

Lacroix's Legacy

Written by: Amanda Barker, MFS

Edouard Lacroix was a lumber baron who dominated the heart of the North Maine Woods during the 1920s and 1930s. A humbly born man, he persevered through the era of the Great Depression and World War II to create a small empire in the middle of nowhere. In Maine, he's most notably remembered for constructing the Eagle Lake & West Branch Railroad which ran from Eagle Lake in the Allagash chain to Umbazookus Lake at the head of the West Branch of the Penobscot. In Quebec, he's still remembered as a fighter for the common man who was concerned enough with workman's rights and welfare that he practiced what he preached.

The woods industry has always had its own set of terms, definitions and complex relationships. Townships or parcels of land can be owned by a single person, a set of heirs, a corporation or investment firm of some sort. The landowner can manage the land themselves or have a land manager do the job. On the back of this booklet, you can see a list of some of the landowners and managers who operate within the North Maine Woods today. Landowners and managers hire contractors to do the actual labor for them. Contractors come in all shapes and sizes from very large outfits to a single piece of equipment. Contractors may specialize in only road work or trucking or cutting or they can do a little of everything. Edouard Lacroix started in Maine in 1919 as a 'little of everything' contractor for the Great Northern, a major land and pulp mill owner at the time. He was already an established contractor in Quebec and Ontario.

Lacroix's 'everything' included raising the level of Portage Lake in Quebec 12 feet to literally sluice pulp wood over the U.S./Canada border into Penobscot Lake, building 40 miles of road from Lac Frontier to Churchill Lake (the Lacroix Road or 9-Mile Road) which included moving an existing steel bridge from St. Georges, Quebec to a new crossing at 9-Mile Stream over the St. John River (later known as 9-Mile Bridge), building camps, depots and running farms (like Churchill, Clayton, Musquacook, Umsaskis, Seven Islands, Lac Frontiere, St. Aurelie and Pittston Farm) and constructing dams (including Churchill and Long Lake on the Allagash). To do all this work, he employed over 3,500 men a year to work in the Maine woods in 50 separate camps and cut over 75,000 cords of pulpwood a year for the Great Northern. He was also a contractor for the American Realty Company, a subsidiary of International Paper. There isn't a contractor out there today that can compare to the sheer number of men, multitude of complex projects and geographical area that Lacroix covered in the 1930's. He ran operations from Coburn Gore to Greenville, Churchill Lake, Lac Frontier and north to Escourt Station. The western border of Maine was his.



Churchill Dam: Note the large mountains of four foot pulp wood on the lake. The only building remaining to day is the closest store house which is upstream of the modern dam. The

Lombard shed and sawmill are no longer there. Churchill Depot closed in 1938 when Lacroix moved his operation elsewhere.

In the Allagash country, his major defining project was the construction of the Eagle Lake and West Branch railroad. The idea of constructing a railroad between Eagle Lake and Chamberlain Lake to move wood into the mill towns of Millinocket and Bangor had been around the industry since 1839. Lacroix was approached with the idea and successfully negotiated a contract to build the thirteen mile long railroad for the Northern starting in the winter of 1926-27. Supplies were brought in by Lombard Hauler from Lac Frontiere to Churchill Depot via the Lacroix road and then across the frozen waters of Churchill and Eagle lakes. Included in the supplies were two gas-powered switchers, log loaders, steel rails, material for the 1,500 foot long Trestle over Chamberlain Lake, 20 train cars, Eerie Steam Shovel No. 181, and a used 100 ton locomotive build by Schenectady Locomotive Works in June of 1897. A second engine, constructed by Brook Locomotive Works in 1901, was brought in during the winter of 1928. The wood moved by the railroad was four foot long pulp wood cut in the Musquacook area and brought to the shores of Churchill Lake by Lombard Haulers towing up to 30 sleds behind them at a time. The wood was boomed through Churchill and Eagle into the Hog Island area, which was used as an anchor point. Men guided the wood onto one of two conveyors that were 250 feet long and rose 25 feet. Each conveyor was powered by its own 40 horsepower diesel engine. It took 18 minutes to fill one of the 12 cord cars. In an average week, over 6,500 cords of wood would be moved by the railroad which ran nearly continuously day and night from 1927 through 1933. When the Northern shut down the operation during the Great Depression, the engines would have cost more to get out of the woods that they were worth for resale or scrap; they were left behind.

At the same time that Lacroix was cutting wood in the Musquacook area and sending it south to Millinocket, he was also cutting in the Clayton Lake area and north along the Allagash River from Churchill Dam. For the most part, he was cutting long logs (wood greater than four feet long that would be sawn into dimensional lumber) and some four foot pulp wood for paper making. His crews were driving this separate wood north to hit the St. John and into his mills at Keegan (Van Buren) and other points along the St. John River. He was able to boast that he was “driving the Allagash both ways.”



On the Churchill Road – 1939. Edouard is the 3rd from the right with daughter Gilberte 2nd from the right.

As Lacroix’s business grew, he began purchasing land making him a significant landowner in the State of Maine, particularly in northern Maine. At the same time, he was also purchasing land in New Brunswick and Quebec and opening several mills in both Canada and Maine. Lacroix did something relatively common in business circles by breaking different facets of his operations into different corporations. Maison Edouard Lacroix Ltee was established in 1919; Perry Whitney Lumber was established in Boston in 1926 to provide an American outlet and shipping venue; the Societe commerciale Edouard Lacroix et freres was a general store established to supply his many camps; the

Madawaska Corporation Limitee was created in 1928 and encompassed his operations in the Gaspesia region of Quebec and New Brunswick; Matapedia Lumber Company was established in 1930 also in Gaspesia. In 1937, he established the Madawaska Lumber Company to operate on the St. John River. Through this company, he purchased the Keegan Mill located in Van Buren, Maine along the St. John from International Paper, and eventually included all of his northern Maine operations. At his height, Lacroix had multiple mills producing a variety of dimensional lumber as well as pulp; he owned large tracts of land in Maine, Quebec and New Brunswick. He owned the *St. Georges Woolen Mill*, which was a fabric mill to supply clothing to his men and a ranch in Alberta that supplied 700 to 800 horses a year to his operations.

Lacroix's drive, business acumen, and imagination had to have been phenomenal to accomplish all that he did. Particularly when you consider that he had little schooling and six months of college at St. Francois Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia where he polished his English skills. Instead, he worked his way through things starting as a wagon boy for the Quebec Central Railroad at 14 years old. He was an example of success in the hard times at the end of the 1800's and beginning of the 1900's. Quebec underwent a "silent emigration" in this time period where hundreds of thousands of Quebecers immigrated into the United States following low paying, but steady, factory jobs. Many people moved back and forth between the U.S. and Quebec several times earning as much money as possible in the U.S. before moving home to Quebec and back to the States when the money ran out. Quebec didn't have factory jobs, had very limited agricultural ground that was of poor quality and couldn't support the growing population in addition to a miserably inadequate transportation infrastructure. The U.S. beckoned with the promise of paying jobs. The Quebecers lived in cramped ghettos but they got a steady pay check and, for many, had running water and electricity for the first time in their lives. They became the backbone of the New England textile industry. Lacroix followed the same pattern as many others at this time. He bounced back and forth across the border working in the textile mills when necessary and always trying again and again to make a go of it in his native Quebec. As a telegraph operator for the railroad while in his twenties, he made his break by using his own intuition to take full advantage of the information that was passing through his station. Lacroix was successful in taking all the tiny pieces of information he processed and seeing how it fit together into a larger picture. He took gambles and lost a few yet even when he lost everything, he continued to look ahead and see possibilities for success.

At the time, the woods industry was always a gamble because the threat of a large, devastating fire was a very real possibility. Lacroix lost a large operation in Ontario as well as the original Clayton Lake depot that was heavily stocked with supplies to build the Eagle Lake & West Branch railroad to fire. In 1940, Lacroix lost out on a contract with Japan. Lacroix had a pulp mill in St. John, New Brunswick. His first boat load of pulp left the wharf in St. John on the day that Pearl Harbor was bombed. Needless to say, the contract was cancelled.

Despite set backs, Lacroix persevered and also had a successful political career. His crowning piece of legislation was one that established exactly what a "cord" volume of measurement was and how it was determined – it was a piece of legislation that helped the common lumberjack by forcing companies to scale to some sort of standard. When Lacroix was sworn into the House of Commons in Quebec, one of his crews in Greenville had their own ceremony where they proclaimed that although Lacroix may be in the house of commons in Quebec, he'd always be a King in Maine – hence "King" Lacroix.

Lacroix began selling various mills, lands, and corporations in the mid 1940s after World War II, ending his reign as the King of the Allagash. But his hand print still remains on the north woods even today.

According to a memoire by Seven Islands Land Company founder John Sinclair, K.C. Irving spent several days negotiating with Lacroix at Lacroix's home in St. Georges, Quebec for the Allagash lands. The story goes that on the 3rd or 4th day, Irving said "You know, Mr. Lacroix, I'm tired. I'm going to bed." The next day, he came back to Lacroix and said "Now Mr. Lacroix, we made a deal and you are going to sell me all of that land and everything you own in northern Maine, including the

Van Buren-Madawaska Mill.” To which Lacroix replied “but since you had such a good sleep, this morning it’s going to cost you \$200,000 more.” That extra cost gave Mr. Irving the right to float wood down the Allagash. Irving later said that “You know, that’s the most expensive night I ever spent.” As you look at the North Maine Woods today, a core of Lacroix’s Allagash lands lives on in the present day Irving Woodlands.

Lacroix’s drive also lives on in the legacy of his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren as well. One fall evening in 2008, LandVest Forester Claude Dufour and I met with some of Lacroix’s great grandchildren at the Lacroix family camp on Clayton Lake. For some reason, I thought I was going to meet a bunch of elderly French gentlemen coming to the old camp for a bit of an interview. Instead, we spent a pleasant evening with six young men aged 29 to 43 who were swapping stories and jests, kicking back a bit and carrying on the long family tradition of playing cards. In other words, they were completely normal, very down to earth men doing what men in the woods do. None of the men had been born before Lacroix died of Parkinson’s in 1963. None knew Lacroix any better than you or I know our great grandfather. Yet, they were intriguing. Lacroix had four children, one of whom died at 3. All three of his remaining children became shareholders and very active participants in Lacroix’s ventures.

His oldest son, Henri, was active in the woods businesses and the foundation of St. Georges Woolen Mills. The mills eventually changed with the times and now produce carpet but are still owned by Groupe St-Georges Inc whose owner, Alexandre Lacroix, is Henri’s grandson.

His youngest son, Andre, moved to the Gaspé region of Quebec where he continued the woods operations under the name Bois Lacroix Ltee. (“bois” means “wood” in French). He had a wide variety of commercial pursuits but concentrated on lumbering. He was also the mayor of Carleton, Quebec in the 1940s. The Bois Lacroix mill in Causapsal was sold to in 1986 to Gilles Berube, who formed the Cedrico Group – a booming Canadian family owned business that mills over 200 million board feet a year and employees over 700 people. A mill that Lacroix made, though modernized, is still going.

His middle child was daughter Gilberte. She suffered a lower leg accident when she was 8 that forced her to go through many surgeries and left her lightly physically handicapped. That didn’t stop her from marrying Roger Dutil and having 5 children. Nor, despite her frail appearance, did it stop her from being very actively involved within her father’s company. She and her husband went on form a steel joist manufacturing company formerly known as Canam Steel Corporation. That company grew to the point that it was split into two companies, the Canam Group Inc. and Manac Inc., to better focus on specific areas of success. Unbeknownst to me, one of the men I was speaking with runs the Canam Group which is publicly traded, has 12 plants, and employs over 3,000 people in offices in the U.S. and Canada. These guys aren’t making nuts and bolts, in their own words from their web site “Canam Steel people love to tackle the difficult steel truss work. Bring us your unusual steel connections, your difficult shapes, your hard-to-design steel joist projects. Our experienced and dedicated engineering teams thrive on challenging jobs.” I can picture Edouard Lacroix saying something very similar to this to the Great Northern’s people in 1920 while convincing them that he was the contractor to build them a railroad in the middle of a wilderness. The great-grandson who runs the day to day operations of Canam is quoted in the Quebec provincial papers regularly and is a well respected, powerful business man. He and I talked about paddling the Allagash and how best to get into the trains. When I asked how Edouard Lacroix was received in government, he was the one to tell me that it didn’t matter how he was received, but what he did that was important (with much head shaking from the other men). Canam Steel provided the steel for the new Yankees Stadium, has a contract for the New York Jets/Giants Stadium and Windsor/Detroit Bridge. Gilberte’s son is still very actively involved with the company as the Chairman of the Board.

The other brother took over the Manac part of the Canam Manac Company. “Manac is the largest manufacturer of custom-built and specialty semitrailers in North America” according to their website (www.manac.us) (none of these men gave any illusion at all to what sorts of companies, and at

what level, they were running). What I like about Manac is that it's something I can see on a daily basis and think "Hello Mr. Lacroix!" On your trip through, or even to, the North Maine Woods, you may occasionally find yourself staring at the back of a log or chip truck. Look closely at the mudflaps on the trailer. If you see what looks like a flying moose – you're looking at a trailer that has been produced by Manac. There's a legend that goes along with the flying moose that you can read about on-line and if you frequent the Greenville/Rockwood area you may be familiar with the flying moose statue at the Dutil home on Moosehead Lake. Again, a company that started in St. Georges, Quebec producing just 11 trailers their first year now has four plants in Missouri and Quebec. Lacroix's descendants are still moving wood, in the form of chips, lumber and logs, from points all over the North America, including ground that their great-grandfather moved logs and pulp over nearly 90 years ago.

Gilberte's youngest child, with help from several more grandchildren, runs Groupe Procycle, a business which makes bicycles and fitness equipment. Some of their products include the types of bicycles that top level athletes use, such as the one used by Canadian Olympic Medalist Marie-Helene Premont. The company started with 40 employees assembling 30,000 bikes their first year. Procycle has now produced 6 million bikes.

Gilberte's third surviving son continues the tradition of being involved with politics and was re-elected to the Provincial Parliament during the 2008 election. He represents the Beauce-Sud region and is the Minister of Revenue.

King Lacroix left a lot of things in his wake: a name that hasn't been forgotten, two rusted locomotives in the middle of nowhere, a landbase that went on to form the backbone of a highly successful forestry company today, mills that were so well located that they continue to function in their original location, three successful children who created their own business based on models and strategies he used, grandchildren who furthered those businesses, and great grandchildren who are carrying on the traditions of tackling intricate problems with a no-nonsense style while still managing to be interesting and down-to-earth human beings who come to the woods to get away from the daily stresses of life, have a couple drinks, and play card games that their grandmother taught them around a beat up kitchen table under a gas light next to a smoky old wood stove on the shore of Clayton Lake.



Lacroix's great-grandsons at the Eagle Lake & West Branch Railroad in the Allagash Wilderness Waterway - 2008

A more detailed history of Lacroix's life is found at the [North Maine Woods Internet site](#).