

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Masculinity in Folklore: The Enduring Symbolism of the Canadian Lumberjack

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ABSTRACT

The nineteenth-century logging industry in North America produced working conditions that gave birth to many folk tales and folk heroes that have held firm, keeping the lumberjack a topic of popular culture that has endured for over a century. Through examining a historical painting and sketch inspired by the popular French-Canadian folktale *La Chasse Galerie*, present-day people can better understand the different historical influences, such as religion and ethnicity, that helped create folklore and ideas of masculinity within the timber trade in the Ottawa Valley. In addition, the masculinity that logging folk heroes and folk tales embody can help illustrate trends in modern resource extraction industries.

Keywords: working-class, masculinity, gender, storytelling, logging, historical popular culture

Even before the rise of the “lumbersexual”¹ aesthetic in North American pop culture in the mid-2010s, cultural conceptions of lumberjacks, like the artwork featured in Figures 2 and 3, were popular in the Ottawa Valley and throughout Canada. Even today, people do not have to think hard to conjure up imagery of lumberjacks: groups of rugged men working alone in the vast hinterlands, facing life-threatening danger, and exercising incredible strength, all while clad in classic red and black plaid. The lumberjack remains an important symbol of Canadian nation-building, industrial expansion, and taming of the

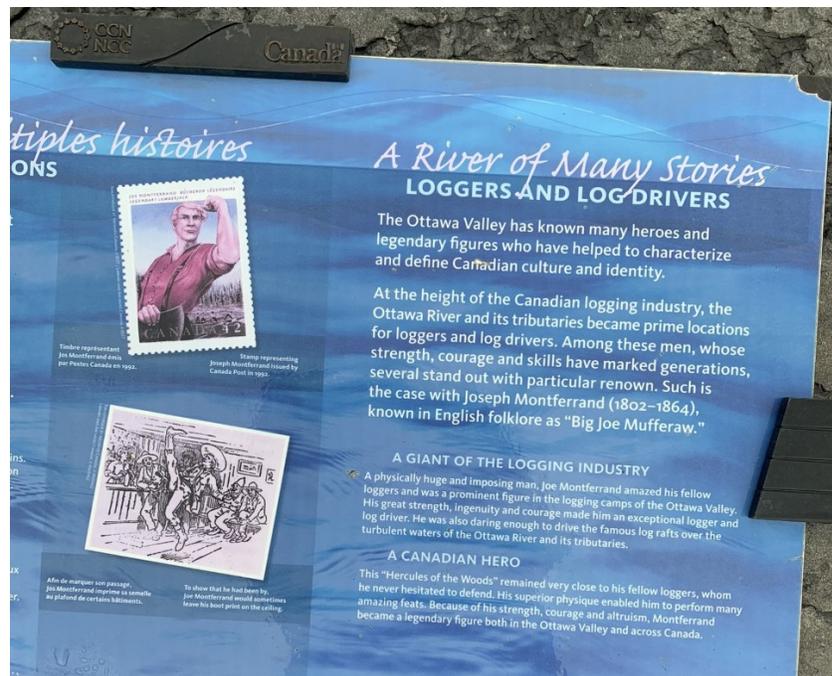


FIGURE 1—A photo of a public plaque along the Ottawa River in Gatineau, QC., describing folk hero Joseph Montferrand. Photo taken by author.

¹ A man whose style of dress and appearance is reminiscent of the ruggedly masculine stereotype of the lumberjack, as in wearing plaid shirts and having a beard (Lexico Online Dictionary n.d.).

wilderness (Lower 1938; Lower 1973). Within these isolated communities of labourers, loggers told tales of wild feats and daring logging adventures in the evenings to entertain, inspire, and act as cautionary tales, slowly evolving into folklore and entering the ethos of the North American public (Higgins 1935; Steward and Watt 1916; MacKay 2007).

Remnants of Canada's rich logging history and the masculine qualities of the Canadian lumberjack are evident in cultural elements and national narratives that are still relevant today. For example, lumberjack influence is evident in Canadian music, film, fashion, and folk heroes, such as Stompin' Tom Connors' song "The Canadian Lumberjack"; the National Film Board of Canada's *Log Drivers' Waltz*, a classic animated work that is still shown to Canadian school children today; in

fashion, many Canadians embody a hipster, 'lumbersexual' style that invokes the idea of grit and outdoor know-how; and famous logging folk heroes, such as Paul Bunyan or Joseph Montferrand, are well known and continue to be culturally relevant. The contextual conditions in which men lived in early resource extraction industries, like the lumber industry, contributed to a specific representation of masculinity in early Canada. As a result of this widespread cultural creation of a masculine archetype, folktales and folk heroes who embodied that type of masculinity arose and became highly celebrated in Canadian culture. This masculinity continues to have ongoing implications for the modern resource extraction industries such as oil and gas, logging, and mining.



FIGURE 2– *La Chasse-Galerie* (Julien 1906). Image of an oil painting on canvas.

One of the first well-known folk heroes in eastern Canada who exemplified masculinity within the logging industry was Joseph "Jos" Montferrand, anglicized as Big Joe Mufferaw, a lumberjack who thrived in the logging industry in the early nineteenth century. He was a man of incredible strength and so tall he would leave a boot print on the eight-foot-tall ceilings of any tavern he visited to let others know he had been there (MacKay 2007, 35). His strength and daring character were legendary in the Ottawa Valley, and the tales about his daring exploits travelled far and wide throughout the continent. Lumberjacks told the epic stories of the timber beast Joseph Montferrand and his mythical white pet moose, spreading these stories across eastern Canada and the forty-ninth parallel into the USA in Michigan and Wisconsin (MacKay 2007, 38–39). The masculinity that Montferrand exemplified in the early nineteenth century laid the groundwork for aspirational lumberjack masculinity within the logging industry and the types of masculinity represented within folktales originating in lumber camps, such as the well-known story of La Chasse-Galerie. La Chasse-Galerie continues to be culturally relevant into the twenty-first century, with the most recent rendition of the folktale being a 2016 Quebecois film called *Chasse-Galerie: La Légende*. In the Ottawa Valley region, recognition of the importance that nineteenth-century logging, lumber barons, and folk heroes had to the area is still seen today in contemporary museums, films, folktales, stores, historical plaques, street names, and buildings.

The folktale of La Chasse Galerie was told in lumber camps long before Honoré Beaugrand wrote the best-known version of the folktale. First published in English in 1892 in a New York newspaper and later republished in 1900 in a collection of short stories called *La Chasse Galerie and Other Canadian Stories*, Beaugrand exposed a broad audience to stories created within logging camps and

shanty men accounts (Beaugrand 1900, 9). Within the collection of short folktales Beaugrand wrote, Henri Julien provided sketches to enhance the stories. La Chasse-Galerie remained important to Julien. Six years after publishing his drawings (Fig. 3) in Beaugrand's collection of short stories, he created the oil painting (Figure 2) depicting the lumbermen's encounter with danger high in the sky as the wispy and spectral appearance of the devil takes control of their birchbark canoe. Julien's artwork (Figures 2 and 3) showcases rugged masculinity as the men immortalized in oil paint and graphite look rough, tough, and buff. Additionally, similar to the one featured in Julien's artwork, the birchbark canoe is a popular Canadian motif that continues to be culturally important and relevant in the twenty-first century (Marsh 2006).

La Chasse Galerie tells the tale of a group of lumberjacks who long to partake in New Year's Eve celebrations. Desperate, they deal with the devil to gain a flying canoe. The agreement is made under the condition that there is no utterance of God's name nor touching of church steeples during travel. While the loggers originally planned to stay sober, the navigator did not and became belligerent with his words and actions, endangering the lives of his fellow loggers. This tale serves as a cautionary account of the dangers of impiety, excessive drinking, and using the Lord's name in vain. The folktale ends differently from version to version. Sometimes, the devil damns the loggers to fly the canoe through hell. In another version, after violently gagging the swearing navigator, the loggers crash the flying canoe and avoid the devil taking their souls. Regardless of how the story ends, each account depicts the lumberjacks as prone to violence, vice, and misdeed. They are characterized as miscreants. Christian beliefs are evident in the folktale's descriptions of the actions of the loggers and the dangers of dealings with the devil. The influences of Christianity and Christian masculine ideals

from Irish, French, and English settlers are evident within this story, as Christianity was the dominant religion, with ninety percent of Canada's population belonging to a Christian sect until the early twentieth century (Bramadat and Seljak 2008, xii). Victorian stories and literature in the nineteenth century began to assert qualities of Christian Manliness, also known as Muscular Christianity, which prized hegemonic masculinity and qualities of independence, daring, bravery, fighting against blasphemy, resisting the consumption of liquor, creating a sense of community, and building spirit and muscles (Phillips 1995, 597–603; Roussel 2003, 146–149). The influence of Muscular Christianity in the nineteenth century had trickled into Canada by the early twentieth century, thus helping to shape the discourse around manhood further and revitalize what it meant to be a man in a religious context (Roussel 2003, 146–147).

The story and the artwork of *La Chasse-Galerie* highlight the dangers of impiety and how lack of glory to God can damn a logger straight to hell. Death and dismemberment were real threats lumbermen faced daily and became something that loggers would expect on the job and a part of the masculine logger archetype. Working-class men played a role in dominating nature, providing an acceptable outlet for male aggression and another way for men to assert their masculinity (Rotundo 1993, 176). *La Chasse-Galerie* reinforces the dangers of the trade and the fine line between life and death as the painting depicts an

uncomfortably close encounter with the devil, showcasing the masculine bravery needed to succeed as a logger. This folktale and painting also showcase how dealings with the devil are not worth risking damning one's immortal soul for an eternity, especially for something immoral like drinking. In other words, these stories demonstrate that to be pious is to work hard and endure the difficulties of working in isolation, as salvation comes to those who give glory to God since hard work will be rewarded by eternal inheritance from the Lord (Colossians 3:23–24, King James Version). Additionally, the dangers loggers face daily would lead to the importance of penance, piety, and prayer, as one would want to ensure that God would care for their soul if an untimely end were to suddenly and unexpectedly befall a lumberjack.

Figure 3 depicts the loggers excitedly heading towards a bright and lively city, wearing clothes to protect them from the harsh winter climate of Canada. These lumbermen have a sense of camaraderie and work together as a team to arrive safely in the city. They are enthusiastic about leaving behind the desolate and cramped shanty to socialize, shake off the feelings of isolation, and partake in a stress-



FIGURE 3 – *La Chasse-Galerie - Légendes Canadiennes* (Julien 1900). Image of artwork made with ink, wash, white chalk, and gouache on paper.

free night of dancing, drinking, and debauchery. While travelling into town, the lumberjacks work together to descend upon the unsuspecting townspeople for a night of wild fun and socialization with women. The sky is clear, the stars are bright and visible, and any potential danger is out of sight and out of mind. Figure 3 depicts teamwork and camaraderie, while Figure 2 showcases violence and danger as the devil is at the helm and leading the canoe astray due to the immoral irresponsibility of the canoe's navigator, much to the shock of the rest of the lumbermen. To save their souls, the other loggers must silence the navigator through any means necessary, even if that means being violent towards a fellow logger. The danger of falling from such great heights relates to lumbermen's risk when climbing giant white pine trees to fell tree limbs and the daring they would have to embody to succeed in their work. In contrast to Figure 3, the background of the painting in Figure 2 is dark and unwelcoming, and there are no more stars to help guide the loggers safely back to their shanty. Instead, the skies are ominous, with clouds beginning to cover the little light the moon had provided. The darkness can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of Christian evil, the dangers of dealing with the devil, and the consequences of transgressions of Christian masculinity.

Although these are folktales and artistic representations, they demonstrate the real violence experienced by lumberjacks. This violence in the lumber camps was well known as "accounts of the cramped quarters describe the collision and fusion of different cultures and temperaments. The expression "he's got a chip on his shoulder" dates back to when a man who was itching for a fight in the cabin-fever confines would put a wood chip on his shoulder and dare anyone to knock it off" (Holdsworth 1995, 15). Camp bosses banned liquor in shantytowns by the mid-nineteenth century; however, it did little to change public perceptions of loggers as rough and rowdy

drunken delinquents. (Gillis and Parks Canada 1975, 140–141). Once the log drive was complete, lumberjacks would flock to nearby townships to let loose and destress after months of sobriety, isolation, and challenging working conditions. These conditions remain similar to the spending and alcohol consumption in modern resource extraction industries, especially in remote sectors that need to fly, drive, or bus in the majority of their workforce (Lee 2006, 187–188; Ennis and Finlayson 2015, 55–57). Although lumberjacks were often sober during winter, the public only saw them when they were drinking in local towns. In addition, violence in the early to mid-nineteenth century was also partially due to fierce competition between well-established French loggers and newly settled Irish-Catholic immigrants. This brutal competition led to the Shiners' War, which lasted between 1835–1845 (Lee 2006, 188–192). The Shiners' War, with the aforementioned logging legend Joseph Montferrand leading the French, further led to public assumptions about violence in the logging industry and the flow of liquor throughout the camps (Lee 2006, 188–191). Logging folklore and related artworks acted as a vehicle for disseminating knowledge to the public about the daring and delinquency of the Canadian lumbermen. They solidified ideals about how a real man can throw a punch, hold his drink, and look death in the face daily while continuing to endure hardships and maintain their work – a trend that has continued in contemporary resource extraction industries (Goldenberg et al., 2010, 161–163; Carrington, McIntosh, and Scott 2010, 405).

The debauched actions of loggers returning to civilization seemed to confirm the depictions already present in the folktale of La Chasse Galerie and Julien's artwork in the public's eyes. Loggers were already publicly perceived as an immoral bunch, and published folklore had helped to further transform loggers into walking manifestations of the dangers of liquor and sin. The story and the

folktale's artistic depictions (Figure 2 and Figure 3) showcase how bad things occur when piety to God has been forgotten or forsaken, even if there is excitement and gratification. The sketch, painting, and tale of *La Chasse Galerie* showcase the lack of access to liquor in the camps and the desire the lumberjacks had to let loose, have fun, and participate in celebratory libations. There are implications that the lure of a night of drinking, dancing, and daring merrymaking seems too difficult to resist to these isolated men, regardless of their religious convictions. Piety to God and adherence to morals seem to be lost on these lumberjacks as they enjoy themselves in the city, forgetting that they will have to safely navigate back to the isolation of the forests without breaching the contract made with the devil. These manifestations were further solidified in the eye of the public, as once the logging season had ended and men returned to populated towns, after months of no liquor, they wanted to spend their paycheques and enjoy themselves (Lee 2006, 182). Themes that appear in Julien's artwork can be related to themes of masculinity in resource extraction industries today, including the practice of bringing in workers from outside the work region, prevalent violence in work camps, and the copious amounts of alcohol and drug consumption when off work (Carrington, McIntosh, and Scott 2010, 395, 405; Ennis and Finlayson 2015, 55–57).

Labourers working far from home "expressed their sense of skill—and thus their manliness—through initiation rites, story- and myth-telling, and occupational language" (Quan-Wickham 1999, 137), leading to a distinct cultural phenomenon of masculine ideals and traits that became synonymous with working in the resource extraction industry. The meaning and function of masculinity were tied to skill in the nineteenth century. Thus, "masculinity was able to control the pace of production" (Maynard 1989, 162) and provide men working in the industry with something

aspirational. In these all-male workspaces, legend served as a vehicle for producing and reproducing working-class masculinities that exemplified bravery, skill, agility, strength, and an uncompromising attitude. Further still, the language of westward expansion and the developing nation-state of Canada itself was gendered from the very beginning of colonial conquest – men were on a mission to conquer mother nature by clearing the land of her forests, preparing for the so-called 'civilized' man to settle in the newly created farmlands, language that Canadians continue to see today in resource extraction industries (Quan-Wickham 1999, 135; Parsons and Ray 2020, 248–251, 266–267).

Men working in the resource extraction industries often viewed the working conditions as a masculine ideal, glorifying the courage needed to succeed and idealizing the risks to life and limb in the remote woodlands (Baron 2006, 152). Recognition of the life-threatening dangers that loggers undertook each logging season, their work to clear the land for agriculture and settlement, and offering contributions to the economy further entrenched their importance to the developing Canadian nation-state and national narratives. Many loggers also participated in agriculture. As Deryck Holdsworth demonstrates, "these brutally strenuous winter logging camps stayed male throughout the nineteenth century, but they too were linked—for some married men—as a seasonal wage environment to pioneer farms" (Holdsworth 1995, 15). The danger was well-known, but labourers and farmers would often return to logging each winter until spring when more experienced loggers would take charge of the log drive (Lee 2006, 183–184, 194). The embodiment of danger is still seen in primarily male workplaces in resource extraction in the twenty-first century. For example, men in the resource extraction industries today often deal with working long hours, spending weeks to months at a time away from home, working in close quarters with other men at camp, having

a minimal choice in terms of food, the proliferation of ideals of toxic masculinity, and storytelling for entertainment (Quan-Wickham 1999; Shaughnessy and Krogman 2011, 139–141; Ennis and Finlayson 2015, 53–57; Parsons and Ray 2020, 259–263).

In conclusion, La Chasse Galerie and Joseph Montferrand are an integral part of the history of the Ottawa Valley and Canadian folklore. Analyzing working-class storytelling and subsequently inspired artwork can help illustrate the production and reproduction of masculinity. Masculinity, tied to alcohol, dangerous working conditions, physical strength, and isolation, became an ideal for aspiring to and a characteristic to be feared. Risk-taking became a core piece of many masculine identities (Mosse 1996). Studying the representations of the Canadian lumberjack in folklore and folk art can show how ideas of masculinity emerged through oral, textual, and visual mediums, which helped shape conceptions of gender roles and working-class masculinities in Canada today (Baron 2006, 145–146). The construction industry, long-haul trucking, mining, and oilfields all embody masculine qualities exemplified within narratives of logging folklore and depictions of lumberjacks in Julien's artwork, such as being far away from home and isolated from familiarity, regular encounters with danger, and working long hours for an extended time. Julien's sketch and painting inspired by La Chasse Galerie helped further entrench ideas about the logging industry and those who worked within it, as visual representations of loggers solidified a particular lumberjack motif that has remained popular across Canada.

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