

Six Months at Hard Labour

John H. Hughes

Corrected narration edition

“Six months at hard labour.” A sentence of chilling words for any man. But to be given to a boy of fourteen years! But I accepted it with excited anticipation. My crime? Loss of interest in school.

School had become a bore. Lessons had become rote exercises. My real classroom had become the L P Fisher Library, the foundry, sawmills, garage, pumping station, roundhouse. I could read half the night at the old kitchen table at home by kerosene lamp. The favorite position was kneeling on a chair with elbows on the table. Ma would complain about burnt-up wicks, for as the oil ran out, the wick would be gradually turned up to finish a chapter. The old lamp was also a good hand warmer after the fire had gone out.

There was no such a thing as a drop-out then. This term came into use only recently, so I just quit school. I was quite a husky lad for my age and could handle any two boys my own age.

So, if I didn't want to go to school, my parents said I should go to work.

My father was going in to cook for Harry and Bill Rogers at their lumber camp back of Scofield Siding on the C N R. They were cutting for Flemming and Gibson mill at Welch Siding, and I was to be a cookie. On the first of October, Pa had gone on ahead to Juniper

to gather up supplies, and I followed in a couple of days. The C P R took me from Woodstock to Bristol, where the stage ran into Juniper with a stop at Glassville for lunch. In the summer, the stage was a buckboard with leather curtains, and in winter, a sled with seats hauled by a pair of lively horses. But I went in with the buckboard. The road was muddy, rutted and rough all the way. The driver was a character with long moustaches. Every so often, he would belt out a song so loud I am sure you would know the stage was coming long before it even came into sight.

When I arrived in Juniper, my father was not there, so I went to the boarding house and had supper. The only thing I remember of this meal was the bread was sour. After supper, the men all gathered in the big room off the dining room and sat on benches around the camp stove. This was in the old boarding house. They were just building the new one. Gradually, the men drifted off to bed, and there were only a couple or so left. One asked if I had a place to sleep, and I told him, "Not yet." He said I better not sleep up in the bunk room, as it was crummy, so I decided to stay where I was. I recall vividly trying to sleep on a four-foot by one-foot bench, and how I shivered when the fire in the old camp stove went out. I was glad when the men began to come in and the fire was made up.

My father showed up. I guess he had not really expected me to arrive and had been at a small bunkhouse with some friends.

The sleds were loaded up with supplies, and we started on the tote road. "Sleds in October?" Yes, there was at least a foot on the ground. It was a rough ride in, but we made it in fair time. The campsite was there, but no camp, so the men got busy and put up a frame and roof. This was to be a board-and-tar-paper building. There was no time that day to put on the sides, but a long upper and

lower bunk was built on one side, board tables and benches set in the remaining space, and the cook's stove at one end. The advance crew was about fifteen men, to get the camp ready for the main crew of eighty men to come in later. So things were very busy for the next week or so. The cook shack was boards and tar paper, with a small addition on one end for the boss and clerk. The main bunkhouse was of logs, with bunks along each side and a large camp stove in the centre, with a rack above and under the large ventilator skylight, the only window. Washing facilities were at the end near the door and consisted of two wash basins, two roller towels and a pork barrel for cold water. Shaving, if any, was done on Sundays with water heated on the camp stove.

I remember one brave lad borrowing the wash tub from the cookhouse on a sunny Sunday and taking a bath outdoors.

The hovel for the horses was made of logs. There was another small tar-paper shack for the teamsters and saw filer. The teamsters slept in a separate shack, as they had to get up before the other men to feed the horses.

More supplies came in along with the main crew. The cookhouse crew was the cook, second cook, bull cook and cookie, me.

The first day the main crew came in, about eighty men, it was found someone made a mistake and had not sent in any forks. So I was appointed to walk into Welsh Siding, about ten miles, for a supply of forks. I was given a loaded rifle, as there was danger of wildcats, but I made the trip without incident.

Each man was supplied with two gray wool blankets. There was no mattress. You were given a supply of hay, then you put one blanket over the hay and covered yourself with the other. You rolled up your

coat for a pillow. I remember one old timer brought his own pillow. Old men were called "Uncle." Work for the crew was six days a week, from dark to dark. The cookhouse crew worked seven days.

We were up at five in the morning. The second cook was up at four thirty to start the cook stove. Breakfast was at six in the morning. While the men were eating, the noon lunch was made up and placed in a long wooden box with rope handles. This lunch was usually round biscuit, baked beans, white or molasses cake, cookies, roast pork or beef, jam and of course tea, along with the boiling pail, plates, cups, knives, forks and spoons. By noon, all this would be frozen and would have to be thawed on the same fire as the tea was being made. The chickadees always knew when it was time to boil the kettle.

Food was the most basic. Breakfast: beans, oatmeal porridge, bread, fried potatoes, pork chops.

Dinner, as in the lunch box.

Supper was the big meal: boiled potatoes, fresh bread, roast beef and pork, baked beans, sometimes pork chops or fried steak. Apple or raisin pie, molasses or corn syrup, and tea. The canned milk, Saint Charles, had a flavor of its own. It was good. It was the only thing besides potatoes and onions that had to be kept from freezing. It was kept in the clerk's annex. Such things as apples were the evaporated kind.

As the fires in the cookhouse would go out at night, my father devised a method of making raised bread overnight. A flour barrel had a row of holes bored around the bottom and another row about three-quarters of the way up. A lantern was placed in the bottom, then the bread pan with the dough was placed on the top, and then

all covered with a blanket and coats. So, in the morning, the dough would be ready for the oven.

Meat was brought in. It was in sides and was hung outside, where it froze solid. It was cut up in junks as needed, using an old crosscut saw. This the chickadees enjoyed, for there was lots of sawdust, meat dust.

In the fall, they had brought in two small pigs to take care of the garbage. They became pets of mine.

Their original home was the manure pile at the rear of the hovel, but as the manure pile grew, the pigs were able to climb over the fence and have full run of the camp. In the afternoons, while my father had a nap, I would go for a walk down the tote road with my pets following behind, talking to each other. They would return with me to camp. It was a sad day in the spring when they decided it was time for their demise. That day I took a long walk alone.

One day, before the pigs were able to get over the fence, I took a walk on snowshoes through the woods, expecting to circle to my right and come back to the road above the camp. But my circle was too great, and I circled around the end of the road. Fortunately, one tends to unconsciously circle in the woods. So I continued to circle and came back to the road, thinking I had to turn right on the road to reach the camp. Not realizing I was on the opposite side, I walked until the road stopped. I thought I was on the other side of the camp, and if I turned around, I should come out at Scofield Siding. So I walked and walked until I came to some buildings I did not recognize. But to my amazement, it was the south side of the camp. I did not tell my father of my experience.

Amusements were few: a few card games, no gambling. Someone would have a mouth organ, and someone would do a soft-shoe step dance. There would be someone who, with much coaxing, would sing some “Come all you” songs, of which the last line was never sung but just recited as if to say, “Now leave me alone.” But coaxing would always seem to be part of the act.

Some would whittle axe handles or fancy ornaments such as chains and fans. I can still make a fan if I have some green cedar.

Some of the older men would have their Bibles, which they would quietly read, and perhaps try to get some of the younger men to stop swearing.

The job of a cookie was quite varied during the day, but each day was the same. And, as can be imagined, washing dishes was the least appreciated. Dishes were tin cups and plates, and tinned knives, forks and spoons. The breakfast tables would be set the night before. Usually, the cook would help with the supper dishes. To dry the cutlery, they were first scalded, then put in a clean bag, and two men would shake them until they were dry. We had a couple of Indian boys from Woodstock, and they would help with the dishes and entertain us while doing so with Indian songs.

After the breakfast dishes were done, water had to be carried to fill the barrels in the bunkhouse, teamsters' shack and cookhouse. There was a brook about a hundred yards away. You don't fill four barrels in a short time.

Then came the stove wood. The logs were twitched in, in sixteen-foot lengths. The bullcook and I would then crosscut them up in stove lengths. The old fellow would say, “Put some grease on your moccasins,” meaning he was pulling me as well as the saw. The

green hardwood was not too bad to saw, but they would haul in a dried pine for kindling. And as the crosscut was set for hardwood, it was really rugged when the pine began to warp and bind the saw.

The bullcook also looked after the bunkhouse and stable. And no, I don't recall that he ever carried any water.

The teamsters slept in their own shack, as they had to be up early to get their horses ready for the day. They would vie with each other to see who could haul the biggest loads and be the first one home at night.

There was a crew who iced the roads and provided an extra team on some of the steep hills. Icing was done by hauling water in a square wood tank that had been filled at a brook, usually with a barrel on a counterweighted pole. There was a hole on each side over the track, with a wooden plug. As the horses moved the bob sleds with the tank along, the plugs would be pulled, and the water would fall into the track, where it would freeze and make a good slippery road. On the downgrades, straw would be placed to cause friction to keep the sleds from moving too fast, and sometimes a chain was run under the runners to help hold the sleds. On some hills they would have old timers. They called them chickadees, as they removed the horse manure from the sled tracks.

If the crew got down on the cook or saw filer, there wasn't much to do but get a new cook or filer. It happened some new Disston saws were being used, and they were especially made for hardwood, being quite thin and narrow, and were not set for quite as wide a cut as you would for softwood. But the crew was not satisfied. An expert from the saw makers filed saws, which satisfied the crew. He, the expert,

could see nothing wrong with the way they were being filed. Even so, it took several changes of filers before the winter was over.

I guess Christmas leave of absence was not so new, as my father arranged for me to go home for Christmas. And I guess he thought I had enough of the hard work. So I picked up an order for my wages and went into Juniper and picked up my thirty-one dollars and fifty cents. This was my full three months' wage, as I had no deductions for socks, mitts, axes or tobacco. Then took the stage and out to Bristol and home on the C P R.

After Christmas with Mum, Mary, Walter and Urb, I decided it was time to return to the woods. Colin was then in Carroll, Maine. So back on the C P R to Perth Junction, where I changed trains to go up the Tobique to Plaster Rock. There I stayed overnight in an unheated room in a hotel, with complete toilet facilities in the commode. Next morning, I took the C N R to Scofield, where I jumped off up to my hips in snow, as there was no station there. I walked back into camp and surprised my father, who never thought I would return. I remember the look of disappointment on the face of the young fellow who was replacing me.

The many incidents I recall at different times make me wonder that it was only six months. We slept in a corner of the cook shack: my father in the lower bunk, and I and the second cook in the upper. One morning, my father said something terrible was going to happen, as he had heard knocking in the night. I don't know whether I told him that I had knocked on the roof over the bunk to see if I could stop my sleeping partner from snoring.

Outdoor toilet facilities were the most primitive: a pole between two trees and a pile of pine cones or birch bark.

Not much mail moved in or out, as very few of the men could read or write. Although we had a clerk with a good education, Hurlie, most camps had a clerk with very little education. So, between the illiterate men and the clerk, you can readily see how there are so many ways of spelling the same name in rural parts of our country.

Oh yes, I almost forgot. One of my duties was to fill and trim the oil lamps and wash the chimneys. The teamsters washed their own lantern chimneys.

The rich, hearty food was a little too much for me at one time, and I developed two boils on my left forearm.

One night, we were all awakened by a loud noise outside, and no one wanted to go outside to investigate. But finally, my father and one other lit the lantern and went outside. And here were the two pigs, dragging away a side of beef they had taken from the dingle.