

“Pioneer Lumbering in Montana,” by Anton Holter

. . . Mr. Evenson and I finally selected a location for our sawmill, and after considerable hardship we reached the top of the divide between Bevin’s and Ramshorn Gulches on December 7, [1863] where we went into temporary camp, with no shelter beyond that afforded by a large spruce tree. . . . We made a hand sled with cross beams extending outside the runners far enough, so when necessary with a hand spike on each side we were able to nip it along. With this hand sled we removed our outfit to the creek and we did all the logging this way during the entire Winter. We first built a cabin and a blacksmith shop, but this soon became more of a machine shop, for when we came to erect the sawmill we met with what seemed insurmountable difficulties.

As I knew nothing about sawmills, I had left the purchase of the outfit to Mr. Evenson, who claimed to be a millwright by profession, but it developed that he had either been very careless in inspecting this machinery or he had not understood it, for so much of it was missing that it seemed impossible to get a working mill out of the material on hand. As there was no foundry or machine shop in this part of the country we were at a loss to know what to do, but were determined to erect a sawmill of some kind. So [we got] out our rubber coats and whipsawed lumber. We made a blacksmith bellows, then we burned a pit of charcoal, while a broad axe driven into a stump served as an anvil.

Mr. Evenson knew a little about blacksmithing, so I began to feel somewhat at ease, but soon discovered what seemed to be the worst obstacle yet. This was that we had no gearing for the log carriage, not even the track irons or pinion—and to devise some mechanism that would give the carriage the forward and reverse movement, became the paramount problem.

After a great deal of thought and experimenting we finally succeeded in inventing a device which years later was patented and widely used under the name of “rope feed.” . . .

These were strenuous days and we worked early and late in the face of the most discouraging circumstances. We manufactured enough material for the sixteen-foot overshot waterwheel, the flume, etc. As we were short of belting, we made it out of untanned ox hides, and it worked well enough in the start. We finally got the mill started and sawed about 5,000 feet of lumber before we ever had a beast of burden in the camp.

Before we could get any of this lumber out we had to employ some help, and the first thing necessary to do was to grade a wagon road on the side of the mountain to get to the top of the divide. It required a great deal of labor to get a road in shape to put teams on. . . .

Now as the mill had been tried and proven satisfactory, a crew [was] employed and the mill started. I felt at ease, as I imagined all obstacles had now been overcome so I left the mill and went to Nevada City, a flourishing camp three miles below Virginia City, and opened a lumber yard.

When I got the yard opened at Nevada City, the lumber commenced arriving from the mill and was disposed of as fast as landed. When we began selling lumber we made only two grades, namely, sluice or flume lumber, which we sold at \$140 per M. and building lumber . . . for which we got \$125 per M. in gold dust.

The demand for lumber was greater than the supply, and quite often some of the larger mining companies would send a spy out on the road, in order that they might be informed when a load of lumber was approaching. Then

they would have a crew of men arrive at the yard simultaneously with the load of lumber, and when the team stopped, without consulting me at all, they would unload the lumber and carry off every board to their mines. Soon a man would come to me with the pay for the lumber, and they always settled according to the bill of lading of the load at the established price so no loss was incurred by this summary method of marketing our product. . . .

Source: *Holter Family Papers, 1861–1968. Manuscript Collection 80* [box 1 folder 8]. Montana Historical Society Research Center. Archives. Excerpted in *Not In Precious Metals Alone: A Manuscript History of Montana* (Helena, 1976): 122–23.