



## Lesson 4 - Lumberjack Life



### Nutshell

The logging days were a colorful time in history for those who lived in the lumber camps. The men worked long hours during the winter months. Secluded in the camps, far from town, a unique language and creative entertainment were born. Students will learn about life in a lumber camp by hearing tall tales told by lumberjacks, playing lumberjack games, and using lumberjack lingo.

### Concepts

- The life of a lumberjack was one of long days and hard work.
- Lumberjacks created their own forms of entertainment.
- The lumberjack had a language all his own.

### Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe a day in the life of a lumberjack.
- Explain the characteristics of a tall tale.
- Describe ways in which lumberjacks entertained themselves.
- Apply language unique to lumber camps.

### State Standards

ELA SS  
D.4.1 B.4.3  
D.4.2 E.4.11

### Total Estimated Time

1 hour and 55 minutes

### Vocabulary

**Ancestor** – family member who lived many generations before you

**Boast** – to brag

**Brogue** – a heavy shoe with nails in the sole

**Bunkhouse** – the building where all of the lumberjacks in a camp would sleep

**Cant hook** – a wooden stick with a metal hook on the end used to handle logs

**Burden** – something heavy that is carried

**Character** – a person in a story

**Culture** – the common features of a particular group of people including beliefs, products, and social customs

**Derrick** – a machine used for lifting heavy objects

**Exaggerate** – to enlarge a fact past what is actually true

**Plot** – the main story in a piece of writing

**Feat** – a large accomplishment

**Jargon** – the special vocabulary of a certain profession or other group of people

**Gangplank** – a moveable bridge used to board a ship

**Gauge** – to measure

**Heed** – to pay attention

**Lingo** – jargon

**Quandary** – a state of puzzlement

**Resolution** – the part of a story where the main problem has been solved

**Retort** – to answer angrily

**Setting** – where something takes place

**Tall tale** – an incredible story with many exaggerations

**Vessel** – a boat or ship



**Wharf** – a structure built along the shore from which people or objects can get onto or off of a boat

### **Materials**

A selected tall tale to read (check the 398.2 section of your library or use the tall tale

provided in Insert 4.1)

A copy of the Paul Bunyan Breakfast menu for each student (Insert 4.3)

A copy of A Day in the Life of a Lumberjack for each of the two readers (Insert 4.2)

Six strands of different colored yarn

Broom

Long, stuffed sock

Blindfold

Tree cookies (optional)

Blanket (optional)

Tape player and lumberjack music (optional)

Logs and rope (optional)

Cast iron skillet (optional)

Bandanas (optional)

### **Teacher Preparation**

Select a tall tale to read if you are not using the one provided. Gather the materials for the lumberjack pastimes.

### **Background Information**

The term “lumberjack” came into use in the 1860’s. It is difficult to imagine what life in a lumber camp was really like. By the late 1800’s, most lumber camps had a shed for baled hay, a granary, blacksmith shop, root cellar, saw filer’s shack, living quarters, eating quarters, and a cook shack. The living quarters were often a room full of bunk beds. Many of these beds had to be entered from the end and so were referred to as “muzzle loaders.”

Lumberjacks were awoken from their bunks at three or four in the morning by a horn or the call “Roll out!” or “Daylight in the swamp!” From here they went to breakfast in the eating quarters. At breakfast there was no talking except for an occasional food request like “Shoot the beans!” Right after breakfast the lumberjacks got ready to go out into the woods.

Since lumberjacks were up so early to eat and get out to the forest at first light, you can imagine how early the cook had to get up. Often times it was as early as two in the morning. After breakfast was cleaned up, he or she had to start preparing lunch. It was a tough job to cook for fifty or sixty hungry lumberjacks.

The bundled up lumberjacks worked in the forest all morning. Lunch was brought to them by the cookee, or cook’s helper. After lunch, the lumberjacks continued cutting down trees until it got dark. At this point they came back for dinner. After dinner, pipes were smoked, music and games played, and tall tales told! Lights were out by nine since the next morning would be an early one.

Lumberjacks worked six days a week. Sunday was the only day they got off, so, as you can imagine, Saturday nights could get quite wild. Dances were often held, but since there were no women to dance with, the lumberjacks would dance with each other. One of them would tie a handkerchief around his arm to designate himself as the lady.

Lumberjacks led a dangerous life. Death was a common occurrence. In fact, sometimes sawyers would yell, “Widow-maker!” instead of “Timber!” They





were a unique mix of nationalities with their own lingo and social rules. Their life is often glamorized, but there was no glamour to it at all. Body lice were a constant nuisance, and try to imagine what the bunkhouse smelled like. Fifty men who work hard all day, don't shower, and hang their sweaty socks up to dry. No wonder there were no women to dance with them!

### **Introduction**

In one hand, hold up five strands of yarn, each a different color. With students, talk about the elements of a story: characters, plot, setting, problem, and resolution. Add a sixth color, something vibrant, and explain that this color represents exaggeration. One of the things lumberjacks did to entertain themselves was make up tall tales, trying to out-do each other as the stories evolved. I'm going to read you a tall tale (see Insert 4.1). As I read, listen for each of the story elements. When I get to an exaggeration, cross your left leg over your right. When you hear another exaggeration, switch legs. Continue switching with each exaggeration.

### **Activity 4.1 - Tall Tales (20 min)**

Read aloud the tall tale you have selected.

As you ask students to recall the plot of the story, hold up one yarn. Continue with the other elements of the story: setting, characters, problem, and resolution. As the students recall these elements, weave the yarns together, noting how these elements are intertwined to create the story. Point out that the "exaggeration" yarn is still

separated from the story: exaggeration is the critical element in a tall tale. Ask your students to recall examples of exaggeration, reweaving the yarns during the discussion.

### **Activity 4.2 - Lumberjack Olympics (30 min)**

Life was hard six days a week, but on Sundays lumbermen had the day off. They used this day to do their laundry and other necessary chores. When these chores were done, it was time to have fun! Lumberjacks challenged each other's skills and also created competitions which were downright silly! Dress up as your favorite lumberjack and choose from the following list activities for your own lumberjack Olympics.

#### **\* Riding the Mule**

Two men would hold a cant hook stalk between them. A lumberjack stood on it to see how long he could balance himself before falling off. *Possible classroom adaptation: Use a broom handle placed on the ground. Student lumberjack stands toe-to-heel on the broom handle.*

#### **\* Rooster Fight**

A broom handle was placed under the knees of a squatting man with his hands tied to it on either side. Two men tied in this fashion butted each other to see who would tip over first. *Possible classroom adaptation: Have each student lumberjack squat, holding hands behind his/her knees. Students try to unbalance each other.*

#### **\*Jack in the Dark Where are You?**

A robust, roughhouse game played in the bunkhouse. Two jacks are blindfolded;



one is “jack in the dark,” and the other jack is searching for him. On the command “Jack in the Dark, where are you?” both jacks attempt to swat each other with long stockings stuffed with water-soaked socks. Real swatting resulted! *Possible classroom adaptation: use a clean empty sock in place of the long stockings stuffed with water-soaked socks.*

### **\*Hot Back**

A roughhouse game played by lumberjacks in the bunkhouse. Jacks formed a circle; one blindfolded man was in the center of the circle. Any jack could swat him on the back. The blindfolded man had to guess who swatted him. If he guesses correctly, the swatter became the blindfolded jack in the middle of the circle. *Possible classroom adaptation: students can tap the blindfolded jack on the shoulder rather than swatting on the back.*

### **\*Shovel the Brogue**

Everybody sat in a ring with one person in the middle. Everyone in the ring passed an old shoe underneath their knees. The one in the middle had to guess who had the “brogue” (shoe). When people in the ring sat close together and held knees tight against each other, it was difficult to know just who had the brogue.

**\*denotes actual descriptions of lumberjack games**

Other possible games.....

### **Cookie Toss**

Each student should have a tree cookie (an inch-thick crosscut piece of a log). Students underhand toss their cookie,

trying to get their cookie to roll the farthest.

### **Skillet Toss**

Using a cast-iron skillet, students take turns throwing the skillet Frisbee style, trying to see who can throw it the farthest.

### **Blanket Throw**

Students spread out around the perimeter of a blanket, holding onto the edge. Place a ball in the center of the blanket. Hanging onto the blanket, students try to flip the ball into the air and catch it in the blanket. Students can see how high they can toss the ball, how fast they can repeat the tosses, etc. Additional balls can be added as students’ proficiency improves. *(Lumberjacks actually tossed each other in the blanket!)*

### **Log Pull Obstacle Course**

Set up a simple obstacle course using cones. Put a rope around a log. Students pull the log through the obstacle course. Individuals could be timed, two teams could race against each other, or create your own twist!

### **Stag Dance**

Sundays were also a day of singing and dancing. The men would get out their “scratch-my-backs” (saw fiddle) and “squeeze boxes” (accordions) and “mouth organs” (harmonica) and play square dance tunes while the men danced. There were no women in the camps, however, so half the men wore a handkerchief on their arm or tied a sack around themselves and they’d be the girls. *Have the students listen to square dance music.*



### Activity 3 - Lumberjack Lingo (30 min)

Within cultures there exist sub-cultures complete with their own vocabulary. Point out to kids examples such as truckers jargon (“a big 10-4 buddy” or “put the hammer down”) or the skateboarding lingo popular today or the slang a small group of friends will create to talk with each other. With this in mind, this activity is designed to submerge kids in the lingo used by lumberjacks. The lumberjacks had a language all their own. It was a rough language, and much of it has been lost.

To give the students a feel for the lumberjack lingo read aloud the following paragraph:

*A lumberjack was brought into the hospital in the early logging days. A nurse, full of sympathy, asked him what happened. He replied, “Well, sister, I tell you how the whole thing happened. You see, I was up in the woods a-loading. One cold morning when I was sending up a big, burly schoolmarm on fourth tier, I see she was going to cannon, so I glams into it to cut her back when she broke and she comes and caves in a couple of my slats.”* (taken from Lumberjack Lore )

Discuss: Have the students brainstorm the meaning of the passage. For your benefit, what follows is the explanation of what actually happened.

*The worker was loading a big forked log onto a sleigh full of logs. When he saw that it was going to upend, he tried to hold it back, then the chain broke. The log fell on him and broke a couple of his ribs.* (taken from Lumberjack Lore)

Lumberjacks had their own lingo at meal time, too. A typical breakfast would consist of “murphies” (potatoes), “sow belly” (salt pork/bacon), “stove lids or sweat pads” (pancakes), “black lead” or “dish water” (coffee), “swamp water” (tea), “logging berries” (prunes), “door knobs” (biscuits), “cackleberries” (eggs), and “sinkers” (donuts). Condiments included “red lead” (ketchup), “Mexican powder” (pepper), “long sweetenin” (sugar), and “salve” (butter), “gravel” (salt).

Supply each student with a copy of the breakfast menu that follows. Ask students to write in the blank what they believe each of the items is either before or after discussion of the above list.

### Activity 4.4 - A Day in the Life of a Lumberjack (15 min)

A lumberjack’s day was long and hard. They ate breakfast before first light and worked from sunrise to sunset. The day ended when it was too dark to see an axe handle at arm’s length. After rehearsal, two students should read the script in Insert 4.2.

### Conclusion

Ask your students if they have a better understanding of what you mean by “lumberjack culture.” Lumberjacks had their own stories, language, and games. Why do you think they might have done this? Let your students brainstorm some ideas.



### Extension Activities:

- Prepare a lumberjack breakfast for the students. Remind students that breakfast was consumed quickly without conversation.

*“In the old logging camp shanty, there was some rules that everybody lived by even if they had never been passed by the state legislature or even by the lumberjacks themselves. When you was eating, no talking was allowed except to say “Pass the meat” or “Shoot the beans” when them things didn’t come around fast enough. I guess the rule was to keep the food moving fast enough so everybody got all he could eat without yelling for it.”* (taken from The Lumberjack Frontier, Walker D. Wyman, 1969)

- Novel study: Journey Back to the Lumberjack Camp by Janie Lynn Panagopoulos (River Road Publications, Inc. 830 Savidge St., Spring Lake, MI 49456)
- Novel study: Cookcamp by Gary Paulsen
- Guest: “Timber Lady” Mary Blahnik 44414 South Union Road, Manitowoc, WI 54220, 920-758-2379
- Have kids read more tall tales in groups (see source list in appendix). Students should compare and contrast or story map

the tales, focusing on the element of exaggeration.

- Have students write their own tall tales.

### Evaluation

- Students can work in pairs: one is a logger and one is an interviewer. Together they can write a scripted interview teaching about life in the lumbercamps.

### Resources

- Panagopoulos, Janie Lynn. Journey Back To Lumberjack Camp. River Road Publications; 1993.

### References

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## Insert 4.1

“His Ancestor” from The Hodag and other Tales of the Logging Camps by Lake Shore Kearney

“Excuse my interruption,” McFay said, “and far be it from me to boast or brag. As you know, I am no boaster, but since you were speaking of men who could lift, I have a right to brag, for I came from a tribe of powerful men, I might say without any exaggeration, giants.”

“On my father’s side, my ancestors were from the heather clad mountains of Scotland, and on my mother’s side, from the high mountains of Wicklow, Ireland. To relate the numerous feats accomplished by them, both on land and sea, would make the world’s library of adventure tales.”

“Your looks are not encouraging, as you are anxious to see someone in the ‘deacon’s chair’, who can really talk. However, I will not keep you much longer. I will just relate one small affair in the life of my Uncle Duncan, who was a man as large as two of me. He had a hand as large as four of mine and a body in proportion.”

“My uncle’s first day in the city of New York, with all its wonders, kept him traveling from one sight to another, and he finally wandered down to one of the great wharves on the river front. Looking around, he spied a group of men standing around an anchor, weighing from four to five tons. Judging from their actions, they were in a quandary as to what to do to solve their problem of moving the anchor.”

“Walking up to the group, Uncle Duncan said, ‘boys, what seems to be the trouble?’”

“An interference of this kind with this type of men would, under ordinary circumstances, bring a sharp retort, but my uncle’s size and appearance prompted an honest answer.”

“‘We have an anchor here that weighs four tons or more, and we want to put it aboard that vessel. As the boat is due to sail in three hours and we have no derrick to load the anchor, we do not know how to manage the job.’ Sneeringly, the man added, ‘I suppose, Big Boy, that you think you can load it alone.’”

“Paying not the least heed to them and looking through his eyelashes which were at least an inch in length, Uncle Duncan strode through the group. He pushed the men out of his way as if they were so many children, and walked up to the anchor. He stooped over and raised one of the points as if gauging the weight of the anchor. Then, he straightened up to his full height, and gazed around as if alone. He removed his great frieze coat and his coarse, hand crocheted ox hair shirt, made from the hair of the longhaired cattle of the mountains of Scotland. The sight that met the eyes of those men, was one hard to believe.”





“Boys, my uncle had a form of herculean size, with a creeping of muscle over his powerful back and arms, showing through a thick tangle of hair. The upper part of his body was bare to the waist, and a belt, four inches wide, made of boar’s hide, circled his body at the waist, supporting a pair of corduroy trousers. A pair of brogans, heavily studded with Swedish nails, encased his feet.”

“He settled to his task, first getting down on his knees, then inch by inch, he began moving the huge burden up towards his shoulders. The muscles on his back and shoulders stood out like whipcords and his neck showed the tremendous strain, as he lifted the anchor to his back. As he straightened to his full height, the anchor cut deep into his shoulders and back. Then he began to move slowly, watching each place he set foot. In spite of his care, there was a crunching of planks, as his great left foot sank through the heavy plank flooring of the wharf.”

“He extricated his foot and went on, step by step towards the gangplank of the ship. The bystanders gasped and shuddered as Uncle Duncan, by superhuman strength, reached the gangplank.”

“Boys, most of you know what a gangplank is. This one was used for the loading of heavy machinery and had powerful truss rods running lengthwise underneath, making it safe for loading weighty articles. Well, he had moved within a few feet of the center of the gangplank, when there was an awful crashing of wood and steel, then a mighty splash into the water. The fire alarm sounded and there were yells from the crowds, while a burly blue coat vainly endeavored to push them back.”

“A diver was hurriedly trying to adjust the headpiece on his diving suit, preparatory to diving for my uncle. Twenty minutes had elapsed since Uncle Duncan had plunged with the anchor into the water. Then shouts rose from a hundred throats as the men saw the anchor appear above the water. Soon the head and shoulders of my uncle were to be seen. Waist high, he arose above the water, shaking the water from his massive head. Boys, you would have died laughing to see that old son of a gun treading water with that four ton anchor on his back.”

“He scrambled to the side of the vessel and climbed laboriously up to the deck. As he dropped the anchor to the deck, it crashed partly through and was just stopped from going clear down in the hold, by a great ship’s timber.”

“Having finished his task of loading the anchor, Uncle Duncan slid off the boat, treaded water across to the dock, and climbed out of the water. Reaching the spot where he had dropped his clothes, he picked them up and tucked them under one arm, as, with a majestic stride, he hove off into the great city in search of more adventure.”

When McFay finished his story, the other members of the crew told no more tales of feats of heavy lifting. McFay rolled into his bunk, having nothing more to add to the evening’s entertainment.



## Insert 4.2

### A Poem For Two Voices

Being a young man	Being a young man
Is hard work!	
	Is a blast!
I'm seventeen	I'm seventeen
I'm a lumberjack!	
	I'm a high school senior!
I'll gladly explain	I'll gladly explain
I hear the call "Daylight in the Swamp!" It must be 4:30. Time to get up.	
	(snore...)
It's cold outside; better wear the woolies! Breakfast is ready. Time to go eat.	
	(snore...)
Tables are full. No one's saying a word. Have to eat quickly. There are trees to be cut!	
	(snore...)
"Timberrrr!" First tree is down! Then another and another... Great start to the day!	
	(grumbling) There's my alarm. Must be 7. I can't believe I have to get up so early!
Timberrrr!	
	Ah, a clean t-shirt to go with my jeans and Nikes. Where's my Dew? Gotta get to school.
It's 9:00	It's 9:00
I'm exhausted and starving! Time for a break. Sinkers sure taste good.	
	It's snowing. I suppose I'll have to shovel tonight. Two more classes 'til lunch. Sure am hungry.
Timberrrr! The first cord is cut!	
	There's the bell!! My favorite time of day. Lunch with my buddies. Can't wait to hear what they all did last night!
Hey jacks! Let's get one more tree down before the dinner wagon arrives.	
	Aww... the bell already? We have to go back to class.



Perfect timing! Tree is down, and the dinner wagon's here. The stew, bread, and pie sure will taste good! Better eat quick.	
	3:00! Another day done! Gotta get ready for the basketball game tonight.
Not much daylight left. Gotta keep moving. Big Push expects another cord cut!	
5:30 . Time for supper	5:30 Time for supper
	Gotta eat quick. Game starts in an hour.
Finally, a chance to relax. Where's my fiddle? I feel like playing a tune.	
	Yea! We won! To McDonald's for a burger.
It's 9:00	It's 9:00
Douse the glim! Lights out! Morning comes quickly in the lumbercamp.	
	Biology test tomorrow. Better start studying.
(snore...)	
	It's midnight. Time to catch some zzz's. Mornings come quickly for a high school student!
(snore...)	(snore...)



Insert 4.3

# Paul Bunyan Breakfast Specials

## Main Entrees

Sow belly ..... \_\_\_\_\_  
 Cackleberries ..... \_\_\_\_\_  
 Stove Lids ..... \_\_\_\_\_

## Side Orders

Murphies..... \_\_\_\_\_  
 Door Knobs..... \_\_\_\_\_  
 Sinkers..... \_\_\_\_\_  
 Logging Berries..... \_\_\_\_\_

## Beverages

Swamp water ..... \_\_\_\_\_  
 Dish water ..... \_\_\_\_\_

## Condiments

Mexican Powder..... \_\_\_\_\_  
 Gravel ..... \_\_\_\_\_  
 Long Sweetenin' ..... \_\_\_\_\_  
 Red Lead ..... \_\_\_\_\_  
 Salve ..... \_\_\_\_\_





Answer  
Key

# Paul Bunyan Breakfast Specials

## Main Entrees

- Sow belly ..... pork
- Cackleberries ..... eggs
- Stove Lids ..... pancakes

## Side Orders

- Murphies..... potatoes
- Door Knobs..... biscuits
- Sinkers..... doughnuts
- Logging Berries..... prunes or beans

## Beverages

- Swamp water ..... tea
- Dish water ..... coffee

## Condiments

- Mexican Powder..... pepper
- Gravel ..... salt
- Long Sweetenin' ..... sugar
- Red Lead ..... ketchup
- Salve ..... butter

