

FISHERY on the  
*Northwest Angle of the  
Lake of the Woods*



COURTESY MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

# Logging on the NORTHWEST ANGLE

THOMAS J. WELSH

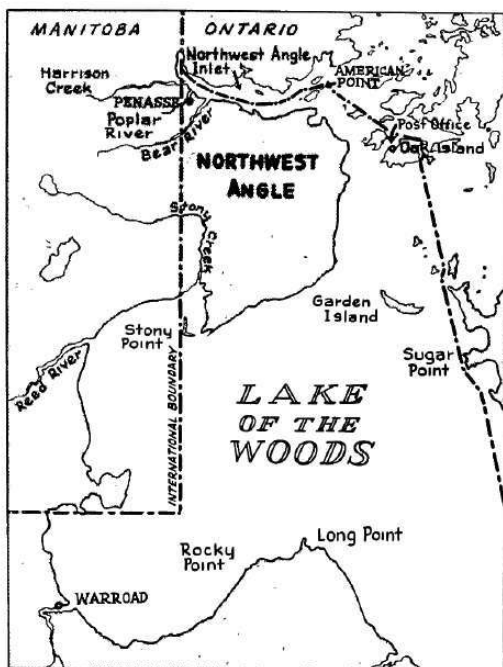
EARLY IN 1925 I met a trapper who told me that the Northwest Angle on the Lake of the Woods was heavily timbered with cedar and spruce suitable for pulpwood. He said there were eight or ten homesteaders in this northernmost area of the United States, but that nobody was operating in timber. The very name Lake of the Woods attracted me, and after giving the trapper's report considerable thought, I decided to investigate it in the hope of finding a new base for a logging operation.

---

MR. WELSH, who now resides in Gulfport, Mississippi, is the author of an unpublished volume of recollections, a copy of which has been deposited with the American Forest History Foundation of the Minnesota Historical Society. The present article is based on one of the thirty chapters included in this book-length narrative. Described in others are Mr. Welsh's experiences in various parts of northern Minnesota from 1894 to 1943.

Before my idea of developing such an operation could go beyond the stage of wishful thinking, it was necessary to confirm the statement about vacant land subject to homestead entry. So I wrote to the United States Land Office at Crookston and received plats of all lands on the Northwest Angle. From them I learned that the Angle embraced about seventy-five thousand acres of land, sixty thousand of which were vacant.

Next it was necessary to go to the Angle and make a personal examination of the timber in order to determine whether there was enough to justify further investigation. For this purpose I went first to Warroad on the south shore of the Lake of the Woods, twenty-two miles below the south boundary of the Angle. I remained there a day, getting acquainted with things in general and trying to locate a timber cruiser to go to the Angle with me. I failed to find an experienced timber man, but I did locate a man who had



DRAWN BY CHET KOZLAK

homesteaded on the Angle. A hunter and trapper, he proved to be much more helpful than a real timber cruiser, for he knew every trail on the north half of the Angle — where it came from and where it went.

We made the trip in April, 1925, when the rivers and brooks were open but the lake was still frozen and safe for foot travel. We each had a pack-sack filled with about fifty pounds of grub and personal belongings, including high, hobnailed cruiser shoes and heavy blankets. We wore hightop rubbers on the ice. After buying our supplies, we had them hauled to the lake. There on the shore, in order to avoid carrying the packs on our backs while walking on ice, we made a sled in less than half an hour. My woodsman's ax was the only tool we had, but it was as sharp as a grindstone could make it. Using only a few boards and the iron hoops of an old barrel, we put the right curve on the runners and did all other cutting and fitting of boards and braces with the sharp edge of the ax, while we drove the nails with its head. Although the sled did not cost fifty cents, it answered our require-

ments as well as if it had cost fifty dollars. When it was loaded, a child could have pulled it along on the ice. We attached twenty feet of rope to the sled — enough to be used as a life line in case of emergency. After eating a noon lunch, we were ready to pull out.

Five hours of easy walking took us to Jim Thunder's place, where we stayed for the night. It was my first meeting with Jim, and this acquaintance grew into a very fine and satisfactory friendship during the following five years. Jim was a full-blooded Chippewa from Canada.

The next day we crossed on the ice to Stony Point and stopped for the night with William Ringling, who had a very comfortable frame house on Stony Creek, two miles above the lake. Mr. Ringling was in the fishing business, and apparently he had been doing very well financially. He had lived there several years and gave us considerable information on local timber. Like all of the settlers up there, he trapped during the winter months and had seen most of the timber on the south half of the Angle. From Mr. Ringling I learned that practically all the homestead filings in the area were made by those interested in fishing opportunities along the lake shore. This explained why so much of the land back from the lake was still vacant and subject to homestead filing.

Our entire walk to Stony Point was made on ice, but from Ringling's place, which was in the southwest corner of the Angle, we decided to shoulder our packs and take a straight course through the woods to American Point, about twenty miles away on the extreme northeast point of the Angle. We expected to find considerable snow in the woods, and did find it knee deep in the thick stands of pulp spruce and balsam. There snowshoes were very useful, but when we crossed or followed poplar ridges — as we did at times for several miles — we found that the snow had melted because there were no leaves to shade the ground, and the walking was good. I kept a record of the sections we crossed by counting my paces and mak-

ing notes on the timber every quarter mile. All our running—to use the woodsman's term—was done by compass, and if we caught sight of a section line as we crossed it, we followed it to a quarter post or section corner in order to check up on our pacing and location.

This trip gave me an opportunity to teach Bill, my companion, how to run a compass and how to pace correctly. Hunters and trappers seldom carry a compass; they follow trails and never keep tab on their paces. If they kill any game that they can't carry with them, they spot a line from it to the nearest trail, or, if they do not have a trapper's ax, break brush. I have known several Indian trappers, but I never knew one who carried a compass. They have a natural sense of direction. It makes no difference in how many directions they have traveled while following big game; when they decide to quit they strike a beeline for their wigwams and get there.

We did not see a sign of any forest creature during the trip except a partridge that flew swiftly away as we approached. Had it known that we were without firearms of any kind, it might have watched two animals trudging along with loads on their backs, leaving great tracks in the snow—harmless creatures.

Late in the afternoon of the second day, according to the map, we were not far from the lake and at five o'clock we came to what was apparently a logging road running east and west. We changed our course and followed the road east for a mile, which took us to a fish-box mill on the bank of the lake. Had we held to our original course for another hour, we would have hit the lake at American Point only two miles north of the mill.

The mill was owned and operated by Olof Johnson. His uncle, Andrew Johnson, was working with him, and Mrs. Andrew Johnson was their housekeeper and cook. In addition to the two Johnsons, three young men helped run the mill and kept it supplied with logs. All the lumber cut was made into

fish boxes, some of which held fifty and some a hundred pounds. Fishermen from all parts of the Angle and the surrounding islands went to the mill dock with their launches when the lake was open and got what boxes they needed. The boxes were sold in knocked-down bundles of five and ten. In this form, the small fishing craft could carry a hundred boxes at a time.

Bill knew the two Johnsons, and he introduced me to them. They were very friendly men, and after visiting a few minutes, I told them we were heading for American Point but would like to stay with them for the night if they had room for us. Olof promptly said, "We can take care of you and will be pleased to have you stay with us." He led us to his camp and showed us a bunk we could have. We were both glad to drop our fifty-pound packs and enjoy the comfort of the warm log camp.

After resting a few minutes, I left the bunkhouse and stood on the bank about twenty feet above the shore looking out across the ice on the islands that form the southwestern fringe of a mass of more than ten thousand. I then looked over the little mill, and the scene reminded me of the description I had read of one of the earliest sawmills operated in the United States. It was built at York, Maine, almost three hundred years before this mill was erected.

After supper the Johnsons and their crew gave us considerable information about the timber in the northeast corner of the Angle. They also told us of a very comfortable vacant house two miles west on the trail we had followed. The owner, William Gildersleeve, had proved up his claim and moved back to Iowa. The house would be useful to us, since we planned to look over the Angle by locating in favorable spots four miles apart and examining all the land within two miles of each campground. Three settings would take us to the Manitoba border—the boundary between the United States and Canada.

The Gildersleeve house was made of hewed logs. A stairway led to a large room

overhead. It had been kept clean, and apparently no one had used it during the short time it was vacant. There was a cookstove, old, but still good enough for the cooking we would do; two chairs and a rocker made of birch saplings; a table, a washstand, and a cupboard; and a few plates and cooking utensils. An oil lamp put the finishing touch on our temporary home in the woods. We had everything we needed; we were satisfied and happy. This was the best house we saw on the Angle, and it was the only one located back from the shore of the lake or the banks of the rivers. Three small rivers with sources in Manitoba empty into the lake through the northwest corner of the Angle.

We had plenty of time to look over the Gildersleeve claim on the day we moved into the house, and we found a very good bunch of large cedar—large enough for telephone poles—and a fine stand of spruce pulpwood. Mr. Gildersleeve was not a fisherman. He wanted a timber claim and he had it. A few months later, when I was satisfied there was enough timber on the claim to make a logging operation successful, I bought it.

Ten days after we left Johnson's mill, we went back and followed the trail along the shore to American Point. There we took on a load of supplies for use in our next stop, four miles to the west. By this time the snow had disappeared and the going was very good except in the cedar and tamarack swamps, where the snow water had settled. In such places we waded through water from six to eight inches deep.

Our next campground was on a rock ridge. Rising out of a swamp within half a mile of the lake, it followed an east-west course through the entire Angle. The spot where we camped was called Birch Ridge, and it was covered with a growth of white birch grouped in clusters of six or more trees. This was not a thick stand; it looked like a park where the beautiful white trees, dressed in bright green, were set apart to show off their graceful forms and lovely colors. In my ex-

cursions in the forests of several states and Canadian provinces, from Michigan to the Pacific Coast, I have never seen a more entrancing picture.

Thirty days after we stepped onto the Angle, we had estimated every forty in the north half that contained timber of any value. We had met every family and bachelor living there and had found all of them anxious to put in what timber they had on their lands if they could sell it right there on the rivers or the lake shore.

WE RETURNED to Warroad, and after spending a few days at my home in Bemidji, I went to Kenora, at the north end of the Lake of the Woods in Ontario. The success of my enterprise, it seemed to me, depended entirely on my ability to sell pulpwood to the paper mill at Kenora. So I arranged to meet its manager, Dan McLeod. After serving for several years as a camp clerk and scaler in the woods, he had worked his way up to this very important position. I found him very friendly to deal with. I wanted to sell him what pulpwood I could put in, and I also wanted assurance that while my contract was in operation, he would not buy wood from any other operator who might follow me to the Angle and start dealing with the settlers. He agreed to this, and after an hour's visit I left his office with the understanding that he would send me a contract calling for the delivery of seven to ten thousand cords of pulpwood the following year. The price was fair. This gave me something to go on.

It was, however, still necessary to obtain enough timber to meet the proposed agreement. If I arranged to buy from settlers who had timber on lands back from the lake, I could not obtain more than four thousand cords. Obviously, that was not enough.

Some time before I went to the Angle, I read in a Minneapolis newspaper about a recently passed law giving men who had served in the First World War for nineteen months or more a chance to prove up on a homestead after seven months' residence.<sup>1</sup>



With this information in mind, I thought of a plan that might solve my problem. On my way home from Kenora, I stopped in Crookston to discuss the plan with the registrar and receiver of the United States Land Office there and get an opinion regarding its legality.

As outlined for them, my plan began by advertising in the Crookston and Grand Forks newspapers for ex-service men who were interested in locating on timber claims on the Northwest Angle. I would offer to advance all expenses involved in filing on the land and proving up the claims, as well as a sufficient amount for food each month. The men would have the right to cut enough timber to pay all their expenses, if they wished to do so, and I would buy the timber as soon as they proved up. In return they were to give me mortgages on the land to cover any advances that were or would be made. Those interested and qualified were invited to write for information about meeting me at the Crookston Land Office and filing on land for which I would furnish descriptions.

<sup>1</sup> For the acts of July 28, 1917, and February 25, 1919, see *United States Statutes*, 40:248, 1161. Some pertinent interpretations are in Department of the Interior, *Decisions in Cases Relating to the Public Lands*, 46:115, 174, 47:151, 48:203 (Washington, 1919, 1921, 1922). According to a decision of May 9, 1917, "The requirement . . . as to at least one year's residence by a soldier entitled to credit for military service is satisfied by a showing of seven months' actual and five months' constructive residence." *Ed.*

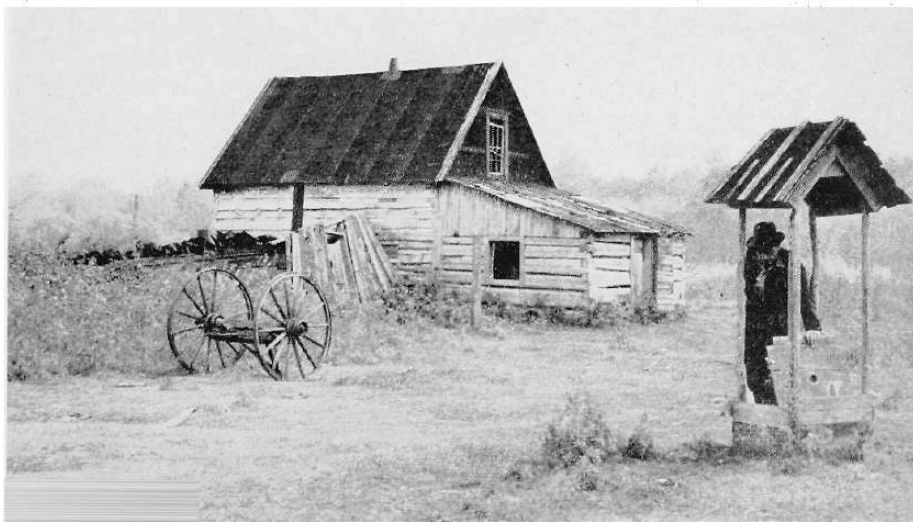
The land officers told me they would check all the data in the office to discover whether my plan was legal, giving special attention to the entryman's right to mortgage the land he filed on. Their decision would be forwarded by letter. This was perfectly satisfactory to me, since I wanted their decision in writing in case of future criticism or charges against me as a timberland exploiter. The letter that reached me a few days later removed any doubt that the plan was perfectly legal. A homesteader had the right to mortgage his land.

During our conversation, the land officers mentioned the risk I was taking in case an entryman did not prove up. In view of my contract with Mr. McLeod, however, I could not see the possibility of risk unless an entryman lived on land a few months and then abandoned it. That happened in one case only. A young married couple went to the Angle, lived there a few months, and then, because the wife was in a condition of expectancy and fear, they moved back to the town they came from. That was the last I saw of them, although, in addition to what I had advanced while they were on the land, I gave them a hundred dollars to help pay the expense of coming events and to buy baby clothes. They did not return.

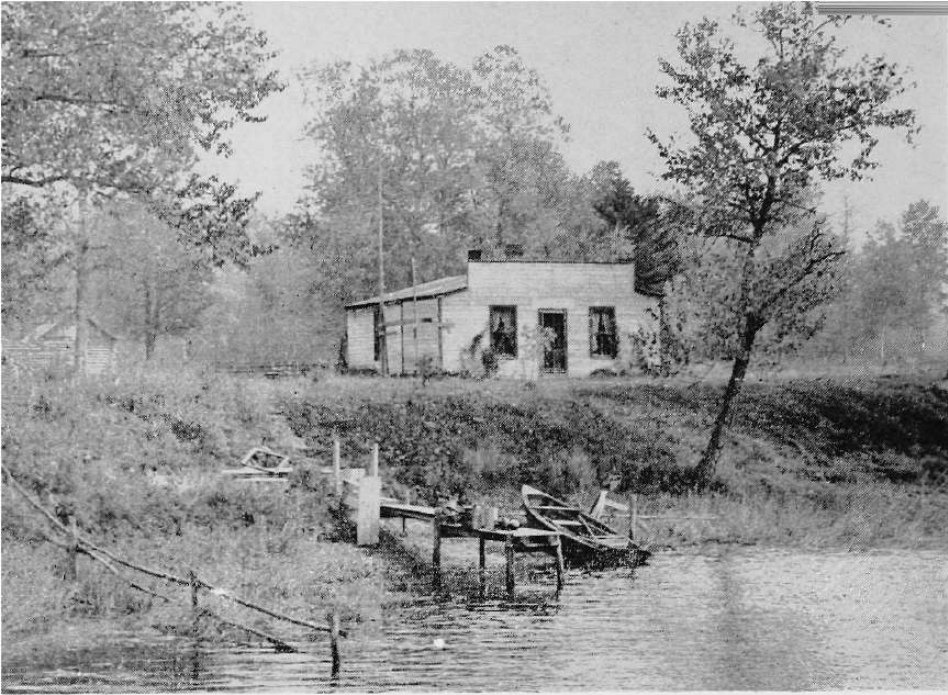
By the time I had placed seven applicants on the land, the Angle had become so widely advertised for its homesteading opportunities and as a trapper's paradise that men began arriving from various parts of Minne-

COURTESY MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

ABANDONED  
homestead on the  
Northwest Angle  
in 1938



Spring 1954



MRS. Nelson's  
store and post office  
at Penasse

COURTESY MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

sota and Wisconsin and one group of three came from as far away as Detroit, Michigan. In some cases I gave them descriptions of land worth filing on. Then parties of from four to seven ex-service men, all of whom could make proof in seven months, began to arrive with a timber cruiser who located them. This put an end to any effort on my part to locate men on claims, for it assured me of all the timber I would need to complete the agreement with Mr. McLeod.

When the lake opened in the spring after my first trip to the Angle, we had on the landings over seven thousand cords of pulpwood, several thousand telephone poles and railroad ties, and twenty thousand cedar fence posts. A timber barge which could carry ten carloads of cedar posts, poles, and railroad ties took them to Warroad. The total value of the winter's output was over seventy thousand dollars. The results of the trapper's story and my own desire to see the Lake of the Woods and the Northwest Angle had been satisfactory.

I thought all my problems were solved, but I had to face a worse one the following year when Mr. McLeod asked me to keep the pulp production below four thousand cords. This was a disappointment to me. It

was necessary because extensive fires had killed a large tract of the timber owned by the company in Canada, and in order to salvage what was left, the firm was compelled to cut and use it. The next year the mill set a limit of twenty-five hundred cords, and it held the figure at that amount until 1931, when the depression came on in full force. That put everybody interested in timber out of business. It was the unsolvable problem.

FOR MANY YEARS before timber operations were started on the Angle, the area was almost as silent and remote as Greenland during the seven months when the lake was frozen. There were no roads; travel was possible only on the frozen rivers and the lake; and the snow and bitter cold made visiting between the few widely scattered homes a thing that was almost impossible. Mail was supposed to arrive once each week. It was taken to Penasse — the northernmost post office in the United States — by a mail carrier who used a team of heavy horses and a covered sled. Mrs. Naomi Nelson, a homesteader's widow, was the postmistress at Penasse, where she also kept a small stock of groceries.<sup>2</sup> The mail carrier also hauled

whatever freight there was for the stores at Oak Island and Penasse, and carried any passengers who wanted to get away from the Angle badly enough to stand the terribly tiresome two-day's ride to Warroad. They rode cooped up under a canvas top, inhaling fumes from a small oil stove which kept the temperature just above freezing. From the time the driver said "Giddap" as he left the Penasse post office until he said "Whoa" in front of the post office in Warroad — a distance of seventy-five miles — the horses continued at a slow walk, stopping only to be fed at noon and at night.

The first year of the logging operation there was very little snow, and by December 1 the ice was strong enough to support automobiles and trucks. Hardly a day passed that autos did not stop at our main camp, which was on the shore of the lake. When I reached camp one day at noon, there were autos with license plates from four states and two from the province of Ontario. Canadians living north of the lake had heard about the Angle operation, and many of them stopped there on the way to Minneapolis or St. Paul or other points due south of Warroad or Bemidji.

Logging activities on the lake lifted from every home on the Angle the long silence that had marked earlier winters, and the area became one of the most active localities in the northwest corner of the state. Although there was not one automobile on the Angle when we started logging operations, within a month there were at least twenty. Our crews in two camps were made up of young Scandinavians from near-by farms, and they all came in autos. All who came in groups from points like Hibbing, where a unit of seven originated, came in cars. They were all young men, and there were about ten of them for every girl or woman on the

Angle. Many were employed by the homesteaders with whom they boarded to cut the timber on back forties. Soon dances were being arranged in the schoolhouse or in homes with living rooms large enough to accommodate a set or two of square dances or a waltz. The residents did not need cars. The boys who had cars would drive as many as twenty miles to gather the womenfolks for a party. They even drove over to the Canadian side, where there were many families who made a living by fishing, and took them to the party.

Every man on the Angle who was able to work was busy, and even if he hired men to help cut his timber, his wife and daughters also were kept busy cooking, mending, washing, and doing chores. I remember very distinctly visiting the cutting of one settler on a Saturday. His crew of five was increased by a daughter, a strong, flaxen-haired, rosy-cheeked girl of sixteen, and two sturdy boys around twelve or fourteen.

I said to the father, "Isn't this work a little too heavy for the younger crew?"

"No," he replied, "they are bound to do it. They want to make some money of their own. We let them cut the smallest trees and Axel carries the wood out to the skidding trail." Axel, the older boy, had finished school.

Anna, the daughter, was dressed, like all pulp cutters, in a Mackinaw jacket and trousers tucked into leather-topped rubbers. She wore a knitted cap pulled down over her ears and hair, and no one who did not know the Engdahl family would have suspected that she was a girl. She did all the usual ax work, notching the tree at the base for the sawyers, trimming off all the limbs when the tree was down, measuring it into eight-foot lengths, and marking each by a small notch. The boys would follow with their light Swede saw and cut where she had measured and marked.

By Christmas, Anna had made enough money to send to Sears Roebuck and Company for a good wool dress and other finery, and when she appeared at one of the parties

---

<sup>2</sup>When Mrs. Nelson was postmistress, Penasse was located on Poplar Creek, in the northwest corner of the Angle. This is the location indicated on the accompanying map. About 1934 the Penasse post office was moved to American Point, on a small island near the entrance to Northwest Angle Inlet. *Ed.*

in her new clothes she looked like a forest princess. She was an excellent dancer, very graceful and correct in every movement. You may be sure that she was kept busy dancing in every set and round dance. It was hard to realize that this fairy-like child of the timberland was the pulpwood cutter I had seen in the spruce swamp. She and her elder brother, who always accompanied her, never had to think about how they were going to reach the next party or how they would get home after it was over. She had several suitors; all were treated with intelligent modesty and friendliness.

The parties continued on Saturday nights throughout the winter until the logging operations ended in the spring. One year the last party of the season was held at a home on Bear River, with a large number attending. Anna with two other girls and four boys came in an open Model T Ford, four riding in the back seat and three in front. Anna sat in front on her brother's knees. They had driven about fifteen miles, singing happily as they sped along over the smooth ice from which the snow had disappeared. Everything went well until they turned into the river and were almost in front of the house. Then the ice gave way, and the car went to the bottom in water that covered the riders' shoulders when they stood on the seats.

As the front end of the car broke through the ice, Axel threw Anna over the door and out on the ice. At once twelve hands went up, and Anna, calm and sturdy, with the strength of the wood chopper in her arms, pulled for all she was worth. With a boost from the boys, the two girls popped out of the water and onto the ice. The boys soon followed. Then all ran for the house.

Fortunately, it was not a very cold night, and in a few minutes the house was as warm as an oven. It was built on the same plan as the Gildersleeve house with a large room upstairs. It was furnished with a wood heater and two beds. The girls were taken there, and the hostess and other women helped undress the shivering guests and rubbed them vigorously with dry towels and then

put them to bed between woolen blankets. By the time the two nearest neighbors could find and donate dry clothes for the girls, they were warm and back to normal, laughing and joking with the boys and girls who went upstairs to cheer them. Anna did not need attention. As she wore heavy arctics, even her shoes were dry.

The four boys were taken to the nearest neighbor's house, which was turned over to them while they dried off and dressed in what clothes could be found for them. One neighbor was very large; the other was tall and slim. When the boys marched into the room where the dance was in progress the twenty or more friends, especially their girl companions, went wild with laughter. There never was such a party on the Angle; it brought the season to a successful conclusion.

The six who took the ducking were kept for the night in order that their clothes could dry thoroughly. Two of the other guests returned in the morning with their cars, bringing blocks and ropes, and with the help of a team of horses, they pulled the submerged auto out of the water and towed it to the mill for overhauling.

Thus social life developed on the Angle along with an industrial awakening. The winters from 1925 to the depression of the 1930s were probably the liveliest ever experienced by those living in this remote northern area.

After building camps and roads and making such other improvements in the Angle area as were needed to cut the balance of the timber there, I was naturally disappointed when, in 1931, I was forced to stop my logging operations. By the time the depression ended, I had become interested in a large tract of timber near Red Lake. This region was far more accessible than the Angle area, and logs could be easily hauled from it by truck to a railroad. Before retiring in 1943, I spent five years in the Red Lake country, thus rounding out a career of fifty-six years in the forests of three states and two Canadian provinces.





Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).