

The first “mill” city

BY CHARLIE MAGUIRE

IT WAS THE DOUBLE-BIT AXE resting on the shoulder of a lean figure grabbed my attention. Shaded by a small white pine tree behind him, the eyes of *The Lumberman* bored right into mine, in recognition.

It's a statue that speaks volumes, especially in Camden. Men like the figure sculpted by Roger M. Brodin kept logs rolling down the river – and kept 800 employees at the nearby C. A. Smith Lumber Company busy producing 750 million board feet of lumber in a single day.

ON THE BANKS OF THE MISSISSIPPI

The first lumber mill at St. Anthony Falls opened in 1821 and was operated by the federal government to cut lumber for Fort Snelling. Twenty years later Franklin Steele opened the area's first commercial lumber mill. Lumber was essential to help the city grow. In 1893 C. A. Smith Lumber Company was incorporated.

What a sight it must have been. Up to the early 1900s huge rafts of logs floated down the Mississippi River from as far north as Lake Itasca, the river's source. In 1903, however, Mary Gibbs, the first woman park ranger and commissioner in the world, confronted armed lumbermen to save Itasca State Park from overzealous logging companies. She was instrumental in conserving some of the state's 33 million forested acres.

Still, the wheels of industry kept spinning and many logs continued to make their way to Camden. And once there, the river redoubled her efforts by powering huge saw blades that turned century-old trees into the lumber.

Smith's mill was the largest sawmill in the city, and as a businessman, and accidental environmentalist, he was determined to use the byproducts of his trade. Sawdust, bark, and wood scraps that other mills simply dumped in the Mississippi River, just might make a hefty profit, Smith thought. So he brought his plant superintendent, Arvo Mereen, into his office (a yellow brick castle-like building that still stands at 44th and Lyndale Avenue North) to help him figure it out.

Mereen carved out space on the property for a wooden box factory, which was followed by another wildly innovative idea: wall-board made of wood pulp, glue, and paper cement suitable for covering wall and ceiling joists. This early “drywall” not only used every part of the tree except the shade, but was also a workable alternative to the time-consuming plaster and lath interior wall construction commonly in use. More savings were wrought by Mereen and Charles Johnson, another Smith employee, when they invented a blade that re-sawed logs horizontally instead of vertically for precise depth and thickness.

People inside the mill should be given their due, certainly. But mill owner Charles Axel Smith would not have had a single board or beam to sell without *The Lumberman*. Loggers were often immigrants who

worked and lived in location camps – a ramshackle cluster of rough cabins or tents at the edge of the forest. Their sweat-soaked chopper mittens, clothes, and socks hung on lines above the stove to dry in the bunkhouses where they slept. Downing timber in below-zero winters and bug-ridden summers, they were often miles from a town or a doctor if a hung-up tree or “widow maker” twisted and fell on them.



A FAMILY CONNECTION AND A WOMAN'S LOVE

Being a sawyer was hazardous for all the brave men who chose the occupation, including Charles S. Maguire, my grandfather.

At 21 years of age he timbered in the Maine woods. In a photograph I have, he's posing for the camera, dressed in working clothes and standing by a freshly cut stack of logs. He's smoking a pipe and wearing a jaunty felt hat and a devil-may-care expression. Who's he looking at? You wouldn't know unless you were family. Is it the photographer? Not exactly. He's looking at his mother.

My great-grandmother Johanna was just yards away. In an attempt to visit her son, she got snowed in for the winter at camp instead. She somehow got a letter out to my great-grandfather, then rolled up her sleeves and cooked for the men the rest of the winter of 1909–1910. She did so to keep an eye on “her Charlie,” no doubt to the delight of everyone in that remote camp.

A woman who was also a “cookie” was unusual in that place, and I wish I had more of her story. Luckily, *The Lumberman* just across the river in Camden shows larger than life, the kind of people my relatives were.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The Biltmore stick was invented in North Carolina on the Biltmore Estate by Carl Schenck around the time C. A. Smith built his mill. Schenck served with Gifford Pinchot who would later become the first chief of the US Forest Service.

To use a Biltmore stick to measure the height of a tree, stand about 60 feet away from the tree and hold the stick at arm's length with the bottom of the stick visually centered on the trunk of the tree where it meets the ground. Then without moving the stick, look at the uppermost measurement taken from the stick and the top of the tree. That will give you the height. Normally timber cruisers measured a bit farther down from the top branches to the trunk or marketable part of the tree. You can also use a Biltmore stick to measure the diameter of a tree and to predict the board feet of lumber the tree will produce.



ABOVE: Lumbermen in the state of Maine, Charles S. Maguire, author's grandfather is in the middle row, second from the right.

LEFT: Charles S. Maguire's mother, Johanna Maguire.

BELOW: A Biltmore stick, used for calculating the amount of lumber in a living tree.

The double-bit axe has two blades on one axe head. Loggers kept one end sharp for felling the tree, and the second edge was honed to cut through knots and work close to the ground. Invented around 1850 by William Mann in Pennsylvania, his descendants manufactured axes until 2003. The double-bit axe can have a head weighing 3–5 pounds with a slim hickory handle 26–42 inches in length.

I favor the double-bit over the single-bit for serious tree felling because of the exquisite balance of the tool as you swing it. It almost feels weightless, enabling the user to really put some weight behind the blade. The double-bit axe in this illustration was handed down by my father who once employed a man named Big Bill to help him fell trees on our farm. Bill's strength was such that he actually split the steel head of this fine double-bit as he worked on a log. Dad should have given Bill a single-bit axe (think chopping knife, not scalpel) because that head is thicker and better able to absorb the momentum of a more powerful man.



C. A. Smith Lumber Company (1893–1912),
4400 Lyndale Avenue North, Minneapolis,
Photo by Norton & Peel, courtesy Hennepin
County Library, 1910.



Author's heirloom
double-bit axe
head welded by a
blacksmith after it
was split by Big Bill.

PUT ON YOUR FLASHERS

No need — there's a parking lot right at the junction of North 43rd Avenue and Webber Parkway. There are also a couple of park benches close by *The Lumberman*. Take some time to walk down to Shingle Creek. There are other attractions at Webber Park including a "natural swimming pool." While you're in the area, also visit what is locally known as "the castle," and was C. A. Smith Lumber Company's original 1890s office building (4400 Lyndale Avenue North).

Charlie Maguire is a songwriter and a performer who makes frequent stops to sing or typewrite a story in Hennepin County. In keeping with a strong family work ethic, he swung an axe before he swung a baseball bat.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Charlie Maguire, "Sheltering a heroine: Mary Gibbs's Minneapolis apartment." *Hennepin History*, Volume 79, Number 3, 2020, bit.ly/3MP5eKX.

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Unless noted, photos courtesy the author.