

From: The Wisconsin River: An Odyssey Through Time and Space by Richard D. Durbin, p. 45.

Booms

Soon after lumbering began, the problem arose of how to sort the mixture of logs coming down the river that were destined for different mills located in the various villages. Wisconsin lumbermen solved it by developing boom systems patterned after those previously used in New England. The operation started above the towns at a "sorting works," where the local logs were diverted into a temporary holding area or boom, there to be sorted, according to the owner's marks on the log, graded, stored and then delivered to the mills as needed. The area required for these operations was obtained by either separating a portion of the river's channel with a "divide" (e.g., Merrill and Stevens Point) or setting off a calm-water area, like a bay or slough, adjacent to the river's main channel (e.g., Rhinelander). The systems employed two general types of booms. The stationary type, called a jam boom, was essentially a floating dam formed by shackling large logs end-to-end with chains. It was held in position by stone-filled cribs or pilings. Sheer or fin booms, on the other hand, had sections that could act like a gate, swinging when needed to allow in-and-out log movement. All booms were required to have a draw, or passageway, that could be easily opened to provide free passage for boats.

As each of the logging towns developed north of Stevens Point, the lumbermen below it became concerned that the new boomage would be detrimental to their operations. But with relatively few exceptions, they all were always able to work out an acceptable agreement. Nevertheless, most lumbermen had the general feeling that the boomages above them were slow in moving their logs downriver.

Until 1878, the legislature was responsible for granting charters for each boom company, authorizing it to construct booms, dams, piers and other aids to facilitate the orderly delivery of logs to the mills. These companies made their money by charging a specified rate per log for their services. In some cases they could also levy tolls. The first charter for a boom company on the river (and second in the state) was granted to the Little Bull Falls Improvement & Steam Navigation Company in 1846 for dam and lock construction. It proposed not only to improve the falls but to initiate steamer service from there to Wausau.

Walter McIndoe & Company organized the first large-scale booming company on the river at Wausau in 1854. Two years later another major step was taken when the Wisconsin River Boom Company was formed. Other charters were granted below Nekoosa in 1863, at Stevens Point in 1873 and Mosinee in 1881.

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