

Sawmills of Groton Pond

by Charlie Lord

The Rob Miller Mill

Rob Miller went to work for Michael Goslant as clerk and surveyor in 1896, shortly after graduating from Albany Business College. In 1902, in partnership with V.E. Ayer of Barre, they formed the Miller-Ayer Lumber Company and bought 9,000 acres from Goslant. The previous mill at the south end of Groton Pond had been destroyed by fire resulting from a boiler explosion which killed one man. One of the boilers landed across the pond from the mill. The mill's sawdust pile is evident still.

Hollis Lund of Groton, a millwright and expert carpenter, worked on the building of the new mill. The other buildings from former operations were still intact and in good shape. These included the blacksmith shop, a storage shed, a barn, the boarding house, two dwelling houses and the station house.

Mr. Lund worked from early summer 1903 to about May 1, 1904 on the building of the new mill. The mill commenced operation in May 1904. The new mill was a two story structure with the boilers, engines, shafting, etc. on the ground floor and the saws, etc. on the second floor. The logs were pulled up out of the pond by power on what is known as a wet slip. The sawed lumber was loaded on hand cars in the mill and pushed over rails, out of doors, on elevated runways adjacent to the siding tracks, stacked and dried and then loaded into rail cars. Freshly sawn green lumber was hardly ever loaded directly from mill to car. Generally, hardwood logs were hauled over the ice and snow to the slip and then sawed. The softwood logs were mostly towed down the pond from the 'log pile' at the north end of the pond by a small tug boat and sawed in the summer.

There were several lumber camps, one at the north end or head of the pond and one on Cold Brook, about 3 miles from the pond and near the west end of the Bog, which was known by some as the 'French Camp', as most of the workers were French Canadians. Mrs. Peggy Beamis, who with her husband, Herbert, cooked at this camp from November 1923 to early January 1924 and then moved down to the camp at the north end of the pond. Apparently, they cut trees in the early winter and then as the snow got deeper, they concentrated mostly on hauling the logs down Cold Brook to the 'Log Pile'. According to Mrs. Beamis, there were as many as 26 men at the camp, mostly French Canadians. (Denerie Vigneault - woods boss - was one of them; also Denerie Bergeron, both could speak English). She says they had everything to cook as Rob Miller was very good about supplying nice food, such as beef butts and baked beans on Sunday - also ham, roast pork and pork chops, eggs and lots of salt pork. She made ten loaves of bread every day, plus a large cake every day and donuts and pies on alternate days. Also they had a pig and a cow at the camp.

For breakfast they had boiled salt pork and warmed up potatoes plus coffee, etc. They also had salt pork when they carried their dinners. Apparently the men liked salt pork, as it kept them warm and didn't freeze so hard that it could not be eaten cold. Most of the men did their wash on Sunday and cut up their tobacco as they brought their own leaf with them from Canada.

After she (Mrs. Beamis), Herbert Beamis, and a small son Stub moved to the head of the pond camp, the men carried their lunch, using a ten quart pail for every four men. She always had baked beans for the Sunday meal.

Life in the lumber camp, while demanding and arduous, was not without its happier moments - for instance, at Christmas time, Mrs. Beamis and her husband made popcorn balls for the men, which they appreciated very much. They also fixed some onions, but no one (of the men) ate them, so the Beamis' froze them and ate them later on.

While at the camp at the head of the pond, which was bigger than the 'French Camp', after supper they would invite Denerie Vigneault (woods boss) to play cards with them in the kitchen. Denerie would bring a different man each time, so that eventually most of the men had a chance to play. These men could not speak English, so Denerie translated for them and all had an enjoyable time.

Towards the end of the season when some of the men had left, there was extra room and Denerie asked if his brothers from Winooski could visit them over a weekend and bring something to drink. The men had worked hard all winter with nothing to drink, for Rob had said at the beginning of the season that there would be no drinking. Anyway, Herbert told them as long as they behaved themselves, he wouldn't tell Rob. The brothers brought 4 pints of whiskey and outside of Denerie's younger brother (only 16) getting drunk and passing out and finally being revived by numerous dosages of black coffee, there were no incidents of note. They all got to feeling pretty good and whooped it up a bit - about 3:00 A.M. Sunday morning until Herbert told them it was time for bed. Next day being Sunday, they slept most of the day and Monday the brothers snowshoed down across the pond and took the train back to Winooski.

The men worked hard and a full nine hour day was put in. I doubt if there were any coffee breaks, etc. However, they were well fed and had a good warm place to sleep. Pay was from \$25.00 to \$35.00 per month, and keep, for the average worker. Sundays, especially in the early part of the season, some of the men would walk down to the main boarding house and mill and bring back groceries, mail, etc., a round trip of 5-6 miles. This was before the pond froze up solid enough to support a team and while the pond was still open they would get in a large supply of groceries that would keep, such as flour, sugar, bacon, ham, etc. So by getting the heavier stuff in by water, they (the men) wouldn't have much to carry back to camp. Herbert was with them one Sunday when they walked down to the mill boarding house and Rob, seeing their light loads, thought that they weren't getting enough to eat, so Herbert told Rob to ask the men and then he explained how they had gotten in a lot by boat before freeze up. Rob said, "smart fellow" and laughed.

The stout boy on the right with one white horse (group of teams in front of the head of the pond logging camp) was assigned to skidding logs that day. One time he was struck in the face by the spring pole tightener and quite severely injured; however, on the 3rd day, he was back to work - they sure were tough. That was the only accident they had at this camp all winter, which was an excellent record.

At camp in the evenings, one little fellow in his 20's had a violin and he seemed to know just one tune. We used to get a bit tired of that one piece with the men keeping time with their feet, however, the men enjoyed it and he generally didn't play much except on Sundays.

There were numbers of workers, especially the Portuguese and French Canadians, who must remain nameless, but all worked hard for Rob because they liked him and he was fair to them.

As with the French Canadians, there were numbers of the Portuguese who could speak little or no English. They had a spokesman, Tony Silva, who came year after year. The Portuguese were employed mostly in the mill, mill yard and log pile - they had nothing to do with the cutting of timber, etc. I remember of two families staying at the head of the pond lumber camp in the summer, the men working at the log pile rolling the logs into the water and making up the rafts or booms of logs for the steamer to take to the mill. These men were often in the water up to their waists and in early summer the water was cold. My sister and I used to play on the sandy beach with 2 children of these families. These children were about our age - ten to twelve years old. They were nice kids and could speak English.

Many hours I have spent in and around the mill area and the station house. We would arrive by train and carry our baggage down the road which was filled, in with sawdust in spots, generally stopping at the water tub opposite the old schoolhouse. There was a gate across the road near the station which kept the live stock from straying onto the tracks and there was a side gate for foot traffic. We were always very conscientiously closed these gates if we used them. I was fascinated, by the powerful steam engine when in operation - also listening to the steady pulsating exhaust was intriguing to a 12 to 14 year old. I remember going upstairs and watching the sawing of a log. At the barn we sometimes stopped to get fresh milk practically from the cow. The boarding house had an appeal of its own, especially the store and small post office. In back of the counter on the wall hung axes, cross-cut saws, and woodsmen's tools. There was even candy to be bought - the two items I remember were the assorted paper wrapped kisses, and a miniature sauce pan with a tiny spoon to ladle out the filling in the pan. It was nearly a mile from the station to where we embarked by water for our camp at the extreme northern end of the pond. In the summer there were generally cows and horses grazing alongside the road. It must have been rather poor picking for the animals for the cleared surfaces were covered with stones.

Austin Lund relates that when he lived at Groton Pond in the station house (his father Hollis Lund worked on the building at the new Mill) he and other children went to school in Groton commuting by train each day. At that time, 1903-1904, the old sawdust pile was still burning and the children were warned never to go near this area, as every now and then it would cave in where it had burned underneath. The old sawdust pile burned for several years - at least 7 or 8.

The new mill had a 125 h.p. steam engine plus a smaller 25 h.p. that ran the generator for electric lights. He says the day they started the generator his dad took his mother and the children to see the electric lights in the boiler room. The first such light he had ever seen and that probably would apply to his mother and dad. Later on a 35 h.p. engine was installed to operate the band saws which sawed out chair stock.

Austin says that they lived on the second floor of the station house. The first floor although vacant at that time was equipped with store counters and also in the past a post office evidently had been there. At that time all mail for Groton Pond was delivered to Ricker's Mill Post Office and had to be gotten there. From Sept. 1903 until early Dec. 1903, he carried the mail during the week, getting off the train at Ricker's, picking up the mail and walking the track to Groton Pond. Rob gave him \$.10 a day for this chore.

Incidentally, one of Austin Lund's ancestors, Jeremiah Lund, settled in the vicinity of Levi Pond and Jerry Lund Hill gets its name from him. There are today, several cellar holes and old stone walls indicating that at one time this particular area was farmland. At one time the Lund family owned considerable acreage in this area as well as around Ricker's and Groton Pond. The so called Annis clearing was a portion of these holdings.

W. J. Bushey notes that he worked for Rob from Dec. 1921 until Dec. 1924, most of the time in the wood cutting both logs and pulp. He says that from old timers he heard that a man named Cole built the "up and down" sawmill on Cold Brook. (The only name rather vaguely I ever heard it called was the Jack Carpenter Mill). It wasn't much of a mill as the volume of water at this location is not very great. The stone foundations are still visible and it is about 1 mile up Cold Brook from the head of the pond. Mrs. Rogers tells me her uncle Almond James of Groton worked in this mill and it was an "up and down" affair - that would make it around 1865 when he worked there. Also Henry Bradley of Peacham says that his father worked in this mill about 90 to 100 years ago.

Frank Jones was a teamster around this time (1918 - 20), and, he quite often used 2 to 3 pair of oxen to bring logs from the "French Camp" to the "log pile." Sometimes in the early part of the winter season some of the horses, equipment, etc. would be brought in by a trail on the west or railroad side of the pond, that extended all the way from the mill area to the lumber camp at the head of the pond.

Nelson Smith generally worked in the mill and relates that he was working in the mill the last day the board saw operated and they finished up by sawing up the "boom logs" which were used in towing the logs down from the "log pile". This last summer of operation was 1924, although they sawed out chair stock a while longer the same year. He relates that on Sundays during the summer time they used to go swimming using the beach at the Ayer Camp now owned by Doug French of Groton.

My brother Ralph says that the first time he went to the pond from Groton with my father and Frank Perry of Barre around 1900, the station house, the school house (opposite the water tub), a house on the left or north side, the boarding house, the barn and the blacksmith shop were in existence. The mill itself was gone having burned, as related above. Billy Gay and family lived in one of the houses. He must have, been a sort of caretaker. Fishing in the pond and brooks was very good. No trouble in catching a meal of fish.

He worked for Rob Miller during the summer of 1911-1912 and ran the steamer. Alex Hall of Groton was his roommate and was bookkeeper and clerk. He says Rob Miller had three different steamers and the one he ran was about 25 feet long, wide beamed and a solid roof. It was powered by a 10 h.p. steam engine, and burned slabs in the vertical boiler. At that time the camp at the head of the pond was run by Mr. and Mrs. Charles Lakin of Marshfield. The woods boss and yard boss was Israel Jewett. Mrs. Lakin was also cook at the Mill boarding house. Mrs. Israel Jewett was also cook at the boarding house. A child's sleigh and jumper, which were made by the blacksmith in his spare time, are still in use by grandchildren of Israel Jewett.

Rob Miller built a two tenement house on the south side of the road near the boarding house. Mr. and Mrs. George Taplin and small daughter Evelyn lived in this house around 1920. Gus Tellier and wife lived here before them. Mrs. Taplin (now Nellie Rogers) worked part time in the boarding house and Mr. Taplin was barn man, steamer operator and general handy man He worked for Rob, off and on, from 1910 to around 1921. Mrs. Taplin relates how the French-Canadians came as a group by train with their belongings and after reaching the pond by the mill, Mr. Taplin would take them by steamer to the "log pile." This event occurred in mid November sometimes there would be a thin layer of ice around the shore line. The Crew would then be carted by team to the "French Camp" and would immediately start cutting.

Another time Mrs. Rogers relates that she went with her husband George when he took a load of groceries up across the pond on the ice on a cold day in the winter of 1920-21 to the "log pile" where Frank, Jones with 3 yoke of oxen was there to take their load the rest of the way to the French Camp. He (Frank Jones) mostly drove oxen and he had brought a load of logs down to the "pile" that day.

In the winter Mr. Taplin's main job was to get up at 3:30 each morning build fires in 5 stoves at the boarding house, then go to barn and do the chores there, including getting the teams ready for the day. Breakfast at 6 a.m., work day from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. with 1 hour out for lunch. and supper at 5:30 p.m. - no work on Sundays. If a teamster was sick, Rob took his place that day, for a team couldn't stand idle all day. In the summer, he (Mr. Taplin) operated the steamer most of the time. There were 5 or 6 double teams at the barn plus a few cows to care for.

Mrs. Rogers says that Ida McRae was a teacher in the school at Groton Pond - that must have been when the previous mill was in operation. Also Nellie Wead was cook at the "French Camp" during the winter of 1920-21.

She also relates that Mr. Smith of Barre was a silent partner of Mr. Ayer - he was a brother-in-law of Ayer. He (Smith) built a camp on the pond where the Beaver Dam Brook enters (camp now owned by Doug French). This camp had a fireplace, flush toilet, running water and even electric lights supplied by a home generating plant. The stones to build the fireplace were shipped in bags on the railroad and Mr. Taplin drew them down from the station with a stone boat.

After, Mrs. Ayer got sick and couldn't be at the Smith camp, he (Mr. Ayers) had a room of his own at the station and he and Rob always ate at the head of the table at the boarding house.

The boarding house, so called, was where the workers in the mill area ate and slept (with the exception of several married men living in the two houses) - it was a large two story building with sleeping quarters on the 2nd floor for 40 men - 2 men to a room, and on the first floor there was the kitchen, dining room, a large recreation room called the "bar room" and another room housing the office, store and post office. The "bar room" was a hold over from other operations. as no liquor was ever dispensed here. Rob was very strict about drinking and gambling and as a result these activities were kept at a minimum. As related above, the men did occasionally consume a bit of whisky, but if Rob ever found out, they would have been "going down the road" quickly. As at the logging camps, the men were well fed. The menu consisted of roast pork, boiled and roast beef, fish, beans and salt pork, pies, muffins, biscuits, doughnuts, cake, brown bread, oatmeal, tea, coffee and milk.

Mrs. Rogers quite often worked at the boarding house - she got \$2.50 a day and her husband got \$30.00 a month, a house, fuel, and milk, so all together considering the times, it wasn't too bad.

All houses including the station house were wired for electricity which was supplied by the steam driven generator at the mill. In addition to the electric lights an ample supply of kerosene lamps and lanterns were on hand for any emergency.

One time Mrs. Rogers worked in the boarding house from early September till mid December. Rob had a map hanging on the wall which showed where the operations were, so whenever he went out to mark a section for cutting he would show Mrs. Rogers on the map where he would be for that day.

The mill was served by a spur track from the main line of the Montpelier and Wells River Railroad about 1/2 mile away and somewhat lower in elevation. [The writer probably means 'higher'] As a consequence of this grade from mill to main line the small engines of that time could only haul 1 or 2 loaded cars , and several times would have to make a second try to get back up on the main lines with a load. At the mill area there were 3 side tracks from which cars could be loaded. At the height of its career, the railroad maintained several daily passenger trains from about 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. It ceased operations in November 1954 after 80 years - today, portions of the track right-of-way are used as access roads by campers. There were stations at Rickers, Lakeside, Rocky Point and Lanesboro - sometimes trains would stop for a group at an informal stopping point known as Tin Pan, which was near where the present Stillwater road crosses the railroad right-of-way.

Besides sawing out all kinds of boards and dimension lumber, the mill also operated several band saws which were used to saw out "chair stock," so called, because the hardwood pieces were rough sawn in the shape of chair parts such as rockers, backs, seats, etc. Other blanks were sawn for baby carriages, etc. I suspect that earlier in the operation, clapboards were also sawn out.

Marvin Boomhower

When the Soules Mill in Plainfield closed down Marvin Boomhower and his family moved to Groton Pond where Rob Miller had a large lumber operation and a large saw mill. Here the power was from steam, and folks say the board saw ran like lightening. Not less than three or more than seven million board feet of lumber came out of this mill in a year. The men worked 9 hours a day nearly all year around. The freight cars on the three spur rail road side tracks had to be kept filled and ready to go. In the years, Marvin Boomhower worked in the mill for Rob Miller, there were 100 men employed, 28 teams of horses, 4 lumber camps running in the woods, a large boarding house, a horse and cow barn, a school house, blacksmith shop, several private homes, saw mill and dry house for lumber, a very pretty railroad station in which 3 private families lived, all this made up this the bustling lumber concern at Groton Pond now called Lake Groton. After Miller ceased operations Marvin went to work for Harry Ricker and finished out his career as a board sawyer there.

Peabody's Mill

The site of this large steam-powered mill is just north of the Stillwater Road crossing. Located adjacent to the newly constructed railroad, the mill was in a favorable position to market its lumber. The train stopped here for campers at an informal flag stop known as the "Tin Pan Flag Stop".

Lanesboro

In the heart of the forest, though not in state ownership, is the abandoned lumber mill community of Lanesboro located across from the access road to Owls Head. The Lane sawmill was later bought by Mitchel Goslant. On the hillside near the railroad tracks was a large lumber camp with a boarding house, blacksmith shop, general store and stables.

[Note: This history of the mills carries no date but was probably written by Charlie Lord around the same time as his reminiscence 'Groton Pond Camping' which was 1971. Both of these excerpts were copied down from the website <http://www.spoorcamp.com> maintained by Peter Braig and last updated in 2004. The website index lists the Rob Miller entry as "by an unknown author" but the reference in it to "my brother Ralph" likely makes it Charlie's.]