

CHAPTER II

COMMITTEE ON NEW ENGLAND SAWMILL UNITS

"The New England Sawmill Unit was the best sporting event that has come to my attention during the war." So spoke Lord Lovat, Brigadier-General in charge of lumber interests for the British government.

At the time the United States entered the war Great Britain was in sore need of timber. Her available woodlands had been invaded and her immediate lumber supply greatly reduced. A similar shortage existed also in all the other belligerent countries, even Germany being forced to ruthlessly deplete those forests which she had laboriously planted and scientifically nursed through several generations. The erection of innumerable ammunition plants, the building of hospitals, barracks and ordnance depots; the manufacture of boxes and shell cases; the increasing need for railway mileage for military purposes and for making highways passable; the speeding up of mines and mills; the construction of trenches; with many other new demands incident to modern warfare, all contributed to this deficiency. A further drawback was the limited transportation for overseas service, which, with the menace of increasing submarine activities, prevented the United States from shipping lumber across the water. So pressing was England's need that on April 16, 1917, Col. Vernon Willey of the British War Office cabled to Mr. William A. Gaston, chairman of the Finance Committee, suggesting that America could best help England by sending over experienced lumbermen to manufacture lumber for war purposes.

Compliance with such a sudden and unexpected demand called for a wide departure from any activity the Committee on Public Safety had heretofore contemplated. But this request, coming from so authoritative a source, at once

caught the interest and enthusiasm of the Executive Committee, who on April 23 voted that Mr. Storrow should send to Colonel Willey the following message in reply: —

Understanding that skilled lumbermen are needed in England to supply timber for forces in Europe, New England gladly offers its services in assembling men and material for ten complete, working, portable sawmill units, all to be shipped from Boston, each unit to consist of thirty experienced men, with portable sawmill, ten suitable horses, harness, wagons, saws, axes, or other tools and camp equipment, ready for business on landing; men, all civilian volunteers, with capable men in general charge. The cost of the portable mill, horses and of equipment, including freight and other expenses to steamer side, about, and not over, \$10,000 per unit; wages per month per unit about \$2,000. Have not yet consulted lumber companies because not certain English government would desire these outfits, but we are sure New England would want to contribute five of these outfits, delivered at the steamer's side. We assume, if desired, the English government could arrange space on steamer sailing from Boston. We prefer men and outfits to be all together on the same steamer.

An immediate acceptance of this offer was received by telegram through the British Embassy at Washington: —

The War Offices are most pleased to accept Mr. Storrow's offer, and request that this acceptance should be communicated to him, and ask for a date on which the transport for these units should be provided.

A corroboration of the above came by letter a few days later.

BRITISH EMBASSY, WASHINGTON, May 15, 1917.

SIR: — I have received a telegram from the Foreign Office stating that the War Offices accept with gratitude your generous offer of ten complete sawmill units for work in England. The War Offices request me to convey to you an expression of their high appreciation of the very welcome co-operation of the New England States in this matter, and I wish to add a word of personal thanks to the gentleman who initiated a movement of such immense practical importance to the successful prosecution of the great struggle in which our two Nations are so happily united.

I have the honor to be, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

CECIL SPRING-RICE.

On receipt of the wire from the Embassy the proposal was taken up directly with the War Department at Washington, and the Secretary of War advised going ahead without further delay or more formal authorization. Correspondence then ensued with the Governors of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island and Massachusetts, all of whom gave full assurances of their sympathy with the project, and their desire to co-operate to the best of their ability.

In the meantime Mr. James J. Phelan, who had had long experience in the lumber business, and whose inspiring energy was from first to last the mainspring of the whole enterprise, formulated a general plan which he offered to the Committee, by whose authorization he later presented it to a gathering of lumber men. The latter quickly formed an organization to put the proposition through, with Mr. W. A. Brown of the Berlin Mills Company as chairman, and Mr. Phelan as vice-chairman, and, assisting them, Mr. F. W. Rane, State Forester of Massachusetts, and Mr. H. G. Philbrook of the Connecticut Valley Lumber Company. Many well-known lumbermen and State Foresters of New England volunteered for service, and devoted a great deal of time and thought toward making the undertaking a success. Headquarters were established in the Committee on Public Safety's rooms at the State House, where all the details of organization, transportation and equipment were carried through under the general direction of Mr. Phelan, Mr. Brown and Mr. Philbrook.

Within a month 122 horses and 10 portable sawmills were purchased. The above were fully outfitted, the equipment numbering over 2,000 different articles. During the same period more than 350 men were enlisted. Funds raised by subscription, and amounting to \$130,000, were formally presented as a "gift from New England to Old England," — a unique example of the former's good will and patriotism. Of this sum, each of the six New England States agreed to furnish \$12,000. The balance was secured from 77 firms, corporations and individual subscriptions, in

sums varying from \$10 to \$5,000, supplemented by a gift from the Committee on Public Safety of \$12,017.47.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of holding together during the three days' wait prior to their departure so large an aggregate of lumber jacks, — many of them fresh from the remote back woods, and all anxious to investigate the attractions of our Boston town, — nevertheless, without the loss of a man, the Sawmill Units set sail for England on June 15, 1917, the men traveling on rations as British soldiers. They comprised the first organized body of American lumbermen to respond for service overseas. Each man was under separate contract with the British government, his term of service to expire on June 15, 1918, at which time the British government agreed to send back to the United States any man who so desired.

At a farewell banquet given to them at the City Club, Boston, on the eve of their departure, Governor McCall said: —

This movement is a most remarkable one, and one of the most splendid contributions that our country could make to the war. It means comfortable buildings erected for the wounded back of the lines. It means the rapid restoration of bridges necessary for military strategy. It means trenches lined with wooden sheathing which will obviate to a great extent the unpleasantness of mud. It means the accomplishment of work for which the Allies have neither available nor trained men. There is no body of men who will contribute more to the success of the Allied cause than you whom I see before me, and I think you should feel that you are as much America's contribution to the war as if you wore a uniform and carried a gun.

On July 4, 1917, the contingent disembarked at Liverpool, and after a journey of five hundred miles, the following day reached Argday, Rosshire, Scotland, a small village on the Dornoch Firth, about fifty miles north of Inverness. There was a slight delay in the arrival of the equipment, but July 28 witnessed the first board ever sawed on foreign soil by an organized body of Americans. By the middle of August the entire outfit was in full action. Timber tracts

chosen for operation were on mill sites, situated in northeastern Rosshire and southeastern Sutherlandshire, and all were comprehended within a radius of five miles from the units' headquarters at Arghday. Seven of the units operated on the estate of Sir Charles Ross, the inventor of the Ross Rifle, and three on the Skibo Castle property of Andrew Carnegie. The greater part of these tracts had once been cut over to supply lumber for the Napoleonic Wars, and the replanted trees, now nearly a century old, had attained to a magnificent size, offering a high-grade dimension lumber. All together they were supposed to carry about 24,000,000 feet of timber.

Lumber production began in August, each unit being organized as follows:—

Foreman and clerk.
 Mill:—
 Millwright.
 Sawyer.
 Unloader and scaler.
 Roll-on man.
 Take-away man.
 Checker.
 Fireman.
 Slab-and-fuel man.
 Teamster.
 Lumber sticker.

Woods:—
 Four to 5 head choppers.
 Four to 5 second choppers.
 Four to 5 swampers.
 Four to 5 teamsters.
 General:—
 Cook.
 Cookee.
 Blacksmith.

Each unit plant consisted of the following:—

Portable steam sawmill, boiler and engine.

Buildings:—

 Cook house, sleeping camps, stable, blacksmith shop and outbuildings.

Camp equipment:—

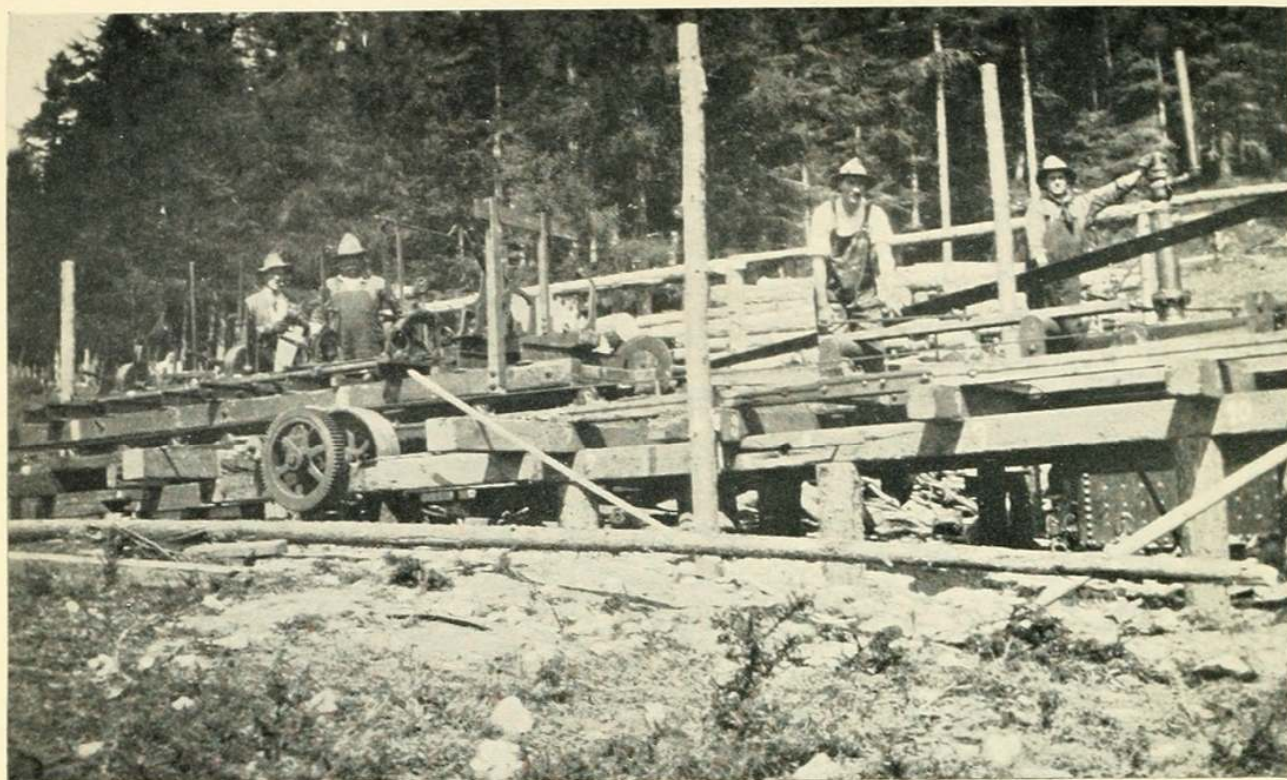
 Complete kitchen and dining-room utensils, camp bedding and necessary supplies.

Ten to twelve horses.

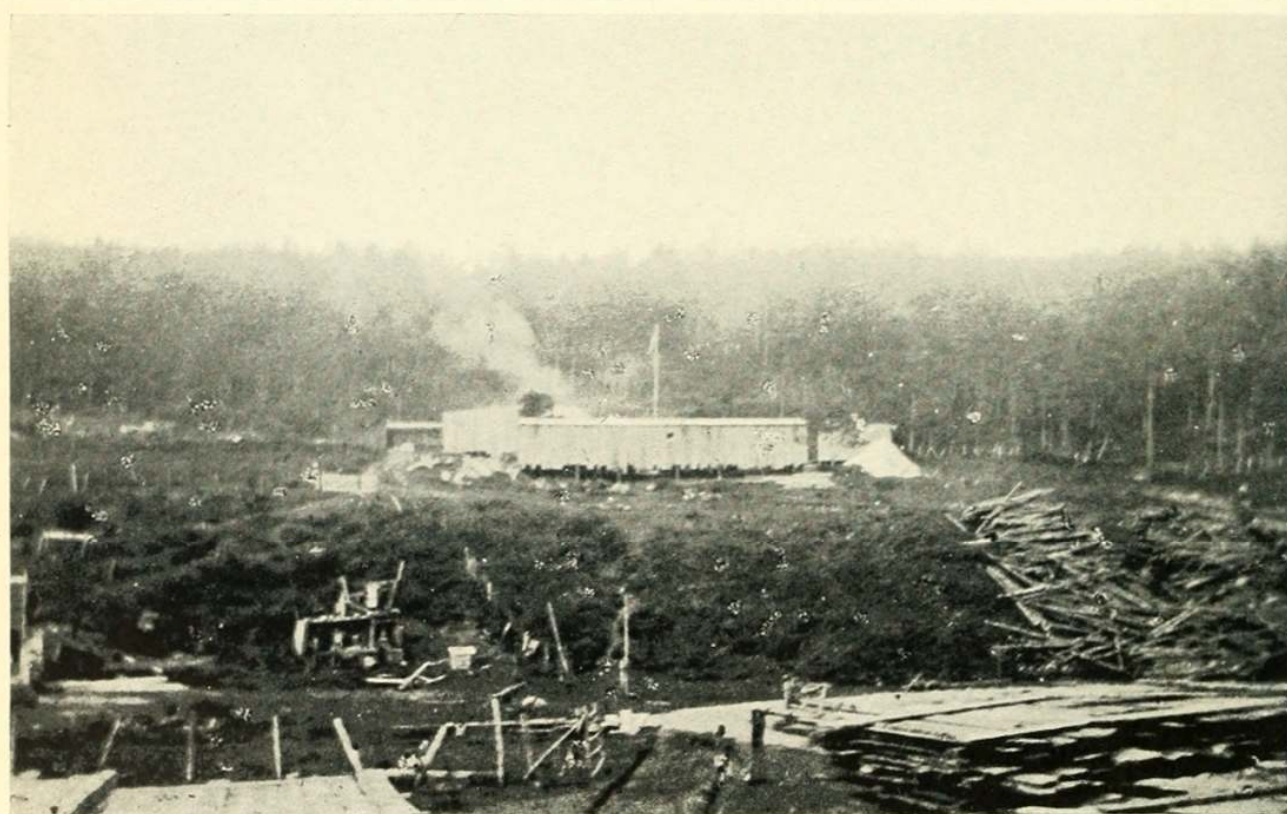
Woods outfit:—

 Crosscut saws, axes, wedges, hammers, cant dogs, scoots and sleds.

 Wagons were used for hauling lumber from mill units and for mill supplies. A few logging trucks were available for transporting logs from main highways to the mills, though very little use was found for wagons in the woods.



Sawing Lumber



Bunk House

During the first nine and one-half months of operating time 20,000,000 board feet of lumber were produced, including railroad ties, dimension lumber and mine props. Over 60,000 railroad ties were made, and a quantity of special dimension lumber sawed for army and navy special construction purposes; and in addition a large volume of sidings and larger dimension sizes were shipped to resawing plants to be manufactured into munition boxes. All of this timber was cut on private estates, and consisted in the main of Scotch pine, larch and Norway spruce. The trees were felled on land so steep as to require the use of "scoots" or wood-shod sleds; yet more feet of lumber were produced per man per day than by any similar organization in Great Britain. This was due in part to the mills being portable, and also to the general make-up of the whole outfit, which proved peculiarly well adapted to the lumbering conditions in Scotland, and enabled the operators to work economically on small lots. This would not have been possible with larger plants. Before the units left for Liverpool the men had been recruited as civilians. This was of great advantage, since it resulted in fewer men being employed to do a given amount of work than would have been required under military control, and subjected them to less restraint and loss of that freedom which they had always been accustomed to.

However, in order to guarantee a continuity of production, and to meet the needs of the many war industries dependent on a steady supply of lumber, arrangements were later made to loan to the British government a company of the 6th Battalion of the 20th Forest Engineers of the United States Army. When the men of the Sawmill Units were given the option of joining this battalion, about one hundred of them did so. Others enlisted in different branches of the army and navy, and about one hundred and fifty returned to the United States.

Shortly after the arrival at Arday, Mr. D. P. Brown of the Berlin Mills Company, who had accompanied the

expedition as its general manager, resigned that he might return to the United States and enlist in our army. Mr. Edgar C. Hirst, State Forester of New Hampshire, was then put in charge, having on his staff as assistant managers and chief engineers, Mr. H. M. Hackett of Athol, Mass., Mr. G. M. Shea of the Connecticut Valley Lumber Company, and Mr. C. A. Pratt. Mr. Hirst practically remained in control from the time the cutting operations began until the new military unit was fully organized, the commissioned officers of which were in general chosen from the foremen of the New England Sawmill Units.

After Mr. Hirst returned to America he received the following letter from the Assistant Controller of Timber Supplies for Scotland, which expressed the appreciation of that department for the splendid assistance given by the units: —

DEAR MR. HIRST: — I desire to convey to you formally the thanks of this department for the valuable assistance it has received from you during the year you have been in charge of the New England Sawmill Units.

Even in this time of great events, the action of the New England States in sending this expedition to Great Britain stands out as a notable episode. Thanks to the energy, zeal and hard work of yourself and your assistants, your mill foremen and men, the gift so generously designed by the Committee has most happily achieved its object. It has provided us in time of need with timber we could not otherwise have produced. It has bequeathed to us valuable plant and horses. On our side it leaves a feeling of profound gratitude and friendship towards the States that sent you over, and of warm personal regard to yourself. . . .

Yours very sincerely,

JOHN STIRLING MAXWELL,
Assistant Controller of Timber Supplies, Scotland.

The formal presentation of the units from New England to Old England was made by Mr. George S. Lewis of Holyoke, Mass., to Right Hon. Arthur James Balfour, Minister of Foreign Affairs for the British government, at the office of the Ministry in London. Mr. Lewis carried with him a letter of gift from the Governor of each New England State. The gratitude of the British government for the help given

them by New England in sending this assistance may be gathered from the following letter written to Mr. Lewis just previous to his embarking for America: —

DEAR MR. LEWIS: — I cannot allow you to leave England without again expressing my heartfelt thanks for the splendid help you have given to this country in general and to my department in particular.

Words fail me to give adequate expression to my gratitude, both for the magnificent gift from New England and for the infinite pains which you have taken to insure that Old England should receive the fullest benefits from that gift.

You have given your Lumber Units a splendid start, and I am very sorry that you cannot stay to see the great results which we are all confident they will achieve. You will be sorry, too, but you will have the supreme satisfaction of knowing that your generous sacrifice of time and thought in our interests has rendered us a most signal service.

When you return to England, as I sincerely hope you will, a warm welcome awaits you from the many friends you have made during your brief stay among us; from none will it be warmer and more sincere than,

Yours most sincerely,

J. B. BALL,

Controller of Timber Supplies of the British Board of Trade.

The climate of Scotland seemed to agree with the men in more ways than one. They were both well and happy, and most cordially and hospitably welcomed by the people of the neighborhood, who expressed great admiration for the manner in which they conducted themselves and turned out their work. Indeed, so naturally did they succumb to the charms of their Scotch environment that the home passage was enlivened by the presence of a large bevy of *bona fide* Highland lassies as brides.

In the matter of rations, each man was allowed by the British government the following: —

Meat and fish, 18 ounces per day.

Bread, 16 ounces per day.

Sugar, $\frac{1}{2}$ pound per week.

Tea, $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce per day.

All non-rationed articles, such as potatoes, beans, fresh vegetables, coffee and cocoa were obtained in practically unlimited amounts.

Many interesting letters were written home by the men after they had a chance to become acquainted with their surroundings, and of these it may be of interest to record a few. Under date of July 9, 1917, one member of the organization wrote: —

We stayed in Halifax Harbor nearly a week, and when we finally did start we had an old boat with us, besides a destroyer, and we had to go slowly to keep with them, so did not get across for nine days, landing at Liverpool on the afternoon of the Fourth. About two days out from port we were met by a destroyer, which accompanied us in, and it was lucky for us that it did, for the night before we docked a torpedo missed us by about 30 feet; but the "sub" was chased off. We wore our life belts all the time coming over, and we felt as though we had lost something when we were on land again. Most of the municipal buildings were flying our flag in honor of our holiday, and the crowds all cheered and whistled when they saw our American flag.

Another correspondent wrote: —

We arrived at Liverpool late in the afternoon and took a train right away. We traveled all night long and arrived at this point in Scotland (Argday) at about noon the next day. The days here are very long at this time of the year, and they have what is known as the "English twilight," the twilight lasting until about 11 o'clock at night. There is only about three hours of total darkness, as the sun begins to rise again at 2 o'clock in the morning. . . . This is a very pretty town with mountains on all sides, and is very near the sea. It is quite a distance north of Edinburgh. . . . The spot where we are located is very unique because we get the benefit of the mountains, woods, rivers, and also the sea not far away, so you see you cannot beat the location. . . . The mountains are certainly wonderful; when the sun shines on them they make one of the prettiest sights I have ever gazed upon, — in fact, I think they have got our White Mountains beat a mile. The weather has been real dry, but the temperature never rises very high. When it reaches 80 degrees or over the people think it is a very warm day.

The following extract taken from the British "Board of Trade Journal," an official publication of the British government, is evidence of the splendid work done by this contribution from New England: —

In the spring of 1917 it was suggested that lumbermen from the United States might also be willing to help in timber production in Britain. The

idea was taken up so heartily by the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety that ten complete Sawmill Units were raised and equipped with mills, horses and all necessary impedimenta, free of cost. These Sawmill Units are not a military organization, the men being under individual contracts with the government. Considerable enthusiasm was manifested in connection with the send-off of these units. Their provision is one of the striking incidents of the story of how the timber problem has been dealt with. These lumbermen have more than realized the high expectations formed of their work, and have put up some remarkable records, their total output being well ahead of what was estimated.

That the enterprise was not one of merely momentary interest, but was held in appreciative memory after its conclusion, is shown in a letter to Mr. Lewis from the Controller of Timber Supplies of the British Board of Trade: —

SEPTEMBER, 1918.

DEAR MR. LEWIS: — Now that the work of the Lumber Units raised by the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety has come to a conclusion, consequent upon the enrollment of the men in the United States Forces for service in France, I should like to convey to you my personal appreciation of the work achieved by the officers and the men of these units. I trust that the sojourn of the men in Scotland was not altogether unenjoyable, and I need hardly say how valuable a contribution to the solidarity of the Allied cause is afforded by such work as that performed by the units.

My sincere thanks are also due to you personally for the very considerable share you took in the work of organization.

Yours very truly,

J. B. BALL.

Surely when Lord Lovat, so prominent a representative of that virile England long recognized as the pristine center of sporting life, forgetting any insular prejudices, allowed in his enthusiasm that the New England Sawmill Unit was the sportiest event of the war, he not only repaid the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety and its supporters in full, but touched that little human chord that makes the whole world kin.