



Log rolling competition

## Calling all Lumberjacks and Jills!

—*New York State Woodsmen's Field Days*

By Elaine Bloom  
photos by Jim Clayton

Even if you missed the banners strung across Route 12 entering Boonville or the barbecue smoke wafting from institutional-sized grills in parking lots across town, you would sense something was up on this sunny August morning. Maybe it's the dry, sweet whiff of fresh sawdust; the distant whine of countless chainsaws; the "If You Don't Like Logging, Try Wiping with a Pinecone" bumper stickers.

It's the New York State Woodmen's Field Days, an Adirondack institution that combines the traditional skills and savvy of the old-time lumberjack with the roaring charisma of monster logging equipment.

The first Woodmen's Field Days, held in Old Forge, NY in 1948, benefitted the Woodsmen's Club, which supports logging families, especially those that lose a breadwinner to injury or death. The festival found permanent home in Boonville in 1972 and still supports the same worthy cause.

The field days tradition harks back to the fierce, informal competitions that sprang up in logging camps of the mid-1800s to mid-1900s. As if their work wasn't dangerous enough, lum-

berjacks, living and working deep in the woods, competed to outdo each other in skills ranging from log rolling to felling trees and bucking them with crosscut saws.

The Boonville-Oneida County Fairground is the focus of Boonville's contemporary Field Days, but the entire village gets involved, with ham dinners at churches and all-you-can-eat breakfasts at the Masonic Temple. Parking is easy, with locations available throughout the village.

As you enter the fairgrounds, you might want to slip in the earplugs you so wisely brought along. Make your way down the rows of vendors. Your attention is initially commanded by dealers of state-of-the-art chainsaws, slicing—with casual skill and deafening noise—large logs into piles of thin "cookies."

All rows lead (after stopping off at hawkers of woodcrafts, forest art, portable sawmills and irresistible delicacies such as fried dough) to the grandstand. There you can marvel at an assortment of exhibitions and competitions, some using ultra-modern technology and techniques, but all contested every bit as fiercely as those of yesteryear.

## Horse Skidding

Wandering the grounds, I was drawn to the horse skidding competition where teams of sleek draft horses “skid,” or slid, a log (and by log, I mean a pretty darn big tree trunk sans limbs) through a slalom line of thick poles simulating a dense stand of trees. If this sounds easy or safe, then you need to see it. The horses weigh upwards of a ton each, and, although well trained, don’t come with power steering. The driver, holding the reins on foot behind the horse, may ride the log or, more commonly, hop deftly from one side of the log to the other as it fishtails through the poles. Miss a step and the driver risks having his or her legs slammed by the heavy log.

When you work with animals (or timber for that matter) you learn to expect the unexpected. At the 2012 Field Days exhibition, Jennie Hatch handled just such a moment with aplomb, much to the alarm and delight of the crowd. When her team ran away out of control, she ran behind them with the 16-foot log



Opening ceremony at the field days.

swinging behind her. “Trying to hold back two spooked Percherons, it’s scary to realize how big they really are,” she said. The only woman in the competition and a crowd favorite, she still managed to finish 5<sup>th</sup> out of 11 teams.

## Game of Logging

Developed to promote new, safer techniques in an inherently risky profession, Game of Logging competition events are anything but dull. The timed events are based on using a chainsaw with a speed,



One-woman crosscut competition.



Cutting “log cookies” with a chainsaw.

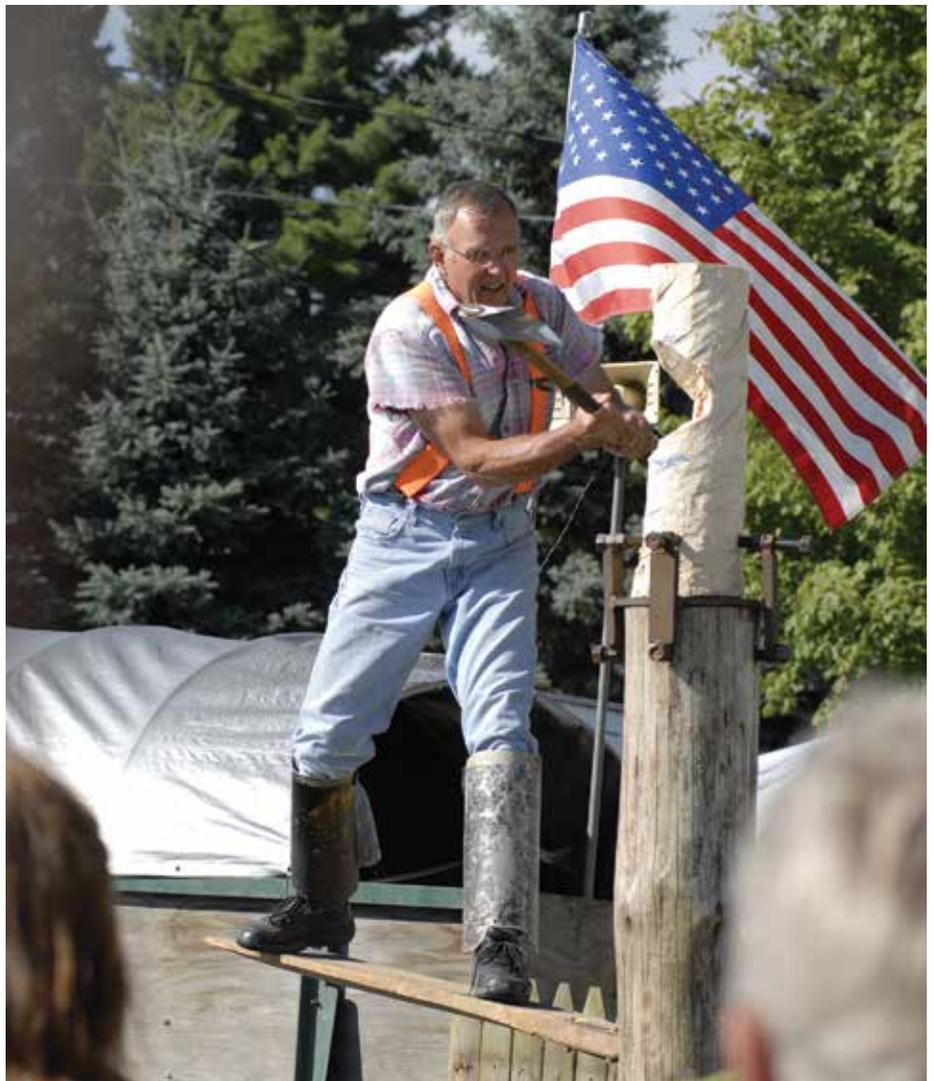
precision and skill that astounds. Competitors face a variety of situations they might encounter in the woods, such as making an open-faced notch in the trunk and leaving just few inches of wood holding the tree, and a precision “bore cut” to allow the tree to fall exactly where aimed. Another event, releasing a “spring pole,” simulates one of the trickiest and potentially dangerous circumstances loggers encounter: a felled tree pinning a sapling under great tension. Spring poles can release with huge force, causing serious injuries.

### Lumberjack and Lumberjill

Lumberjack and lumberjill competitions pit contestants against their opponents’ times in more traditional events such as one-man and two-man crosscut, axe throwing, underhand chopping, and log rolling. (By the way, if you imagine that the lumberjill contests are tame versions of the men’s contests—don’t. These women train just as hard and are equally as determined and proficient as their male counterparts.)

One of the most spectacular of all the lumberjack events is the springboard chop, a technique first used by old-time time loggers to establish a cutting platform part-way up the trunk of massive trees. In this competition, each contestant uses an axe to chop pockets into a 9-foot pole and place narrow planks into the pockets. Climbing the planks, the competitor chops through a 12-inch diameter log at the top of the pole. It goes without saying that agility and good balance go a long way in this event.

For those awed by watching dinosaur-sized equipment thunder around the stadium, the Field Days offers loader and skidder contests, as well as a logging truck show. Other do-not-miss fun includes the crowning of the forest queen, the Wood Nymph fashion show, chainsaw ice carving, the Brothers of the



A demonstration of the springboard chop.



There is plenty state-of-the-art wood-processing equipment on display at the field days.

Bush beard contest, and loads more. For the more serious-minded individual there are seminars on forest management and ecology. All seminars are free and open to the public. Check the Woodsmen's Field Days website at [www.starinfo.com/woodsmen](http://www.starinfo.com/woodsmen) for full details.

The 2013 Field Days will be held on August 16, 17, & 18. Consider spending a day enjoying crafts, food and logging excitement, and to show your support for New York's lumberjacks and jills. Oh, and don't forget the earplugs!



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Good balance and agility are important in birling (see definition below).



## Learn the Lingo

Before heading to the Woodsmen's Field Days, you might want to brush up on your lumberjack and logging lingo so you understand what everyone's saying!

**Barber chair:** a tree which splits upward along the grain during felling

**Birling:** the game of log rolling in the water

**Buck:** to cut a tree into lengths after it has been felled

**Cat Skinner:** bulldozer operator

**Fall guy:** person who cuts down the trees in the forest—also known as a “Jack”

**Ink slinger:** a logging camp timekeeper-bookkeeper

**Macaroni:** sawdust

**Nosebag:** a lunch bucket

**Pike pole:** a long aluminum pole with a spike and hook on one end used to maneuver floating logs

**Schoolmarm:** a log or tree that is forked; stable in river driving because it does not roll easily

**Swedish fiddle:** a crosscut saw

**Tramline:** suspended cable that skids or carries the logs to the mill

**Tree harvester:** large rubber-tired machine with jaws for holding tree while a blade cuts them off

**Tree farmer (or skidder):** large machine with multiple choke cables or big claws for skidding logs out of the woods

Kids enjoy playing in the “macaroni” at the fair.