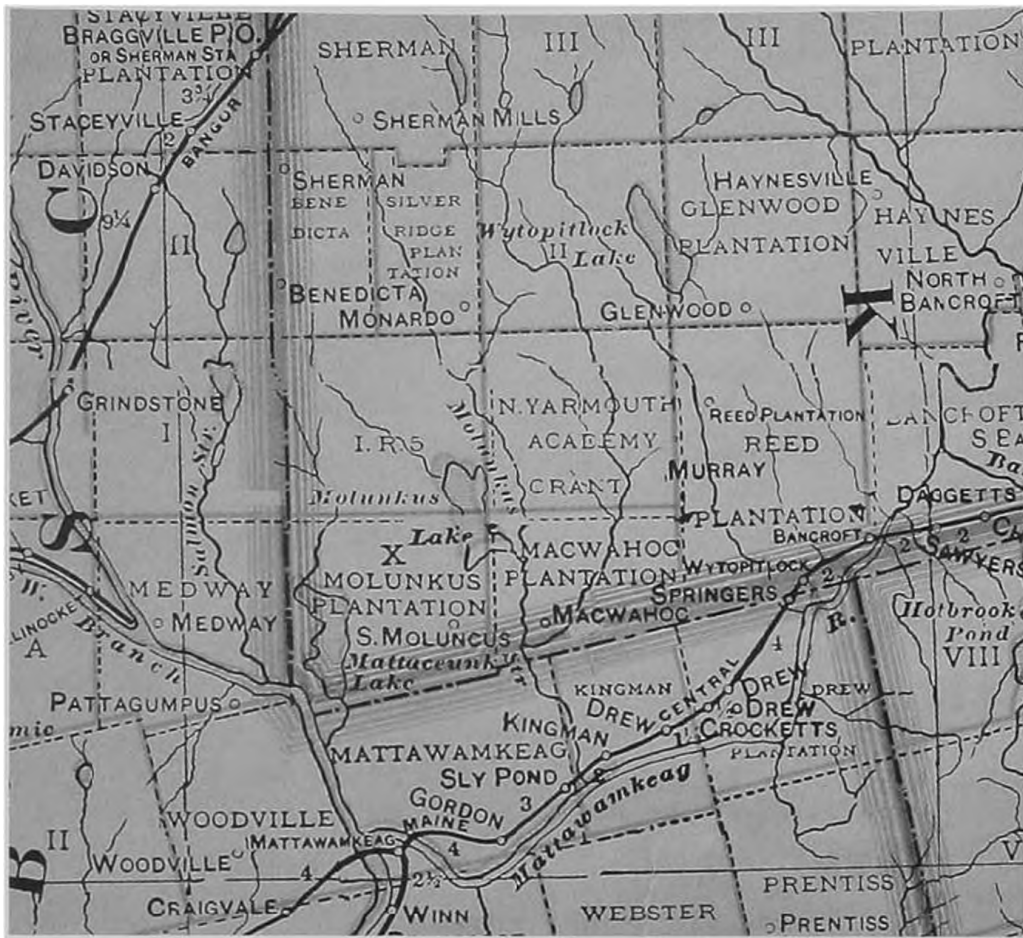
There were drivers here from Houlton,  
     One from the bold St. Croix,  
 Who with three calks in either shoe,  
     Used a cant dog like a toy,  
 And when the logs came close to him,  
     He’d push with all his might,  
 At finding rocky bottom

He was simply out of sight.  
[4]  
Our sawyer was the bravest one,  
His nerves you could not shock,  
For he stood boldly in midstream,  
Upon a giant rock.  
As waters raged on Horsmans falls,  
In his heart there was no fear,  
And when a log came close to him,  
Down stream it's course he'd steer.  
[5]  
One man who wore snow shoes,  
Was always in the lead,  
While drivers on that autumn day,  
Done many a daring deed,  
Those who wore rubbers,  
At single logs would shy,  
White water-men stood on the banks,  
And watched the logs roll by.  
[6]  
And when it came to luncheon time,  
The drivers gathered around,  
Not a man was missing,  
And not a peavy drowned,  
That night we gathered at the house,  
Near the firelights warm gleam,  
And we talked and laughed about this day,  
We drove Molunkus Stream.

### When the 'Taters Are All Dug

Version A, a manuscript copy, came to me in a letter dated April 3, 1968, from Marjorie (Mrs. Harvey) Crandall of Oakfield, Maine, who copied it verbatim from a badly damaged printed slip found in her late husband's papers. It bears the attribution "By John Mitchell," and beneath that "Ten Cents Per Copy." Version B is taken from Roland Palmer Gray's *Songs and Ballads of the Maine Lumberjacks*, pp. 173-75, where it is attributed to one E. J. Sullivan.

Two themes are common in what we can call "transient labor poetry": (1) "the bosses tempt us with promises, but afterwards they are glad to be rid of us"; and (2) "just wait until we get to town!" They turn



Molunkus Stream is a small tributary of the Mattawamkeag, joining the latter near its confluence with the East Branch of the Penobscot River. Certainly not the setting for an epic river drive, the stream served Mitchell's purposes for a spoof on the tales of derring-do concocted about the larger drives on the West Branch. (Cram's Superior Map of Maine)

up time and again in the songs of sailors and lumbermen, and it should be no surprise to find them both in "When the 'Taters Are All Dug," but before we get to the poem itself, it will be helpful to know more about that significant historic pairing: Aroostook and the potato.

Aroostook County is both the northernmost and the largest county in the State of Maine, and it was one of the latest to be developed. The problem was that roads were few and poor, and, during most of the nineteenth century, there was no direct rail connection at all with the rest of the state. Even so, settlement began, the lumber industry moving in first with small family farms following soon after. The newly-opened

land turned out to be very fertile, particularly for potatoes. There was no sudden or early rush to exploit this crop, but as good spraying equipment and (especially) mechanized horse-drawn diggers made their appearance late in the century, more and more farmers began to see that potatoes could be their big chance, as long as they could get their crop to market. And, in practical terms, that meant a railroad.

What was needed was a direct line to Bangor, tying in to points south and west. Several schemes to build such a route had already failed, but finally Albert Burleigh's Bangor and Aroostook was successful, reaching Houlton in 1893 and the rest of the county later in the decade. The result was that local farmers began to prosper as they never had before. Aroostook County soon became one of the most important potato-growing areas in the country.

These turn-of-the-century years, then, were boom times for the county. There was plenty of work for the laboring man, skilled or unskilled, not only on the potato farms but also in the lumberwoods, in local sawmills, and on the roads and railroads. At the same time, Aroostook towns were growing, and construction labor was needed there too. Moving from boarding house to bunkhouse and from job to job as the season and the labor market demanded, a man could pretty well keep busy year-round. No one got rich this way, but it was a way of life for many, one of them, of course, being John Mitchell.

The great fall potato harvest was a classic institution. After the horse-drawn digging machines had turned the potatoes up, an army of pickers would begin the back-breaking work of gathering the now-exposed tubers into their handbaskets and then transferring them to their individually assigned barrels. Payment was by the barrel, and the work went on dawn-to-dusk. Just about every able-bodied person in the county would turn out—men, women, boys, girls, even schoolchildren—and local schools would close for two or three weeks to allow the students to participate. It meant long hours for little pay, but the harvest seems to have been carried on with certain festive and celebratory overtones. Almost every fall issue of *Echoes*, a magazine devoted to Aroostook County life, contains someone's fond reminiscence of what it was like: "Yes," they all say, "it was hard, but we had fun, too, and it helped me buy my new school clothes."

The poem is largely self-explanatory, but a few notes may help. To begin with, the stanza form, with its repeated last line, makes it just about a sure thing that Mitchell modeled "When the 'Taters Are All Dug" on D. J. O'Malley's cowboy ballad, "When the Work's All Done This Fall." O'Mal-

ley first published his piece in 1893, and it is interesting to see that in less than a decade it was well enough known in Maine for John Mitchell to make use of it.<sup>12</sup> The “great potato bug” in stanza one is the notoriously destructive Colorado Potato Beetle, which had reached the East Coast in great numbers by the end of the century and was definitely something to cuss about. In stanza four Mitchell over-emphasizes the importance of migrant labor in the potato harvest, possibly because he was one of those who had slid in “on the bum” himself.<sup>13</sup> For an explanation of “Europe” and “the Line House” as found in stanza six, I refer the reader to the Appendix.

Finally, since Gray’s broadside attributes the B version to one E. J. Sullivan, why am I so sure it was written by Mitchell? The answer is that I am not sure at all, but then neither was Gray. His headnote is interesting: “This broadside was contributed by Mr. Chadburne of Mat-tawamkeag, Maine, in 1916. He bought it from a young fellow who had finished work in the potato country and was without money. Mr. Chadburne thinks him the author of it, but is not certain. Thus the young man paid his way.”<sup>14</sup> Lacking further information—and freely admitting that I am trusting to hunch as much as to fact—I can only say that I believe Mrs. Crandall’s text (A) represents Mitchell’s original slip, while Gray’s (B) is someone’s reproduction (probably Sullivan’s), written some years later from memory. And there the matter must rest for now.

#### WHEN THE ’TATERS ARE ALL DUG (A version)

[1]

Way down in Aroostook County,  
           Where in Winter falls the snow,  
 There in a short hot summer,  
           The big potatoes grow.  
 Where the farmers cuss and talk about  
           The great potato bug:  
 There’s a smile all o’er the county,  
           When the ’taters are all dug.

[2]

In the village store there’s ’tater talk,  
           About their monster size:  
 Some of those yarns sound just like truth,  
           But a lot of them are lies.  
 There is no whiskey to be had,



Spring water in the jug:  
But there'll be an awful racket,  
When the 'taters are all dug.

[3]

When the farmers start in digging  
They'll flag you on your way,  
And smoke or chew tobacco,  
While they talk about the pay:  
And they'll say fill up your baskets,  
Just as much as you can lug;  
Oh they're always in a hurry,  
'Til the 'taters are all dug.

[4]

From east and west, north and south,  
The 'tater diggers come;  
Some have no cash for railroad fare,  
So they slide in on the bum;  
And how they sweat and cuss,  
At the big potatoes tug,  
But the farmers have no use for them,  
When the 'taters are all dug.

[5]

And sometimes, too, the country girl  
May pick up in the field;  
Some love-struck 'tater digger  
May cause her heart to yield.  
In the evenings they beguile the time,  
With a stolen kiss or hug;  
Oh they're bound to have a wedding,  
When the 'taters are all dug.

[6]

And when the 'taters are all dug,  
And the diggers come to town,  
While the dollars in their pockets last,  
They never get a frown.  
Sometimes they go to Europe,  
To fill up their little jug;  
The most of them drop out of sight,  
When the 'taters are all dug.

## WHEN THE 'TATERS ARE ALL DUG (B version)

1.

'Way up in Aroostook County  
Where in Winter falls the snow,  
Where in the short hot summer months  
The big potatoes grow;  
Where the farmers cuss and talk about  
Their big potato bugs,  
There's a smile all o'er the County,  
Till them 'taters are all dug.

2.

In the village stores there's 'tater talk  
About their monstrous size;  
Some of these yarns they sound like truths,  
But a lot of them are lies;  
There is no whiskey to be had,  
Spring water in a jug,  
But there'll be an awful racket  
When them 'taters are all dug.

3.

When the farmers start in digging  
They will stop you on your way,  
They will smoke and chew tobacco  
While they talk about the pay;  
They say, "fill up your baskets,  
Just as much as you can lug,"  
For they're always in a hurry  
Till them 'taters are all dug.

4.

From East to West from North to South,  
The 'tater pickers came,  
Some had no cash for railroad fares,  
But they got there just the same;  
And how they sweat and cuss and pull  
And at the big potatoes tug,  
For the farmers have no use for them  
When them 'taters are all dug.

5.

And sometimes, too, a country girl  
Will pick up in the field,  
Some love-struck 'tater picker  
May cause her heart to yield;  
And in the evenings they'll beguile the time

With a stolen kiss or hug;  
 There is bound to be a wedding  
 When the 'taters are all dug.

6.

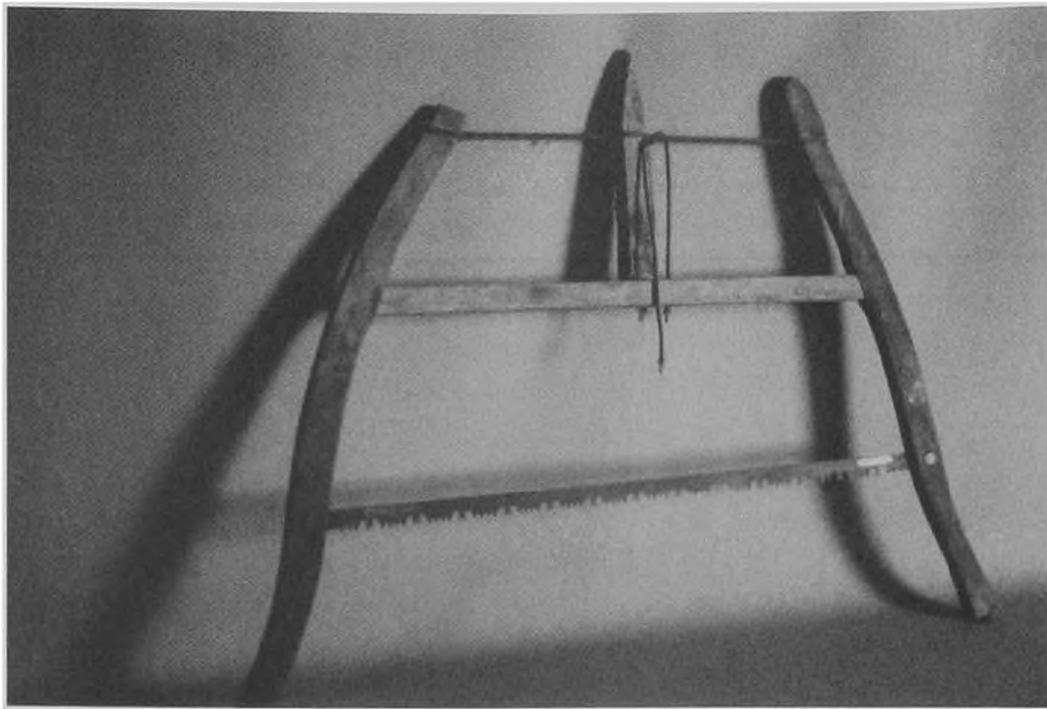
And when them 'taters are all dug  
 And the pickers come to town,  
 While the dollars in their pockets last,  
 They never get a frown;  
 Some of them go to the Line House,  
 For to fill their little mug,  
 'Tis then they drop clean out of sight,  
 For the 'taters are all dug.

## THE HOULTON VIOLIN

*This poem, like the preceding, was carefully copied by Marjorie Crandall from a damaged slip in her late husband's papers, and it too bore the attribution "By John Mitchell/ 10¢ Per Copy." So far as I know, there is no other copy extant.*

The first question that will occur to anyone reading this poem is "What in the world is a 'Houlton violin?'" Mitchell answers that, but he answers it slowly, somewhat in the manner of a riddle. He lets his readers begin with the concept of a pleasure-giving musical instrument (that's the title of the poem, and, after all, a violin *is* a violin); then by steps he leads them to see it in a different frame. This "violin" is played in a jail, the prisoners are forced to play it, and with it they make a music that is sad, doleful, and dismal (that last term turns up three times). Then in stanza four, Mitchell drops an even more direct hint: it is red, "with teeth on one edge." Most of his readers surely would have caught on by this time, but those who hadn't would find the answer in the chorus (in effect, stanza seven): a "red brick saw" could only be a brick-red saw, which is to say a bucksaw (see Figure 1). Traditionally painted red, it was the common tool of both lumbercamp and farmyard for the chore of bucking up firewood. As the illustration makes clear, the blade was kept under tension by twisting a cord with a stick that rested on the central brace of the frame.<sup>15</sup> Later models substituted a rod-and-turnbuckle arrangement for the cord and stick.

The poem takes on added significance when seen in the context of what was going on in Houlton at the time. Ever since it had become an important railhead in 1893, this quiet country town had been increas-



An old-time bucksaw. Courtesy of the author.

ingly troubled with transients—laboring men coming and going, looking for work on the farms and in the lumberwoods—and the concerned town fathers responded as best they knew how: by “crackdowns” like the following:

#### Hoboes

The Houlton police, dressed in citizens clothes, made several trips to the vicinity of the Cold Stream and the Horseback, Sunday, and rounded up 28 hoboes, and landed them in the lockup. Thomas Hay, night baggageman at the B.& A., brought 5 during the night and placed them with their chums.

This class of men has been exceptionally bold, and the gardens, the chicken roosts, and even the potato fields . . . have suffered seriously, and the danger from fires is great with this irresponsible class of the traveling herd.

A mere warning to leave town has no effect, as many will hang around hoping to get a winter’s free board with the County. They should be set at work on the roads or at a large wood pile, and made to pay for their keeping.<sup>16</sup>

Sheriffs had tried making prisoners work for their keep back in 1907, and, according to one report, it had been startlingly succesful. Why, the

reporter wondered, was the County Jail so bereft of occupants lately?: The same cook makes the soups and stirs the dough. H.D. Smart who has for a long time said to this man “come and he cometh, and to that man go and he goeth,” is still in the saddle, but no men to command....

It must be the new stockade that the county commissioners put around the wood yard last fall. . . . The hobo has evidently been informed the yard has been enlarged. The yard is now sixty by ninety, capable of holding 200 cords of wood. . . . The last hobo left this week singing “Never coming back anymore.”<sup>17</sup>

The wood yard having been so successful, the county commissioners requested state permission to use prisoners to work on the roads. Permission was granted, but I can find no evidence of lumbermen using prison labor, though that idea certainly makes Mitchell’s point that almost *anything* would be better than playing a Houlton violin!

Only two of the people mentioned can be positively identified. H.D. Smart was turnkey at the County Jail from 1907 through 1912, and Bill Guiou was on the police force from 1898 until his death in 1910. I’m not sure of either Briggs or Thornton, though there was an H.M. Briggs who was a local justice for some years, and it is at least possible that Thornton may be poet Mitchell’s mishearing of the Aroostook County Sheriff’s name, which was Thurlough. At any rate what dates we have make it pretty certain that the poem was written between 1907 and 1910

#### THE HOULTON VIOLIN

[1]

’Way down in Aroostook County  
     In the good old State of Maine,  
 Where the farmers raise the Devil,  
     While raising ’taters, hay and grain.  
 In the busy town of Houlton,  
     There’s a place that’s all fenced in,  
 Where a crew of men are twisting now  
     The Houlton Violin.

[2]

A mixed up crew is found in here,  
     Some for stealing rides on cars.  
 Through the night they can learn the doleful  
     Tunes by a study of steel bars.  
 There are woodsmen and ’tater diggers  
     Who drank too much whisky or gin.  
 So they’re forced to play a dismal tune  
     With a Houlton Violin.

[3]

The musical director here is a man  
Who's shrewd, called Smart.  
'Neath a white hat brim, he eyes the men  
Sees that each one plays his part.  
And if he finds one out of tune,  
Not much will then be said  
Until this player is run inside,  
To subsist on water and bread.

[4]

The Thornton March is played in here,  
Long and hard 'tis seen at a glance,  
While Brigg's short step shows the man  
Who'll give another man a chance,  
So the red violin with teeth on one edge,  
Is thought to cure drinking of gin.  
Just now there's a lot of men learning to play  
A Houlton Violin.

[5]

Frank Dugal is the cook in here,  
The food is very good,  
But the players oft strike a dismal note,  
In a cord of knotty wood,  
Yet Officer Guiou upon his beat  
Every night runs someone in,  
Some have broke out and got away  
From the Houlton Violin.

[6]

A lumberman came here lately  
After men to chop lofty pines,  
A lot of the players went with him,  
Far away from the Boundary Line's.<sup>18</sup>  
And all the musicians would like to go too,  
To try never again to get in,  
They would like to forget the dismal sound  
Of a Houlton Violin.

(CHORUS)

So, ye boozers beware of Houlton,  
Bill Guiou and the law,  
Or your heart will break and your arms will ache,  
Pulling a red brick saw.  
Many sad and doleful tunes you'll play,  
If you fill up on whiskey and gin,

And you'll rue the day that ever you saw  
A Houlton Violin.

## THE SPRING WE DROVE HOWE BROOK

*On July 17, 1959, I paid my first visit to ninety-five-year-old Fleetwood Pride at his home in Abbot, Maine, and had the pleasure of listening to some wonderful accounts of his adventures in the lumberwoods and on the river-drives. At the close of the interview, his wife handed me a large envelope full of penciled manuscript, saying it was Mr. Pride's autobiography, and she wondered if I might like to look it over. I said I'd be delighted to, and that evening I began the process that led to my publishing it eight years later as a volume of Northeast Folklore.<sup>19</sup>*

*Included with that manuscript were three poems, written in a different hand and on Game Warden Service stationery, and evidently they were saved because each mentioned Pride by name. One of them, "The Spring We Drove Howe Brook," was attributed to "Jack Mitchell," and I reproduce it here as Version A. Version B was contributed by Dr. John E. Hankins, who had it from John K. Pottle of Oxford, Maine, on April 5, 1968. Pottle had worked in the Aroostook County woods as a young man and remembered "hearing it around," but these few lines were all he could recall.*

During the late 1890s the Bangor and Aroostook's Ashland Branch made its way north to St. Croix Lake and then along St. Croix Stream to Masardis, thus opening up thousands of acres to lumbering that had been difficult to get at before. Among the first to take advantage of this new situation was Fleetwood Pride, and his own description of the country he was moving into sets the scene very well:

I went from Smyrna Mills up in Aroostook County on a spotted line [a blazed trail] to Howe Brook through the 30 miles of woods lying between Smyrna and Masardis, and I built the first camps in those woods that were built in connection with the building of the Ashland branch of the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad, and I began my woods operations there making ties and telegraph poles for the railroad company. And when the road was built through, I put a small sawmill at the place called Pride's Mills, and we spent several quite prosperous years there until the available spruce was cut off, when I commenced work at Howe Brook.<sup>20</sup>

Howe Brook is the name of both a community and a brook. The brook takes its rise in the bogs and lowland areas of T9R4, and after flowing

southwest for about ten miles and picking up several tributaries (among them two-mile-long Boom Brook) it enters St. Croix Lake. Clearly it is not a very big or dramatic waterway, and it didn't receive much attention from lumbermen until the railroad came along. According to Pride, the drives chronicled here took place around 1900, but he wasn't sure of the exact date (in all likelihood it was closer to 1910), and while he claimed that Jim Crandall had the Howe Brook drive, Marjorie Crandall claimed her husband Harvey was in charge. Of course, the point is moot, since Poet Mitchell speaks only of "the Crandall boys."

I asked Pride about some of the terms in the poem. A "turnpike sailor" was "a kind of a tramp," and "swiggle" was "a stew made of pork and beans." (I had heard this called "bean swagan" elsewhere, and indeed that is what we find in the B version.)<sup>21</sup> He couldn't identify either the man from Dixie or the cook, but it's a pretty sure thing that the latter involves a punning reference to Albert Burleigh, vice president of the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad.

#### THE SPRING WE DROVE HOWE BROOK (A version)

[1]

I was standing on a corner  
In Houlton down in Maine  
While the snow and ice was melting  
In the sunshine and the rain.

[2]

A man came along and hired me  
Set our names down in a book  
It was then we were elected  
To go up and drive Howe Brook.

[3]

There were drivers there from Oakfield  
Presque Isle and Caribou  
Potato diggers, farmers  
And turn pike sailors too.

[4]

There was one man in our crew  
Who said he was no fool  
Far away down south in Dixie-land  
He used to drive a mule.

[5]

Our mascot was a big bull frog  
Who saved us from being drowned  
When we came in sight of danger  
He would sing out, "Go around!"



[6]

The man we thought the most of  
Was our big fat Burleigh Cook  
Who dished us up the swiggle  
The spring we drove Howe Brook.

[7]

Another drive came down Boom Branch  
'Twas owned by Fleetwood Pride.  
I guess they must have greased the logs  
How swiftly they did glide.

[8]

When the logs were in the lake  
A homeward train we took  
And I often think of the Crandall boys  
And the spring we drove Howe Brook.

THE SPRING WE DROVE HOWE BROOK (B version)

[1]

There were men there from Fort Fairfield.  
Presque Isle and Caribou.

....

And a few old woodsmen too.

[2]

But the man we thought the most of  
Was our big fat lousy cook,  
Who dished us out bean swagan  
The spring we drove Howe Brook.

VALE POET MITCHELL

And that is all we know about John Mitchell and all we have of his poetry. Clearly he was not a great talent, but he has left us some ironic glances into the laboring man's world of his time, and his voice should not be wholly lost. In no way was he either a Larry Gorman, intent on excoriating his victims, or a Joe Hill, calling for change and social justice. But it wouldn't be right to think of him as simply John Mitchell either. He was John Mitchell *Poet*—and, as Robert Frost said, that made all the difference.

## APPENDIX: "THE BOUNDARY LINE"

Both Maine and New Brunswick had their "liquor laws," but Maine's putative Prohibition was far more troublesome to anyone seeking a drink than was Canada's Scott Act. In addition, since New Brunswick's rum was somewhat cheaper than Maine's, it was inevitable that arrangements to oblige thirsty Mainers would spring up along the border. One of the most imaginative was reported to be up in Bridgewater on the Boundary Line Road:

The McMullen store used to be called the Line House because it was built half in Maine and half in Canada. It had a counter mounted on wheels. When the U.S. Federal officers raided the store, the owners were warned beforehand, so the counter was on the Canadian side and the officers could do nothing. When the Canadian officers raided the place the counter was always on the American side. The officers from the two countries never seemed to get together for a joint raid for obvious reasons. Rum in those days flowed freely.<sup>22</sup>

But the best-known of such establishments—and almost certainly the one John Mitchell is referring to in both "When the 'Taters Are All Dug" and "The Houlton Violin"—was the one just south of Houlton, where the road from Cary, Maine, to Richmond, New Brunswick, crossed the border. It was known locally as The Boundary Line, or more poetically as The Boozy Boundary Line, but it was most generally referred to simply as The Line. Evidently there were several establishments there, one of them being described by the local *Aroostook Times* as nothing more than "a shack within six feet of what they call the boundary line." The liquor, the article continues, "is kept stored in hollow logs, in stumps, in brush piles, under boards in the ground, in fact anywhere as long as it is on the provincial side."<sup>23</sup> The area was no end of trouble to agents of the law from both sides. "Inspector Colpitts of Woodstock [N.B.] made a raid on the line stores recently," according to one *Times* article, "and took two of the violators of the Scott Act into custody." There are other accounts of arrests, raids, and even one stabbing, but the rum and whiskey kept moving.<sup>24</sup> "It is claimed by the citizens living in the vicinity," reported the *Times*, "that it is not an uncommon thing to see twenty teams go over this road in a single day, Sunday being the banner day in the week."<sup>25</sup>

One final puzzle: Why does Mitchell refer to the Line as "Europe" in version A? My guess is that this was a code word of the time, a bit of poetic license, a jesting euphemism for a foreign country, which, of course,

Canada was. "Going to Europe" was a way of *not* saying "going to the Line," which in turn was a way of not saying where you were going and what for. Metonymy has its uses.

## NOTES

1. Fannie Hardy Eckstorm and Mary Winslow Smyth, *Minstrelsy of Maine* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), p. 3.
2. For a description of this tradition, see Edward D. Ives, *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), pp. 371-402.
3. See Ives, *Joe Scott*; Edward Ives, *Larry Gorman: The Man Who Made the Songs* (Urbana: Indiana University Press, 1964; reprinted Goose Lane Editions, 1993); for John Calhoun see Louise Manny and James Reginald Wilson, *Songs of Miramichi* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Brunswick Press, 1968), pp. 140-44, 166-68. For Joe Smith, see Edward D. Ives, "Joe Smith: The Poet as Outlaw," in James Porter, editor, *The Ballad Image* (University of California Los Angeles, 1983), pp. 148-70. For Michael Whelan, see Michael O. Nowlan, *Michael Whelan, Folk Poet of Renous River* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: 1990).
4. University of Maine, Fogler Library, Special Collections: Frances Robinson Mitchell Collection.
5. Letter to the author, April 3, 1968.
6. This clipping was pasted in a commonplace book along with hundreds of other like items. I confess I'm not sure where I found this book, but my best guess some twenty years after the fact is in an antique store in Cornish, Maine.
7. Dorothy Laverty, *Millinocket: Magic City of Maine's Wilderness* (Freeport, Maine: Bond Wheelwright, 1971), p. 16. See also David C. Smith, *A History of Lumbering in Maine, 1860-1960* (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Press, 1972), pp. 251-55.
8. "Polack" (or "Polander") was a catchall term for "foreigner," especially those from central and eastern Europe.
9. *Bangor City Directory*, 1892, p. 486.
10. Laverty, *Millinocket*, p. 47.
11. See *Aroostook Times*, March 25, 1908: "Sherman Lumber Co has 30 teams hauling wood and bark. They are hauling at night on account of the condition of the roads."
12. *Stock Grower's Journal* (Miles City, Montana), October 6, 1893. See John I. White, *Git Along, Little Dogies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 85. For an easily available text of O'Malley's song, see Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927), pp. 260-62.
13. For an example of someone who did travel from Machias to Aroostook for

the harvest, see Richard M. Dorson, "Mishaps of a Maine Lobsterman," *Northeast Folklore* 1 (1958): 1-3.

14. Roland Palmer Gray, *Songs and Ballads of the Maine Lumberjacks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), p. 173.

15. My friend Roger Mitchell tells me that in his time—"thirties and 'forties—it was often called a "Frenchman's fiddle," since French woodsmen were doing most of the pulpwood bucking then.

16. *Aroostook Times*, October 26, 1910.

17. *Aroostook Times*, February 6, 1907. See also *ibid.*, July 10, 1907.

18. See Appendix.

19. Edward D. Ives and David C. Smith, "Fleetwood Pride, 1864-1960: The Autobiography of a Maine Woodsman," *Northeast Folklore* 9 (1967).

20. Ives and Smith, "Fleetwood Pride," pp. 35-36.

21. See also Eckstorm and Smyth, *Minstrelsy of Maine*, p. 114. Roger Mitchell, who ought to know, says, "it is a bit thin to call it a stew. The beans are parboiled with a bit of salt pork. All in all, a bit disappointing, when with some molasses et al, it would have been baked beans. But it was fast; as my Mom said, a 'hurry-up John meal.'" (Letter to the author, February 4, 2002.)

22. Annie E. Rideout, *History of Bridgewater, Maine* (Manchester, Maine: Falmouth Publishing House, 1953), p. 145.

23. *Aroostook Times*, June 1, 1906.

24. *Aroostook Times*, January 25, 1911.

25. *Aroostook Times*, June 1, 1906.