

# Life of a West Virginia Lumberman



CREW OF A WEST VIRGINIA LOGGING CAMP.



FELLING AND SAWING INTO CAR LENGTHS.

(Copyright 1932, by Elias Lisle.)

**D**OWN the winding mountain path a small boy of apparently 10 years stepped with the briskness of one about some important business. We were going up to the lumber camp whence the boy had come, the writer and the superintendent of the camp, one of the biggest camps in Clay county, West Virginia, which is noted for its vast timber cuttings and its murder record.

"Hello, Billy Judd," the superintendent hailed, in friendly greeting.

"Howdy, Mistah Blair," said the urchin, in the soft mountain drawl.

"Where are you off to, Billy, this busy time of day?"

"Jus' down the road a piece!"

"What's the matter with your head?" A neat white bandage circled Billy's cranium in the place where his hat should have rested.

"Sib Turley," said Billy, laconically.

"You and Sib been fighting?"

"Wa'n't no fightin' to it, Mistah Blair. Sib snook (past tense of sneak) up behind me an' beat me up right peart with a black-jack. Ben abed foh nigh onto a week."

"You're up now. Why aren't you at work?"

"Jus' heard that Sib was down to the river," explained the boy. "I'm goin' to git him if he is."

"What would your father say to your knocking off work like this?"

"Paw? Oh, he give me his gun (here Billy produced a revolver half as long as his arm) an' he says: 'If you don't git Sib Turley I'll bust the other side of you' head in,' he says."

## Good Sample of the Elk.

That boy was a legitimate product of the West Virginia lumber camps. Along the poplar-crested hills of the Alleghanians' western slopes there lives and works a barbarian race, to whom murder is an ordinary occurrence and vendetta the only law worth considering. Men who have been in all parts of the country, who know the vicious slums of the great cities and the wild frontier towns of "red-eye" liquor fame, say that for sheer brutality and ferocity the lumbermen of the little mountainous state are pre-eminent. It is a fact

that Clay county, the great lumber center, has a record of more brutal murders mile for mile than any other locality in the United States. It is also a fact that up to the present winter no conviction for murder was ever obtained in that country.

The lumberman of that district is unlike his brother of the great northern woods. He has no taste for the craft. He is an indifferent workman and draws indifferent wages. Generally his apprenticeship is due to one of two things: Either he is a fugitive from justice on account of some killing in which he has participated in a neighboring state or county or the lumber camp has established itself so near to his home that he has been drawn into it by a natural tendency to do what everybody else about him is doing. His one idea is to get through the week with the minimum amount of work and "blow in" his accumulated wages on a grand spree. When he is drunk he wants to kill somebody; mostly he succeeds, sooner or later.

## Nature Alone Beautiful.

In the summer the mountain lumber camp is beautiful because lavish nature covers everything on those verdurous slopes with its lovely fancies of climbing vine and blowing flower. But intrinsically the camp is as hideous and hopeless and bare a spot as imagination can picture, the true outward expression of its inhabitants. To see it in its true aspect one must go there in winter. Picture to yourself a narrow-gauge railway, the private transportation plant of the outfit, twisting and turning through a hilltop clearing. At one point in its course there is a little cluster of bare, one-story buildings surrounding a larger shack. This large building is the center of the town—the company's store, the focal point in the life of the place. From it, as far as the eye can see along the track in either direction, stretch the wretched little houses, sometimes only a few rods apart, sometimes divided by a quarter of a mile of vacant space.

Enter one of them and you will find two small rooms; in one a huddle of rags for a bed, in the other a tumble-down stove, a table and a few battered and greasy utensils. From the platform of the store you would guess the population of the settle-

ment to be perhaps 120 or 125 souls; in reality it is from 800 to 1,200. Those wooden hovels extend for five miles in both directions and some of them harbor incredible families. The writer has seen one house of two rooms inhabited by father, mother and eleven children of all sizes and both sexes, not to mention several dogs.

## Life Deadly Monotonous.

Their mode of life is absolutely without amusement or change except on Sundays, when they get together for a drunk or a church service, the chances being in favor of the former, as liquor seems to be always attainable, though the country is no-license, whereas it is not once a month that a wandering preacher comes within walking distance of the camp. In all that settlement you will hardly find half a dozen persons who would not be considered barbarous by the dwellers in Cherry street's toughest tenement. The half dozen would be made up of the superintendent, the head foreman, the lumber inspector and the store men. These are always in peril of their lives from the jealous hatred of the lumbermen, who recognize their superiority. But they are a fearless lot—no other need apply—and, on the whole, if trouble ensues they are rather more likely to kill than to be killed. Where the enmity is openly avowed they can take care of themselves, but the lumberman has a puerile habit of fancying himself offended at some trivial thing and of treacherously planning the death of the offender. Two years ago a mountain storekeeper told one of his customers that he was all out of a certain brand of tobacco. Later in the evening he found, on a back shelf, some of the brand and sold it to another man. The first customer, finding this out, conceived the theory that he had been insulted and that night when the storekeeper went out to put up his dog he was fatally shot. This is a typical case.

The owner of a large tract of timber land in that region told the writer that one of his minor settlements was entirely made up of fugitives from justice. The storekeeper of that camp entertained the writer one evening with a running commentary on the customers who came in. It sounded like a string of fancies at the

time, but later enough was verified to convince the most skeptical that it was all true.

## Personal Characteristics.

"Here comes Turner and his three boys," said the store man. "All sober tonight. I'm always glad to have my gun in reach when they come in. They're from Kentucky way. Got into trouble with some neighbors there and got chased out, but not till they'd burned the other fellow's house and the old woman in it. (Evening, Sam. Painkiller? There you are. Can't drink it here, you know. One dollar. That's right.) Is he sick? No more than you are. That's booze, that stuff; only kind they can get here. Ever see a painkiller jag? Well, you don't want to unless you're up a tree. There's a worse kind, though. Cinnamon. They drink the alcohol the cinnamon's kept in when they can steal it. We lost six men that way last year. All died within twenty-four hours. Yes, I've heard of cinnamon drunks getting over it, but all I ever saw went crazy first and then turned up their toes. See that crossedey kid near the door? Looks mild, don't he? He's a mean one. Got a grudge against a man named White, over the range in the Big Sandy district. White was a decent enough fellow. This cuss goes over there one day, doesn't find White, but finds his three kids keeping house. Oldest kid not more than 10. He kills 'em all, but one of 'em must have fought back some, for he comes back with a cut in his shoulder. Do anything to him? No, not in this country. White's been kind of looney ever since. He'll likely get this kid some day. Now, there's old Branch, with his feet against the stove. Peddler came along a couple of years ago and put up at his house. Nobody ever saw the peddler again. Branch went around wearing fake jewelry for months. The notion got around that he'd buried the peddler under his floor, but when they wanted to find out Branch got some of his kin down there and they swore they'd kill any party that came near the place. Of course, that ended it. There's a lot of the murderers that ain't around tonight. Old Beebe that dynamited the boatmen's cabin; Slason Morey that killed the miller down

at Elk for refusing him credit; the Perrin boys that shot the two revenue officers; the Vances that used to work in with the Hatfield gang; the Rebarbs from Tazewell county that poisoned that gypsy outfit there, and a lot of others. Oh, there's a heap of 'em in this camp. You couldn't hardly shoot a man here without making a killing that the law had ought to have made long ago."

## Nothing to Reclaim Them.

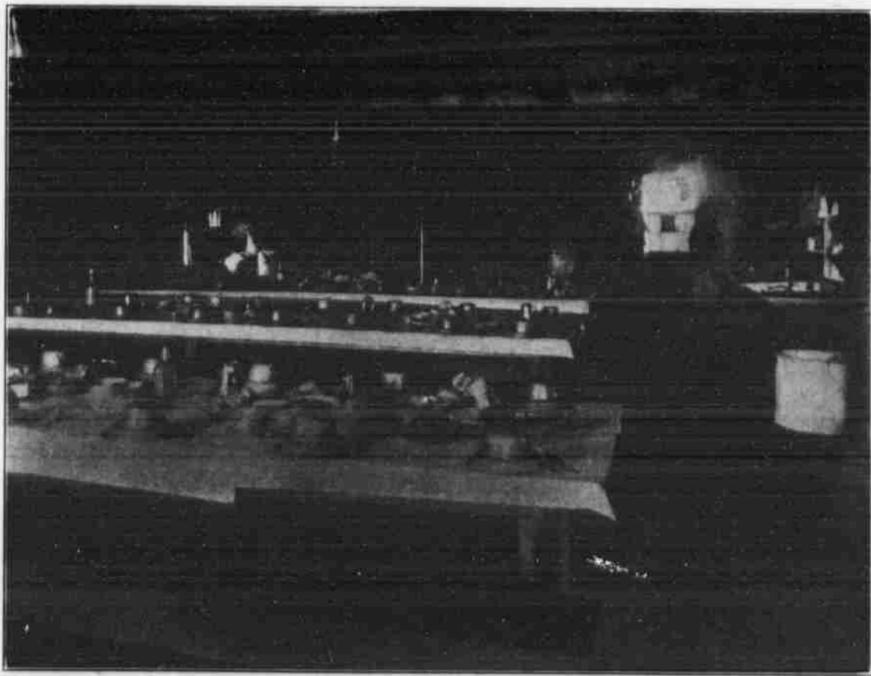
If the lumbermen are brutalized there is nothing in their lives to reclaim them from still worse depths. Their life is a bitter one, particularly in winter. They must be up at 5 o'clock to take the train over the mountain where the cutting is in progress. By 6 they are at work. With an hour at noon for lunch excepted they cut and hew all day and come home so wearied that they can hardly crawl. Most of them are too far from the store to come down except on Saturday nights; they tumble into their filthy beds and sleep until the early call. The women are much of the same type; frowsy, old before their time, chowers of snuff, drinkers of vile liquor when they can get it, degraded in thought and speech.

The worst of it is that these creatures are descendants of the best blood of the Virginias. You will find the fine old Virginia names there; the faces of the men are often fine in profile, with high foreheads and well-set eyes, but with the lower part of the face hopelessly slack. You can read there the degradation of the gradual descent into barbarism, the degeneracy of constant intermarriage among a few families.

But to return to Billy Judd. We met him some two weeks later. He wore a satisfied smile. "Did you get Sib Turley?" asked the superintendent.

"Naw," responded the scion of the Judd race. "I didn't git Sib, but I got his brother. Old Turley shot Paw's ear off last night. Reckon we're goin' to have a right peart feud."

"The one redeeming feature about it," said the superintendent, "is that the more these people 'git' each other the better it is for the state of West Virginia and civilization in general." ELIAS LISLE.



DINING ROOM READY TO SERVE A MEAL.



IN THE BUNKHOUSE JUST BEFORE BEDTIME.