

No Greater a Feller There Ever Was

Some people in these parts say the story of Mighty Maurice is nothing but a myth—a tall tale that grew among even taller pines.

He is said to have lived nearly two hundred years ago, and before his larger-than-life legend slips through the cracks of memory and time once and for all, I will share with you what I know to be true, so that you may keep it in the memory box of your mind and tell your children and your children's children...

Nobody knows where Maurice came from. Some said he'd been a beaver trapper for the first part of his life, spending his quiet solitary days in the wilderness and coming home every night to his little horse Rex, whose small back he kept warm day and night with the only wool jacket Maurice owned.

One day, Maurice took in his traps once and for all and headed out to look for other work. People speculate about why: some say he fell in love with a lumber camp foreman's daughter whom he'd met at Fort William, and he wanted to prove to the man that he deserved to marry her. Others say Maurice no longer had the heart to trap the creatures he'd come to respect. I, for one, think both these reasons to be true.

After two weeks of walking, and just as the first snows were beginning to fly, Maurice showed up at a camp on the Ottawa River with nothing to his name but his felling axe and his little horse Rex. He went straight up to the short-statured foreman and told him he could fell more trees than any other man there by twice the number. It was a challenge the foreman could not pass up—and a threat that made the other men in the camp, who'd neared to listen, fierce with rage.

“We're clearing this area to build the rest of the buildings,” the foreman said, indicating a flat spot of land where the small camboose shanty, a rough log building where the men cooked and slept, was dwarfed amid a field of massive white pines. Maurice picked up his felling axe and, with two enormous strides, was at the base of the largest pine in the field.

He started chopping feverishly, at a pace none thought he could withstand for more than a minute. But a minute passed and the deafening chops came even quicker than before. The other men picked up their axes and rushed back to work, two men to a tree, afraid of being accused of lazing in front of the foreman. But before the other men were even half through their trunks, Maurice's deep baritone boomed out, “Timber!” and the largest giant in the stand came crashing down and landed in front of the foreman. So thick was its trunk that the short foreman's gaping mouth was almost completely hidden from view. “Don't I know you from Fort William?” came his muffled query.

But before Maurice could answer, the other men, enraged that they had been shown up so sorely, doubled their efforts on their own trunks, and a maddening chopping was all that could be heard. The two fellers nearest Maurice, one working away at each side of a thick pine, were almost through when the weight of the crown began to pull the massive trunk straight down towards the little shanty.

The eyes of the two wayward fellers rounded in fear as the pine began to heave towards the camboose. The winter food stores would have been lost if not for Maurice's quick thinking, for with a mighty swing of his axe he gave the falling trunk such a fierce blow that it shifted direction and soon lay tidily next to the tree Maurice had just downed. All was silent until a bestial cheer echoed through the camp, and the foreman pumped Maurice's hand in welcome.

In a record three days, with Maurice's great help, the rest of the shanties had been erected and a rough stable had been built to house the oxen, whose muscle and determination were just as important to the success of the logging operation as the men's. "You can't keep Rex in here," said the clerk, his nose stuck in his notebook. "We won't feed an idle beast when there are working bovines that need to eat."

Maurice, who could not accept such ill feelings towards his beloved Rex, struck a deal with the clerk that if Rex could earn his keep, he could stay in the stable. "But how a little horse like that can match an ox, I just don't know," said the clerk with a mean-spirited twinkle in his eye, for even he knew that a mismatched pair could bring trouble for both animals. But as Maurice fastened the yolk chain from Rex to Steamboat, a lone ox who'd lost his mate to exhaustion the week

before and who'd earned his name through his sheer size, he lovingly ran his hand along the little horse's dappled neck and whispered words of encouragement.

As Maurice watched, forty massive logs were loaded behind the odd pair using a pulley system. The teamster was just about the start down the valley to the log landing near the river when the clerk came rushing out of the storehouse. "We're behind schedule since the other ox died," he said. "Pile on forty more logs." Maurice set his jaw as they piled on the unheard-of load. There wasn't even any ice to smooth the runners, but when the teamster gave his signal, Rex pulled with all his might and, before long, the team had the sleigh runners moving.

As the team headed downhill, the load began to creep up behind them. It seemed that there would be no way any team in the world could hold back the enormous weight that was nipping at their heels. But as Steamboat braced his front hoofs and horns, Rex strained all four legs until they were shaking, and slowly the load came to a stop on the flat landing. Maurice had always known that Rex would never let him down, but he had never been so proud of his little horse his whole life.

After two months working for the foreman, the clerk delivered Maurice's wages: \$12.00 for his and Rex's work, minus room and board. Maurice immediately went to the storehouse and requested to buy a scoring axe and a broad axe. "But those are \$4.00 each," said the clerk. "That's what you've earned all winter!" But Maurice was firm. He picked up his new axes by their ironwood handles and marched straight to the foreman.

“I know I can shave those logs square and leave more wood on ’em than anyone else here,” said Maurice so surely that the foreman had to give in. “I’ll let you try one,” said the wary foreman. “But in my experience, the best squarers have had some schooling behind them and know some geometry and such.” But Maurice’s confidence wasn’t swayed.

Instead of going to the straight and tidy log that the foreman pointed him to, Maurice went off to the side where a castoff log was lying, discarded for its wicked twist. Maurice eyed it up hard for a long second, then got to work marking the straight edges with his scoring axe, not even using chalk. Then he picked up his broad axe and, in record time, a perfectly squared timber was produced, with only half the waste that the other hewers would have left—even if they’d worked with the straightest of logs. The foreman clapped Maurice on the back. “That’ll pack snug in a ship to Europe. You’re a hewer now!”

Maurice got busy at the riverfront landing, squaring timbers and latching them together to build the 24-foot-by-32-foot log cribs that, come spring, would be floated over 300 miles down the river to market. He’d sometimes be caught looking out over the mighty Ottawa River as he worked, his eyes searching the valleys on the opposite shore for little creeks where beavers might be busy playing in their dams. Maurice had never been so settled in his life. He began to yearn for adventure. Rex took to pawing at the wet, melting snow. He felt the same way.

One day, Maurice was looking out over the hundred squared timber cribs he had built. Each crib was made of side-by-side timbers on the bottom level, with some squared beams set on top to act as runners for the

men to walk across. He had just been joined by the foreman when suddenly they heard a thunderous, earth-shaking noise: a massive wall of ice that had accumulated on the mountain cliff had melted free and crashed to the ground. Spring had arrived. “I’m coming with you on the river run, boss,” Maurice said. “I’m up for an adventure.”

After the river’s winter ice had melted, the hundred massive cribs were lashed together as a raft that acted as a sort of floating settlement with sails. One crib was designated for the cookery, and there were sleeping shanties for the men who’d be accompanying the raft on its journey. Before he set off, Maurice nuzzled Rex and said, “I’ll see you soon, boy.”

The rivermen sailed downstream quite peaceably for several days. Then the water began to quicken and the river narrowed from its wide mile to a mere hundred yards. “Unleash the cribs and man them!” the foreman yelled. By the time the huge floating raft was unhooked, they were taking on terrible speeds of 30 miles an hour. Using his makeshift rudder, Maurice positioned himself at the head of the pack and sped down the mouth of the churning rapids. A fork soon became evident, and Maurice knew that those rafts sucked to the right of the small rocky outcrop would be torn apart viciously, leaving the men aboard killed and the hard-earned logs sunk. So Maurice jumped onto the dividing rock and, without a moment to lament the passing of his unmanned crib down the perilous path, ripped down an enormous branch to use as a poker to sweep each of the following cribs down the safer passage.

After all other rafts had passed clear of the rapids with no wreckage, Maurice had no way

to join his gang but to swim for it. His great weight careened down the churning water at impossible speeds. He was sure he'd make it—that is, until he became caught in a whirlpooling eddy that would not relinquish its grip. No matter how hard he stroked, Maurice could make no headway. Just as his strength was about to finally wane, he heard a familiar whinny and looked up to see Rex, who'd followed the raft downstream along the shore. Rearing up on his hind legs, Rex gave a mighty buck to a thick cedar tree and its trunk uprooted, laying the log across the eddy and allowing Maurice to pull himself to shore. "I told you I'd see you soon, boy," Maurice said as he stroked the little horse's nose.

When Maurice walked with Rex through the forest towards the calm waters downstream, he came upon his comrades, who were all long-faced and staring at the untamed waters upstream. He came up from behind and put his hand on the foreman's shoulder. "Ah, my crib crashed, I see," he said, thinking that was the cause of the grim mood. The foreman turned around, his eyes widening. "Maurice is safe!" he hollered, and the men turned to stare before raising a whooping cheer.

"But look at those sticks jammed there in the narrows," said Maurice, speaking of the remnants of the raft he'd been manning. "I'll have to unjam them." And without a moment of pause, he grabbed up a long, hook-ended pike pole and sure-footedly danced onto the bobbing timbers, freeing each from its jammed position one by one, showing no fear of this most precarious job. "You have the grace of a waltzer," said the foreman when Maurice jumped ashore unscathed, "just like a true gentleman."

I think of Maurice every time I look out through my kitchen window and see the Ottawa River, that great and deep waterway that is over a mile across in stretches and framed by green and misty hills so pretty and untouched that I forget for a moment how I'm living in modern times. I think of Maurice's determination all those years ago, his fearlessness, his might—all the qualities he shared with the great lumberjacks and rivermen of his time.

Yes, there are some people who say that Mighty Maurice is nothing but a legend, but I know for certain that the stories are true. After all, I see Maurice's eyes looking at me every time I catch my reflection in the calm waters of the Ottawa River. He was, after all, my great great great grandfather, and I have descended from him and his wife, the daughter of a lumber camp foreman.

By E.J. Bond. This tale has waltzed through the author's mind and been spun onto the page for Deep River Lumber. 2011.