

Blind River Has Become The Centre For Log Birlers In Northern Ontario

By Evelyn M. Bell

Blind River – The civic minded citizens of Blind River who dreamed up the idea of adding a log birling competition to the feature events of the annual community day celebrations in the hope it would be entertaining and different have had their highest hopes realized.

It's way to becoming a National Sport.

Thousands are expected to jam Blind River's park for the log birling, and water events. Special bleacher seats have been built along the river bank to enable the visitors to enjoy the activities while seated. Contestants will come armed with pike poles, and caulked boots from mill ponds throughout Algoma, and points north to those who would lick the log for fun, and honour.

At one time all a log birler needed to enter active competition with his bush-mates was good strong legs, plus the same measure of natural timing, and balance required of a prize fighter. Today a prize seeking birler must also be conversant with a three sheet list of rules and regulations.

Through the years to now, log birling has ranked with "bear wrestling" and card games as a favored form of entertainment in the lonely northern Ontario bush camps.

Word of these rugged rollo relays spread out to more urban parts of the province and there rose up in the minds of many a picture of a barrel chested, hairy-armed river driver birling logs from bush camps to the mill pond. People removed from the scene looked upon birling as part of a loggers day of work.

Such was never the case. Birling has never been a way of work. It has been, rather a form of fancy-Dan play developed by lonely, lively men with time on their hands and no dust on their feet.

Naturally the river drivers who hopped from one rolling log to another in their attempt to break a shore-wedged pile-up, had an edge on the fallers and sawyers who normally kept their feet on dry land underbrush. However, the sure footed senangian known as log birling was never a job of work to the light-hearted fellows who kept the art alive.

In the early years loggers barked the buoyant birling logs and rounded them off by hand. Today roll-a-loggers perform on glass smooth, lathe turned cork-pine, which are painted and waxed, and engineered to twirl like a majorette's baton.

Generally speaking log birling is a recognized sport in the northern bushlands of Michigan, and Minnesota, certain sections of Washington and British Columbia, and in the timberlands of Ontario.

The town of Blind River is famous for its log birling history. Here every year since 1949, the Ontario Log Birling Championship crown has been offered to the logger with the fastest feet. And interested in the

sport has been nurtured as more and more people from all parts of the continent are caught in its “splashy” spell.

Like all other sports, birling has its own hall of fame. Local “greats” who have captured and held the imagination of fans during the Ontario Log Birling Championship tests normally held as a part of Blind River’s Community Day programs, are recorded in birling annals and in memory.

Perhaps the most famous among these was the fabulous “Bidou” Cyr who provided a wet reception for four years hand-running, and held his crown against all comers. A born showman with all the poise and personality needed to keep a crowd breathless the great “Bidou” could actually dance on a rolling log. On many occasions he demonstrated this special added art to the hoe-down strains of a barn-dance fiddle.

In 1949 “Bidou” at the age of 40 was hired to display his tricky talent in an amusement tent at the CNE where he put on 190 birling shows.

Others who have hit the log lime-light since 1949 are Sylvio Cyr, and Cleo Cyr, both related to the birling Bidou and retired in 1951 unbeaten. Cleo won the log birling Championship in 1952 and 1953. He was defeated in 1954 by Ronald Miskimin who held the Algoma Championship for the past three years. Last year “Gazou” Florent Rousselle was the runner-up for the Ontario Championship in Blind River.

The J.J. McFadden Lumber Company sent Ronald Miskimin and “Gazou” Rousselle to Toronto where they entered the Canadian National Log Birling Competition sponsored by the CNE. Gazou Rousselle defeated Ronald Miskimin and won the Canadian Log Birling Championship. Both Miskimin and Rousselle are expected to defend their titles against all comers on August the third.

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THE PRIZE AND GLORY – To the winner of Saturday’s log birling competition during the Community Day program goes the J.J. McFadden Memorial Trophy. It has long been the symbol of log-birling supremacy in Algoma.

Shown holding the trophy is John J. Fitzgerald. Last year it was won by Ronald Miskimin who is expected back to defend his title this year. Log birling events will be held on the river opposite the municipal park. (Photo by Bell)