From: The Wisconsin River: An Odyssey Through Time and Space by Richard D. Durbin, p. 35-38.

Rafting Lumber

Until the railroads came, the Wisconsin River provided the only feasible way to transport lumber to market. How much was moved by this method can only be guessed at; one authority conservatively placed it in excess of two and a quarter billion board feet. The first organized use of the river occurred in the fall of 1828 when soldiers from Ft. Winnebago floated tamarack logs from Pine Island downriver some seven miles to the portage. By 1832 though, rough lumber was coming down from Nekoosa and nine years later from as far north as Big Bull Falls (Wausau). Jenny (Merrill), the most northern point on the river that lumber was floated from, began its rafting in 1853. For a brief time finished lumber was also taken downriver but this proved impractical as it had to be cleaned and dried out at its destination. Although the villages along the river initially provided markets for lumber, its production so far outstripped their demand that Dubuque, Galena and most especially St. Louis rapidly became the major lumber markets and distribution centers. Henry Merrill of Fort Winnebago claimed to have been the first person to take a raft as far south as St. Louis - that was in 1839.

Oddly enough, when the first railroad shipments of finished lumber reached St. Louis, they were not well received. The dealers there thought that during rafting the water soaked the pitch out so the lumber would dry better. Accordingly the rail-shipped lumber had to be sold at a 30 percent loss.

At the mills, logs were cut into 1 1/8 inch rough lumber and then assembled into the basic rafting unit called a "crib." It usually measured sixteen feet square and contained about five thousand board feet. A crib had to be stoutly constructed so it could withstand the violent twisting and banging it would be subjected to on its run down the Wisconsin. Its bottom was constructed of three stout "grub" planks and three cross planks. Holes were bored in the planks and three-foot "grubstakes," made from saplings of oak or rock elm, were then driven through from the bottom. The grubstake's root crown was left on to act as a stopper so that the grub wouldn't slip through the hole. In 1872 grubs sold for seven to eight dollars a hundred at Wausau. Because of their widespread use, like shingles, they were commonly considered legal tender and used for barter.

Courses of rough boards were crisscrossed over this foundation to a depth of one to two feet, depending upon water conditions. Binding planks with holes corresponding to the grubstakes were then laid along the top, the whole unit compressed or "witched," and wedges driven into the spaces between the grubstakes and holes to hold the whole structure in place. Starting in the 1870s, some rafts began to be held together with chains or rope.

Usually seven cribs were coupled together in a row with another set of planks laid down each side to make a raft or "rapids piece," but on the smaller tributaries like the Plover individual cribs were floated down to the Wisconsin before they were joined

together. Oars, commonly up to sixty feet long with sixteen-foot blades, were positioned at each end of the raft for steerage. The head (bow) sweep was manned by the more experienced men called "steersman." The less-knowledgeable "tailsmen" at the tail (stern), however, ended up doing most of the work. Still, it was much safer to be there than at the head when the raft went over a rapids or dam slide.

Thirty-foot, eight-inch diameter hemlock "spring poles" were attached at the head to lift it up so the crib wouldn't flip after it went over a dam or spin around in an eddy and throw the men off. A life or "sucker" line was run down the middle of the raft and small kennel-like shelters were built on top for sleeping. One raft in the fleet, usually the pilot's, also had a cooking shanty, called a "wanigan," with a woodstove, some sort of large table and food storage. Here, the cook and his helpers turned out several simple but ample meals each day that the men ate at the table or which were brought to their rafts by skiff men called "lunch carriers." The term wanigan also referred to a flat-bottomed boat that carried the cook's paraphernalia, but it was used more by loggers than raftsmen.

Men who took the lumber rafts down to the Mississippi were often called "river hogs." The less experienced of them were termed "suckers." They came to have this appellation because so-called sucker fish migrated upriver to spawn in the spring at the same time the men came north to find work. Also, since they both left at the end of summer, "sucker" especially referred to transient rivermen from Illinois.

About ten to twenty rafts were run together as a "fleet" by a "pilot," who would hire several men to handle each raft. Going downriver, they would tie up, or "snub up," the fleet above each obstruction. They then ran each raft separately to an eddy below the obstruction with four- to ten-man crews, who returned upstream (called "gigging back") to repeat the operation until the entire fleet had been moved. Gigging back could be very time consuming, depending upon the water's depth and length of the obstruction: at Wausau this distance was usually between one to two-and-one-half miles, one-half to one mile at Little Bull Falls, one mile at the Stevens Point dam, three miles at Conant's Rapids, up to five and one-half miles at Grand Rapids, four to five miles by Whitney's Rapids, and four to five miles at the Dells. Often, the lumbermen provided wagons to take the crews back upstream, for the time it saved was sometimes critical for getting the rafts downriver while the water was still high.

During the height of the season as many as twenty different fleets might be using the same eddy; indeed, there are accounts that the rafts were sometimes strung out in one long, almost continuous procession from the head of the Dells to Lone Rock. One rafter once wrote that at a bend where, although he could see only one-half mile in either direction, he could count twenty two rafts. Newspaper reports of over a hundred rafts passing by each day were common.

The history of rafting is remembered in the colorful place names along the river that link the rivermen and their deeds to the present day This road map, inspired mostly by events (e.g., broken bones, smashup or drowning) or river features, extended from as far north as lumber rafting was done. From Biron down to Grand Rapids, for example, there was Piss Eddy and then a series of rocks called Spinning Wheel, Storey, Left Horn,

Handspike, Black, Right Horn, and Leach, followed by The Locker and Anchor Rock. Major eddies and crossings-places where the main channel crossed to the other side of the riverbed were so important that they also had names like Norwegian Eddy and St. Louis Crossing.

At Pointe Basse, the rafts would be joined two, or occasionally three, abreast using coupling yokes, the number depending upon the water conditions, to make an "Upper River Raft." These had to be separated just above the Dells so the individual rapids pieces could get through the Narrows and over the Kilbourn dam. Once past these obstructions, three rafts were coupled together to make a "Lower River" or "Wisconsin Raft." Often at this point the pilot would return upriver to bring down another fleet, while the rest of the crew continued on downriver to the Mississippi. By this process the rivermen could make as much as fifty to seventy miles a day if all went well. Remember though, the usual work day was sixteen hours. It started very early, for rafting on the river stopped at dusk.

When water levels were favorable, a fleet could go from Stevens Point to St. Louis in twenty to forty days. In the high-water year of 1873, a James McHugh made it in a record nineteen days. From Wausau to Pointe Basse could be done in four days, and from there to the Wisconsin's mouth usually took six to ten days more, although there were reports of the trip being done in five. Of this, passage through the Dells accounted for two to three days. This meant that in years when the season began in March, a man might be lucky enough to make three trips. In periods of low water though, several heavy rains might be needed to float the rafts to the Mississippi and an unlucky raftsman might make only one trip, if any, that season. One rafter reported that it took him eleven days to go from Plover to the Mississippi in the spring freshet but forty-two days to make the same trip later that year.

Steering a raft was difficult, but critical, for if a raft smashed up on rocks, a dam slide or railroad bridge pilings, or became beached in a blind channel, commonly called a "pocket" by the rivermen, or on a sandbar, it could be difficult to almost impossible to recover. In times of low water the pilot might take a skiff downriver and plan out a course for his fleet. Even so, rafts commonly became stranded at shallow spots or on rocks.

Raftsmen told the story of a fleet stuck on Flanner Flats below Kilbourn City (Wisconsin Dells) one June, whose pilot, Barnes, had his men plant potatoes because their supplies were running low. Soon after that the water rose long enough for them to get to Sauk City, where the rafts became grounded for a second time. Towards September supplies began to run low again so the crew went back to the Dells and harvested the potatoes they had planted. They finally got to St. Louis in late October. Although this story has been highly enhanced, its chronology is real; the year was 1840. Another tale from that year has a village council put forth a resolution to plow up the river and plant potatoes. The resolution failed to pass because someone remarked that the ground was too dry! Another of the real points these folk stories illustrate was how difficult supplies were to replenish. Most of the time the cook, if he couldn't supplement his supplies with local fare, made do with flour, salt pork, syrup, dried fruits, beans, sugar, tea and salt.

The work was exceedingly dangerous and not uncommonly, prayers were held before starting down an especially bad stretch. Indeed, a week of accident-free rafting on the river was considered real news by the newspapers. More common was the attitude of one editor, who after reporting "the usual amount of staving and sticking upon the rocks" at Grand Rapids, described six near-drownings in one day. The so-called "Jaws of Little Bull" at Mosinee and "Clint's" and Kilbourn dams claimed many a riverman over the years, too. One rafter reported that Trappe Rapids, which was considered minor, took fourteen lives one year. In 1873 a newspaper noted that forty men had died at Clint's big dam (Port Edwards) since its erection, twenty-seven of them just the year before. Another forty had perished at Big Bull Falls. Besides drownings, many men died of injuries suffered during the run down the river such as John Gaucher, who had his foot torn off at Little Bull and bled to death while en route to Stevens Point for treatment. What the attendant loss of life was during all of this period is anyone's guess for such figures were not kept. Still, there was never a shortage of men willing to try their hand at the job**.** As one said, "there was a fascination that held men in spite of the danger to life and limb to be encountered at every move."

Once the Mississippi was reached, the rafts would be joined together to form a "Mississippi Raft," sometimes as long as six hundred feet, and taken to St. Louis, usually running day and night. Beginning with the side-wheeler *Union* in 1863, this operation was done by steamboat tow, and rafts consisting of as much as seven million board feet were assembled. To give this figure some perspective, the lumber in such a raft would make about 375 average-sized houses. Once the more powerful stern-wheelers came into use and bowboats used for steerage, rafts as large as 300-by-1,800 feet were not uncommon.

After leaving their rafts on the Mississippi, the early rivermen would usually walk back. They followed the river to Lone Rock or Honey Creek where they commonly turned north on trails through Sauk County to the Dells so as to cut out the big bend in the river. From there, either by stage or on foot, they would take the Pinery Road through Pointe Basse to their destinations. Later, they were able to take a steamer to La Crosse, the railroad to New Lisbon and then stages to the river towns using what was known as a lumberman's railroad ticket.

The coming of railroads meant the end of rafting on the Wisconsin River for it was the most expensive, unpredictable and dangerous river in the state on which to transport lumber. The last rafts to St. Louis are reported to have been taken by John Farrish in 1888 from Biron for the Daly & Sampson Lumber Company. The last log drive to Brokaw was in 1915. Probably the last drive on the river itself occurred the next year when the John Week Lumber Company made a run from the upper Rib River to their mill at Stevens Point.

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