



THE AUDIO MUSEUM OF AMERICAN SONG

EXPLORING LOCAL HISTORY
AND FOLK MEMORY
THROUGH SONG

Michigan-I-O

*"We'll go home to our wives and sweethearts, tell others not to go.
Oh God grant there is no bigger hell than Michigan-I-O"*

Alan Lomax spent three months in 1938 traveling through Michigan and Wisconsin – looking for music. He'd pull into town and start asking around, looking for the village elders, the kind of people who were around before the town grew up, when the forest fell before the lumberjacks. It's no surprise that someone remembered "Michigan-I-O".

It's a gripe song, really, about a young shanty boy who didn't know the half of what he'd signed up for. Harvesting trees in the middle of a Michigan winter wasn't anyone's idea of fun. If you signed up to spend a winter felling trees in the north country, you were in it for the money, because no other work looked good – or, in the case of this young narrator, because it beat going to war.

That's right. 1863, the year named in the first verse of the song, falls right in the middle of the American Civil War. Songs like this got around, and some of the particulars would have been altered as they passed from camp to camp. Canada even had its own version of the song, called *Canaday-I-O* (Canada spelled with a Y, then the I-O), and there's another named for a place called Colley's Run – that's somewhere in Pennsylvania.

But that year, 1863 – I find it so interesting that the song would be passed down that way, documenting someone's choice to go logging *instead* of the front. You wonder why, but they don't tell you. The money was a little better in the logging camps, compared to enlisting as a Private, anyway – you'd earn \$13 a month as a Private in the Union army, compared to around \$2 a day a lumberjack. If this guy was running from the fight (maybe he didn't believe in the cause) many of those logs went straight to the Army to become muskets and cannons. I don't even know if people thought that way back then. So the song begins with this mysterious footnote, begging us to figure it out.

[cut to song]

The way you'd become a lumberjack was almost like joining the army. You'd go and talk to a recruiter who'd tell you how great it was, how you'd join this elite force of ferocious men. You'd balance an axe on your pinky while shoveling down God-knows how many pancakes with your other arm. Your beard would glisten in the northerly sun. And if you didn't like it, hey, it was just one winter.

It had to happen in the winter, by the way. Once the snow thawed, that's when all the felled trees would get pushed into the river and shipped away. It was a tradeoff: the snow made it possible for pack animals to move logs a short distance on the ground; the open water in the spring let you really put on some miles.

These recruiters, who made logging sound like no work at all: they were cynically referred to as "preachers of the Gospel". The song "Michigan-I-O" opens with this seemingly chance encounter between an unattached young man and a lumber company agent, who sends him on a journey he wishes he hadn't taken. But it wasn't chance. That young shanty boy was just becoming a cog in the wheel.

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If you wanted to start a lumbering operation at the time, you went to the US government first. The government took land from the Native Americans who had previously lived on it, offering them stretches of farmland, and the opportunity to assimilate into a new dominant culture. In Michigan those treaties worked, from the government's point of view. Once the treaties were made, barons could send scouts who'd sit on a piece of land until the boss could pay for it all. When the plot was finally just a bunch of stumps, the company would sell to someone else for cheap. They actually called it "stumping". Huge chunks of Michigan are just farmland now – they look like Iowa or Nebraska. When I was a kid, Grandpa and Grandma's house sat next to a big Michigan corn field, in a town you've never heard of. I never would have guessed that that land used to be a forest.

They started working in Michigan around the year 1820. It started as a trickle, like always. Lumber barons who had already clear-cut much of the East Coast, like Maine, became intrigued by this beautiful territory. The scouts they sent came back with reports of endless acres of old-growth pine trees. That alone would have caught their attention. Pine is a soft wood, easily manipulated by the steel tools of the day. If you cut down a pine tree, you could turn it in to planks, a cabinet, or your front door – seriously, some of these trees were five feet deep, so you could cut a door out of them – you could do all that on your own. As Americans continued to push West over the course of the 19th century, they needed materials to build their new lives (especially in the plains, where trees were harder to find). For that, they looked to states like Michigan, which had plenty to spare.

Michigan had the lumber, but it wasn't just that that made it perfect for the lumbering industry. Michigan had water. Rivers snaking everywhere, leading inevitably to the Great Lakes, which of course meant that whatever was cut in the forests could be shipped more easily to its destination.

By the 1860's, Michigan was rising among the nation's lumber producers, about to take the lead, in fact. In 1870, the state would begin a 30-year reign as the highest lumber producer in the nation, at times totaling as much as the next three states behind it. We're talking millions and millions of board feet each year – that's a square foot, one inch thick. At its Icarian height, the winter of 1889 to 1890, the State of Michigan alone produced 5.5 Billion board feet. In 1887, someone crunching the numbers had determined that the state had harvested upwards of 162 Billion board feet since those first lumberjacks moved in. That's nearly half of the entire state in less than 70 years.

Humans have impacted the earth around us. Our expanding cities have exacted a massive cost on the environment, and we've worked hard to do it.

Michigan-I-O is a gripe song, because the work wasn't easy, and the people who did the work itself didn't always like it.

Now, listen to the song in its entirety. This is their story.

[play "Michigan-I-O]