

From: Camera Man of the Dells (p. 36-43) an unpublished manuscript by Miriam Bennett. This material is copyrighted and used here with permission of the copyright holder.

For many years the Dells photographer had been thinking of making a series of stereo views of lumber rafts and their crews. Two pictures, listed in the catalogue of 1882, showing rafts going over the dam may have been made with one of the early trials for a fast shutter. However, they were made from shore at too great a distance to show any interesting detail. Lumber rafts and their rugged crew continued to interest Father as they floated down the Wisconsin past Kilbourn. Although there are many good photographs taken by other photographers in lumber camps, Father's set of forty stereos of The Story of a Raftsmen's Life on the Wisconsin picture series shows that part of the lumber industry.

When lumber was first cut on the Wisconsin river and its tributaries, this long waterway, stretching nearly the length of the state, furnished a good way of taking it to market on the lower Wisconsin and the Mississippi. Logs were floated down to Portage for the building of Fort Winnebago at the time of the Black Hawk war in 1832. Lieutenant Jefferson Davis was in charge of this lumbering operation while he was stationed at the Fox-Wisconsin portage a few miles downstream from the Dells. From the beginning of Kilbourn the weekly paper found it of interest to report the shipping of lumber through the Dells. The first spring the river rose five feet and rafts were running. When the water rose higher, perhaps twenty feet above the normal level, "Very few raftsmen dared venture through the Dells." It was estimated that one hundred million feet of lumber would pass through the town site that spring. During a rapid rise three "rafts got in together, struck each other and the rocks on either side and were dashed to pieces. The crews of two saved themselves by jumping on the rocks and the other escaped on the wreck." In 1856 "Dutch" Jake Weaver was downed in the Dells when his oar "caught in a whirl." The next spring, with the Wisconsin running wild, several rafts broke up in the Dells. Timing the river in flood, for half a mile at the Narrows, the current was said to run at fifteen mph. A raftsmen was drowned and Leroy Gates, working as a river pilot, had four of his eight rafts damaged at the dam. A few years later, in 1869, rafts were going over the dam without trouble, but one was "stove up in the Dells at Notch Rock." In May 1871, the river was so high it was unsafe for rafts. "A raft, running the Dells was lost when it struck Notch Rock and parted in two, leaving five men on one part and a woman and two children on the other. They all passed over the dam safely and were taken off near Hurlburt Creek." Two years later, "The work is finished on our river improvement (to the dam) and the water takes a different direction from the pier, that without doubt, will carry every raft down the river without damage to board or grub plank." Soon the paper was reporting that no one was drowned or in any way injured that season. "All fleets was passing the dam in splendid shape." November 15th, "A fleet of lumber was run over the dam this week; the latest for many years." The first rafts of the following season, piloted by Lewey Yanno, passed over the dam without trouble April 10th. In May, several rafts broke up on Lone Rock although twenty-six had gone over the dam with no serious accidents. By the end of the month the river level was too low and lumbermen were handspiking off the bars. This would be necessary when a raft was aground on one of the

many shifting sandbars. In the spring of 1875 the local paper reported "The romantic Wisconsin gets high, breaks dams and rolls fields of ice and millions of feet of log through the beautiful Dells." By 1887 the picture changed and it was said to be unprofitable to ship by raft. An editorial writer thought the railroads should do the carrying business and leave the navigable streams to be utilized for power for factories. A fleet of lumber was stranded at Pine Island near Portage all summer. Next summer, the editor again wrote that it was more expensive to ship by raft than by rail. Two fleets of fifty-two pieces had run the dam.

Typical Wisconsin river rafts were not made of logs but of sawn pine lumber pegged together in "cribs" sixteen feet square and fastened, one behind the other, in strings, or "rapids pieces" seven cribs long or less. The leading crib was connected to the next one in line by two long, limber saplings called springpoles in such a way as to lift the leading edge a little. At each end of the string a long, heavy sweep was placed. On deck a cargo of lath and shingles was carried together with dog-house like sleeping quarters for the crew and a shelter for the cook and his stove. A rope, called the 'sucker line' could be rigged down the center of the raft so that the crew could hold on and not be swept over board in rough water. Where the river was wide and there were no rapids or other difficult spots to navigate, rafts might drift down the river fastened together three strings wide by wooden strips called bridles. At the head of the Dells, near Louis' Bluff and the entrance to Witches Gulch, rafts would usually be separated into the narrower rapid pieces and each would run the Dells with a full crew aboard. The roughest spots were at the right angled turn at the Devil's Elbow in the Narrows and the Dam at Kilbourn, when there was one here, especially when the river was at flood stage. At such times, when the river at the Narrows was wildly turbulent, fleets of rafts would stay tied up at the head of the Dells until the water level subsided to a safe point. Sometimes, as we have seen, the dam at Kilbourn would be equally impassable, and so many rafts ties up between the Jaws and Kilbourn that it was possible to walk over them dry shod from town to High Rock. Below the dam rapids pieces were again joined together for the rest of the voyage. One of the "rafters hooks" of iron may still be seen firmly fixed to a cliff below the dam.

Raft crews, of about twenty men, were made up of some of the men who cut the timber in the northern pineries during the winter. Some of them came from nearby farms and were quite young and lively. The pilot of the fleet would be an older man, serious and responsible for the lumber in his charge. Captain John Bell, owner of the Dell Queen, was a part-time raft pilot. Leroy Gates, who carved his name as "Dells and River Pilot" in the rocks at the Narrows, also advertised in the newspaper that he "stood at the head (of the pilots) for coolness, intrepidity and courage." There is a story of his undertaking to pilot a raft through the Narrows in flood time in full formal attire, but his finery was not impressive when the raft broke up and he had to dash for the safety of the shore with his coat tails flying and his silk hat (if he had one) bobbing in the river.

Just a short distance upstream from the Devil's Elbow on the west bank is the dreaded Notch Rock. Now out of sight under water since the building of the power dam at Wisconsin Dells, it is a right angled notch in the stone at the water's edge. The steersman had to be very careful not to allow the front corner of the raft to strike in this notch, for, if

it did, the force of the current and the weight of the swiftly moving raft would cause the unwieldy craft to break up and the Narrows would be full of loose and tumbling lumber and fleeing raftsmen. Even with the greatest care, rafts would often go where they were not intended to, striking Notch Rock, going over the Kilbourn dam in the wrong place, crashing into Lone Rock or other cliffs. At the foot of the Narrows, on the west side of the river, stood the Dell House. This frame building was the first structure built on the Wisconsin above Portage. First used as an inn for travelers crossing the river by the Narrows bridge, it finally came to be a raftsmen's tavern. Near, in quiet water, rapids pieces could tie up while the crews walked, or as they said, "gigged back' to the head of the Dells for another section of raft. Before they started on the return hike the men might stop for refreshment at the Dell House, which became the scene, according to legend, of many a wild carouse. Bob Allen, who was the last owner of the building, is supposed to have said that no one was ever killed in the Dell House. Evidently, he did not care to vouch for the woods around it. Raft crew's visits to town were likely to be boisterous, though not to the point of murder. A section of Superior Street, known as 'bloody run', was supposed to have been the scene of their revels. Rather playfully, it is said, they might tie up the town marshal, and deposit him in a safe place, "so's he won't get hurt" during the festivities. Raft crews were not always such rough fellows. In April 1871 the Kilbourn paper printed a story of A Visit to Lunch Hall. The writer and some friends walked there. "Strolling home", he related, "spied a fleet of twelve rafts and determined to float down through the Dells if possible....Upon boarding we found the Captain (pilot) and his crew a genial and gentlemanly set of fellows who started from Wennerville on the Yellow River in charge of half a million feet of lumber, the first fleet through the Dells the present season. We enjoyed our trip through the narrow defile.... to attempt a description of the wonderful phenomenon to be seen along this river would be folly. We only refer our readers to an exact reprint of these phenomenon to be found at the gallery of H.H. Bennett."

With such interesting activity on the river passing through Kilbourn, it is no wonder that Father wanted to photograph the vivid scene. With his home-made fast shutter and the now reliable Cramer dry plates Father was at last able, in the autumn of 1886, to set out to capture in pictures the life of the raftsmen on the river. He went aboard the Arpin fleet at Kilbourn with his son Ashley as his helper and journeyed as far as Boscobel where his supply of plates ran out. The Arpin fleet on which Father made his viewing voyage belonged to the Grand Rapids family of that name, who were well known in the Wisconsin lumber business. A letter from Father to D.J. Arpin explained that he had just come home from an eight day trip with a fleet of lumber from the Arpin mills. The letter ended, "We had a glorio us time and made lots of pictures, how good they will be I cannot say as I have not developed the plates. Most all I have done was illustrative of rafting or the raftsmen's life, leaving the scenery along the river for another season." Later he wrote that about thirty good views resulted from this trip and that some would be sent to the Arpins "in return for favors to myself and son." Ashley is the Cooke in two scenes the cook, and can be seen in a few others. Father was never able to make another long viewing trip on a raft, but he evidently photographed the ten views which complete the present set of forty in the Dells near Kilbourn. In 1938, Mr. D.J. Arpin wrote to the studio giving the names of most of the crew members in the pictures and remarking that more

than one crew had been photographed. One view that was a sensation at the time was titled, "We are broke up. Take our line!" Here a rope, thrown by a raftsman, had been stopped in mid-air. Other photographers could explain the effect only by suggesting that the rope was frozen and somehow hung up in the air. Another unusual action picture was taken from the rear of a raft just as it plunged over the dam at Kilbourn with the steersman hanging to his oar and water boiling up among the planks of the raft.

When this series of life on lumber rafts was photographed, perhaps no one realized how short a time remained when they would be a feature of Wisconsin river traffic. Railroads came to ship most of the lumber, and there was less to cut as the seemingly inexhaustible forests vanished. In April 1890 there was an interesting account of some rafts passing the Kilbourn dam. At the time the river was so high that it looked unsafe to run the dam and the owners of the lumber tried to sell it locally. Having no success in this, Captain Bell and Jack Lynch undertook to pilot the rafts over the danger spot. People gathered at the dam where only a short strip of water offered anything like a safe passage. Otherwise, the river below the dam was a roaring maelstrom of whirlpools, billows and breakers. John and George Bennett, two of Father's brothers, waited below the dam in a skiff to try and fish out the daring pilots if they should be washed overboard. Excitement grew and the reporter wrote; "The raft, instead of going over the smooth chute near the mill, is diverted and goes over in the wildest part of the dam. Now it comes to the edge, shudders as if in mortal terror and Capt. Bell's face seems to get a shade paler. The crowd holds their breath..., the raft passes over the danger line, floats out into the eddy and the interest of the crowd is gone."

After this the paper reported no further rafting of lumber through the Dells until June 1903. Then, on the 25th, George Atchey and Henry McCausland came down the Wisconsin from Quincy in about nine hours with a lumber raft from the Hanson-Snider Lumber Company. According to the report, "It was a quick trip made by old time raftsmen." Hanson-Snider was a Kilbourn firm for many years.