Women Working Their Way Through Logging Camps

Snellman, Hanna
Kustannus Puntsi
2005

The North Calotte : perspectives on the histories and cultures of northernmost Europe, p. 136-147

http://hdl.handle.net/10224/4769

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.
This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.
Please cite the original version.
Lapland was crucial to the Finnish national economy in the 20th century. Export industry was mainly based on forestry, which was mostly practised in northern and eastern Finland in the early 20th century, where there was an abundance of untouched forest. Lapland and its forests belonged together in the Finnish awareness, and in the Lappish everyday life as well.

The Finnish Forest History Society carried out an extensive oral history project in Finland in 1999–2002 under my guidance, interviewing more than a thousand people who once earned their livelihood in the forest trade. Because previous research had not paid due attention to women’s work, we also wished to collect their recollections of the trade. Up to the 1980s, cooking and cleaning was the most important female occupation in the forest trade. These duties are the subject of this article.

It was considerably more difficult to find female interviewees than male in our oral history project. Women hid themselves behind modest statements that their men—husbands, fathers, brothers and sons—had done the forestry work, not them. This is true enough in the sense that many women only worked temporarily on the logging camps. The occupation of cook-cleaner in a logging camp is relatively recent compared with men’s occupations. Forestry companies started employing women at their logging camps in the 1930s to cook meals for the men. The cooks only prepared some of the meals at the experimental stage, while the rest was self-catering. The practice of providing all meals, including a packed lunch, spread in the late 1950s. Logging camps admittedly had cooks before, but they were generally relatives working for as little as their food in recompense, young girls as a rule. Beside cooking, their job was to keep the lodge warm while men were working. Lapland had lodge cooks up to the early 1990s, when shared accommodation was abandoned everywhere, and log floating closed down on the Kemi River.

Women’s underestimation of their own work results from the male dominance in the forestry trade. Forestry was regarded as male work, and the female contribution was not particularly appreciated. Some of the husbands found it difficult to accept that their wives were primarily asked for the interview, not them. The emphasis on male work also emerges in the material collected for earlier research.

The project carried out by the Finnish Forest History Society includes 35 interviews with logging camp cooks from Lapland. These interviews are the source material of this article. The interviewees, born in the 1920s–1950s, were cooks on the logging camps from the 1940s to the early 1990s. The interviews mainly dealt with the period from the 1950s to the 1970s.

I set out in this article to look at the recruitment for work as a...
logging camp cook. What choices were women forced to make, how is the camp cook work situated in the course of life, and what solutions are found to the problem of combining outside work with child minding? As we know, the workplace was often hundreds of kilometres from home.

**Domestic, or kitchen hand?**

Raakel from Pelkosenniemi had parents in small farming. The family had seven children, the two eldest of whom moved from home when Raakel was only a small child. Raakel also naturally left home as soon as she had finished her compulsory schooling. She had to start paid work after her church confirmation at 15 years old. The choice was between being a domestic in Rovaniemi or in the towns in the south, or a kitchen hand at a logging camp. A domestic would have been paid much less than a camp cook, and the job would have demanded moving to a small market town or a major town.

Raakel's first job was a logging camp in Savukoski, with more than a hundred men to be fed, and three women to prepare the food. Raakel helped the senior cook, doing the duties that she was told to do. The work started at four o'clock in the morning with coffee, and finished at ten at night when the place had to be silent. The sheer size of the coffee pot 20 litres, indicates the amount of work. Just lifting the full pot onto the range was impossible for a young girl without help. Raakel worked at the logging camp from 15 until 19 years of age. Since the workplaces were far from home, employees could only come home a few times a winter. The summers were spent at home, working in the fields, scrubbing the barn clean, and making hay. The isolation at the logging camps made Raakel eventually leave her job as a camp cook after four years. Both she and Maaret from next-door, who shared her work, found that they lost their youth in the woods, far from everything. These two girls left home in the spring before the logging was finished, which made their parents angry. They still did not have to stay at home long. It only took three days before the teacher at the local school came to ask Raakel to be her maid. Maaret also became a maid, but she went to Helsinki for that, and soon moved on to a factory. Neither of these two girls returned to the logging camps.'

Eeva from Pelkosenniemi thinks that her life was affected in many ways by the fact that she was the eldest child of a family with ten children. The eldest had to look after the younger sisters and brothers. There was nobody else to do it when her mother had another child. She had stayed at her aunt in Oulu to go to school when she was evacuated because of the war, but she had to leave school without finishing it when there was another baby on the way. Eeva was a case in point of early obligation to accommodate the younger children in a small house. She started as a kitchen hand at the same logging camp as her father when she was 11. Children were not expected to master quite every job in the kitchen. The men could cut the meat for braised reindeer, and peel the potatoes. The following winters were spent helping in the camp kitchen, and the summers working at the home farm, both jobs along with her father. When Eeva got engaged at 18, she stopped working as a camp cook; she did not go to the rural household management school either, although she had the chance. Her husband to-be did not regard cooking for lumberjacks as proper for a married woman.'

**When the children were born**

Eeva does not say anything about a possible pregnancy as the explanation for finishing as a camp cook. Raisa from Savukoski told us however that the same happened to her as to so many recently-married camp
cooks: "had a baby, and had to stay at home". Raisa never returned to her previous occupation. There would certainly have been vacancies as a camp cook, because there was a shortage of skilled labour. Those with experience from logging camps were often used as short-term replacements.

Not all interviewees stopped work as camp cooks because of child-bearing. Aila started as one when her child was three years old, and stopped when the child started school. Her daughter stayed with her at the camps, because she had no other day-care for her. The married men separated from their own children liked the presence of a little girl. They had the energy to draw and play with her after work, while her mother was busy with her chores. Even the employer was aware of the child's presence, because it had been included in the terms and conditions of employment when Aila accepted the job.

Maili, born in Ylitornio, also often had her children with her at work. Their father was a lumberjack, so that there was no choice. The youngest of Maili's children was only one when her mother worked as a camp cook for the first time. Maili also remembers that the men were quite happy about the presence of children at the camp with only a few exceptions.

Riikka, once a cook at a floaters' camp, often had to take her youngest child with her to work when her husband was away at work. She remembered this particularly because her child could not swim yet, which caused extra worry on a camp surrounded by water. Mother and child left home for the weekend after work on Fridays, but returned on Monday morning. Other cooks at floating camps also reported that their children went with them. This was particularly the case when their husbands worked at the same floating base.

Mari, born in Kemijärvi, had a mother who had been a camp cook when the children were small. A widowed woman had no choice. The eldest sister looked after the smaller children when mother was away. Mari ended up doing the same. Her four children were looked after by her sister in the winter while she was a camp cook. Understandably enough, she missed her children badly during the long winter. The children could not have gone with her, because they had to go to school.

Family life at the camp

Helena from Savukoski would have liked to become a trained nursemaid, but her parents could not afford it because they had eight children. A girl from next door went to a rural household management school in Kemijärvi, and Helena also ended up there. The training took a year. She acquired skills for work as a camp cook and life as a woman on the whole. The domestic arts course included household management, kitchen work, agricultural work, gardening, child care and handiwork. After this Helena became the school cook and cleaner in her home village, and worked there for the next eight years. Before going to the rural household management school, she had spent a summer on a logging camp as a kitchen hand when she was 16 years old. She returned to her logging camp work a little more than ten years later, when she was made the camp cook for the Finnish National Board of Forestry. Her husband was a lumberjack on the same camp, but he lived with the men while Helena lived on the kitchen side with her children. Their smallest child accompanied mother at work. The eldest already went to school, lived in a residential home for the week, and visited the camp for the weekends. Like some others, Helena also had the permission to have her children with her on the camp as a condition for accepting work. Because there were so many men to be looked after, Helena would have got a helper, but she did not want one because of her children. Her skill from the rural household management school came in handy when she planned the meals. She thought that she prepared
good food for a reasonable price precisely because of her training. Her children ate with the men, but they only paid half the price.” All logging camps worked on the principle that they made a food team, and everybody paid the same. The cooking skill was all about keeping the cost as low as possible. The feedback for successful work thus came for both the taste and the cost of the food. If the food was expensive, the men did not hesitate to complain. Reasonably-priced food on the other hand even produced gifts from the men.”

Camp cook or rural household manager?

Many of our interviewees said that children and work as a camp cook could mix, but cattle could not. Those with both cattle and children usually did not work as camp cooks.” Helena also left her work as a camp cook in the late 1970s, having bought a place nearby with her husband. When the logging near home finished, Helena also finished her work as a camp cook. She did not want to be separated from her family, and the new camp was too far from home. The move to Helena's parents made the couple into farmers. The cattle also made it impossible to work as a camp cook.”

Eine had started work as a camp cook out of financial necessity, because she was a war widow, and her first child was only three. Grandmother looked after the child while mother was working on the logging camp. The cooking work usually only lasted from November to March, so that Eine had the time to spend the rest of the year with her child, and help her mother with the farm work. She eventually stayed at home after her second marriage and her second child. When the children had grown up and the cows were disposed of, she returned to her work as a camp cook.”

School or work?

The question of whether to continue at school after the obligatory part could not usually be asked in the countryside before the 1970s. It was taken for granted that young people went to work after they had finished school. Martta, born in the Rural Commune of Rovaniemi in 1938, would have liked to continue at school, but her parents thought that it would have been impossible. Going to school would have meant having to move to town, which would have been the sure way to “rack and ruin” in her parents' view. They regarded work as help in a camp kitchen as a much better choice for a young girl. Rauha’s father was a forest foreman, and he knew that his daughter was well looked after at the logging camp. The discipline was tough, and the rules were clear.” Elma from Kittilä on the other hand had a mother who would not have wanted to let her daughter work at a logging camp, although she had already worked as a domestic. Her mother found the camp cooking work insecure compared with being a maid. The good pay however lured Elma to work as a camp cook. Elma did not even consider more training.” None of our interviewees reported any sexual harassment at work in any case. They nevertheless recalled that it was not worth taking the men's jokes too meticulously, if they wanted to do well.

Those who trained themselves further usually went to a rural household management school in Ivalo or Kemijärvi for a year, and some few had completed a household management and animal husbandry training in Tervola. One of the interviewees held a diploma in the restaurant trade from the vocational school in Rovaniemi. At least some reported increments in their pay for their training in household management. It was nevertheless not essential to have completed household management training for employment even as a senior cook.” The work was generally learned on the job. The team consisted of a senior cook and one or two helpers. The kitchen hands learned jobs that the senior cook was in charge of, both cooking and ordering.
groceries. As they gradually grew older and more experienced, the hands became senior cooks themselves.25

One of the interviewees had saved money for her education when she worked as a camp kitchen hand while at secondary school. She later became a teacher.26 Work in the forest trade has been a popular summer occupation for students on the whole.

**Casual labourers**

Only few earned a regular annual income from camp cooking. The same applied to men; only some had logging and floating as their main source of income for the whole year.27 The story of Riitta from Salla is a typical representation of a variety of sources of income. Child-care had been familiar to Riitta since she was ten, because she nursed children next-door for a little payment. Typically her first actual job was being a domestic in Rovaniemi when she was 16. She stayed in her job a winter. She also had the time to work at a restaurant kitchen and at a shop in the same year. The following winter was spent at a logging camp as a kitchen hand, and the summer as a cook at a floating camp. She continued with these jobs for the next five years. The camps changed annually, and a job only lasted four months at the most. As for floating camps, the cooking could only last for a month. Meanwhile Riitta worked at a kiosk and helped at a barber's shop, as well as doing spring and Christmas cleans and the laundry around the neighbourhood. Although Riitta did not live at home any longer, except for short periods of the year, it was taken for granted that she would give her pay to her parents. She then asked them for money whenever she needed it. Riitta married at 19 and left her work as a camp cook.28

Heljä from Sodankylä had youthful dreams of becoming a dairymaid or a waitress, both of which would have required further training. There would however have been no opportunity for that. Heljä had seven sisters and brothers. The sons became forest workers and the daughters camp cooks and domestic helpers. Heljä's first job was thicket tending at the home village when she was 14 years old. The work lasted a couple of weeks in the autumn and spring. Beside the thicket tending, Heljä was planting pine seedlings early in the summer and in the autumn. When she was 18, she started as a kitchen hand at a logging camp. As usual, the work started in November and finished in March. She was offered the opportunity to be a cook for a floating team, but declined because of the hard work. It was enough work to help her mother on the family farm. The annual cycle repeated itself for the next four years; the midwinter was spent cooking at a logging camp, and the rest of the year on the farm. As was the case with so many others, her marriage to a timber worker and a childbirth made Heljä leave the work at the logging camps. When they disposed of the cows, and the child had grown a little, Heljä started work as a cleaner at a power plant site.29

Lahja cooked for a floating team in Muurola until summer 1991, when floating on the Kemi River ceased. The rest of the year she was employed by Lappish tourist enterprises from Levi to Suomutunturi, the autumn colours season *ruska* and the early spring ski season in any case. Sometimes she cooked at a restaurant, and sometimes she attended a holiday village.30

**Camp cooking as a career**

We were frustrated in our attempt to find women with long experience in camp cooking, because many seem to have finished working at logging and floating camps when they married. Marriage usually also meant children, which naturally explains the withdrawal. There are however some among our interviewees who were active in camp cooking throughout their career — as long as such jobs were available.31
Sirkka from Savukoski was a camp cook all her working life. When she was 15 years, she started as a kitchen hand for the senior cook. Cooking was not what she preferred to do, but when the woman from next door offered her a job, her parents left her no choice. Sirkka has no children, which made it easy for her to work far from home. She is one of the fortunate ones with permanent employment with the Finnish National Board of Forestry. She never needed to suffer from unemployment or odd jobs during the quiet seasons. Even when the camp accommodation ceased, Sirkka still maintained her employment with the Board, the job description being altered to cleaning.

Transgenerational practices

Two things recur in the accounts by those who spent their childhood in the remote villages in Lapland in the period from the 1920s to the 1950s. We hear that it was necessary to leave the parental home as soon as one could, the principle being that once the confirmation class and any obligatory training had been completed, no further education was needed. These accounts encapsulate the everyday conditions for young people in Lapland.

What did young people strive for after having done their confirmation class, and having left home? This article has so far dealt with the critical choices that the interviewees made given a childhood in Lapland and life-long permanent residence there. Despite wishes to do further training, it was not often possible in the remote areas because of long distances, high cost and little appreciation of education for girls. If girls wanted to stay in their native district, they had to console themselves with poor job opportunities. There was an abundance of menial jobs, which made many Lappish girls start their career as domestic helpers. Because their pay was poor, they advanced to other duties as they gained confidence. They became kitchen hands at the camps, and gradually senior cooks as they could be entrusted with more responsibility. “The work was learned through experience. Surprisingly, many managed to combine their camp cooking with their maternal duties. The children were either left with relatives, or went to work. It was partly a question of day-care problems, but partly also of socialization to future duties.”

Combining farm management and maternity with camp cooking was considerably more difficult than maternal responsibilities alone. Many camp cooks left working life when they married, gave birth or started dairy-farming Many left because cooking did not provide employment all year round Before the mechanization of forestry work, the logging usually started in November and went on till March or April. People had to find other jobs for the rest of the year. Many did farm work at home, or cooked for floating teams, as well as any odd jobs available.”

Previous research indicates that a great deal of women's work typically lacks a clear-cut division between work and family, these two responsibilities being closely intertwined. Women's work history and professional careers seem inconsistent and haphazard, because family life factors affect their choices so strongly. The interviews with Lappish camp cooks suggest that family life meant quite a restricted range of choice. Obviously child-birth and child care changed camp cooks' lives in many ways, and their own mothers' pregnancies and having to look after younger sisters and brothers limited their choice as well. Previous research has largely neglected these constraints on personal freedom, which were conditioned by care for others. The needs of the family and the community determined and shaped women's work, and this was passed on from one generation to another.”