

From: The Wisconsin River: An Odyssey Through Time and Space by Richard D. Durbin, p. 215-216.

Rapids

In its primordial form, the Wisconsin River could boast more whitewater rapids than any other river in the region. Located north of Nekoosa, they occurred in pre-Cambrian rocks or, as above Merrill, glacial drift where the river, having eroded away the smaller and lighter overlaying materials, exposed the bedrock and boulders in its channel. The rapids were major obstacles to the passage of lumber rafts and boats, and they claimed many lives, especially during the rafting era. The total number of fatalities can only be guessed at for no records were kept, but certainly it was in the hundreds, if not more. In order of peril Little Bull Falls was undoubtedly the worst, followed by Grand Rapids, Big Bull Falls, Conant's Rapids, Whitney's Rapids and, as the old pilots used to say, "a great many other places." Some of the more hazardous rocks in the rapids were dynamited out, like Kelly Rock at Little Bull and Sugar Loaf at Grand Rapids.

Men, called "pirates," made a business of stationing themselves below these trouble spots and picking up loose lumber and shingles that came by after a raft broke up. (in truth the lumber was still the property of the mill owners for one year but this legal nicety was seldom observed.) At first the land around most rapids was merely a stopping place where goods had to be unloaded and portaged. At some, trails to other river systems like the Black, Fox and Wolf branched off. Starting in the 1840s though, villages began to grow up beside rapids because they provided excellent sites for saw and gristmills.

The original Indian names for the rapids were discarded when the lumbermen moved north and in many cases have been lost. The colloquial French-Canadian word *bulles*, meaning "rapids," was corrupted to "bull" by the lumbermen when they named the major rapids Little Bull, Big Bull, and Grandfather Bull in progression as their noise level increased, or at least that's the story now told. Most of the other rapids were named after the men who built the first sawmills on them.

All the major rapids on the Wisconsin River are now gone, either because a dam was built over them or because they were submerged when the water level rose after a dam was constructed downstream. They are located as follows:

Otter Rapids was at the site of the present dam. It was about three-quarters of a mile long, quite rocky and had a sixteen foot drop.

Rainbow Rapids is a very short, steep set of rapids situated two miles below Rainbow dam. Prior to damming it had a ten-foot drop.

Pelican Rapids was at Rhinelander. It descended twenty-two feet in a third of a mile and required portaging along the west bank unless the water was high.

Hat Rapids is submerged above Hat Rapids dam. It consisted of two sets - Black Hawk and White Horse - and usually required a twelve-rod portage.

Ten-mile Rapids was the name originally applied to a several mile section running along the northern border of Lincoln County. The channel has a sixteen-foot drop and large rocks in it. Whirlpool Rapids - the only remnant still left - is in the middle of this section just below Crescent Creek. It often requires an eight-rod portage. Somewhere below Whirlpool Rapids was a small subset of rapids called Rocky Toro by the rivermen; it's submerged under the backwaters of Kings dam.

Pine Creek or Kings Rapids was the name applied to a short rapids near Kings dam.

Skawanaw Riffles was probably located near Skawanaw Creek.

Little Pine Creek Rapids appears on early maps in Sections 34 and 35 below Little Pine Creek, about one and one-half miles above Grandmother Falls. This rapids also may have gone under the name Kennedy Rapids (sometimes called Kennedy Riffles), although this is unclear. Kennedy Rapids was a short, rocky stretch with an island in the middle.

Grandmother Falls was located at Grandmother Dam. It was a short set of rapids with a ten-foot fall over a quarter mile.

Grandfather Bull Falls, sometimes called Rock Falls, was the most spectacular rapids on the river. It descended ninety four feet over one and one-half miles. Before dams were built on it, the river channel at the top was divided into three chutes by ridges of rocks that rose ten to fifteen feet; farther down was a succession of two- to five-foot drops. The rapids contained immense masses of rock and had a very swift current. It required a portage of about 560 rods.

Posey Rapids is located about three miles above the Wisconsin's confluence with the New Wood River. An easy Class I descent, the rapids is more of a riffle in low water. It was named for Julius Posey, an early fur trader in the area.

Bill Cross Rapids, a Class I rapids with a fall of nine feet, is located about a mile above the Wisconsin's confluence with the New Wood River. It also is quite rocky in low water. According to some sources, it was called New Wood Rapids in early times. Cross, like Posey, was an early trader.

Jenny Bull Falls was originally called Beaulieu or Bollier Rapids (*Mush-ko-da-yaw* in Ojibwa). It was situated at the Merrill dam. Dropping thirty feet over one-half mile, it was usually portaged.

Maine's Rapids is mentioned by some sources. Its exact location is unknown.

Trappe Rapids or **One-sided Rapids** (*Nah-ba-na-sa-se-je-wun* in Ojibwa), an easy class-I run, is located just before the Wisconsin's junction with the Trappe River.

Big Bull Falls (*Pah-je-tak-a-ke-ning-a-ning* in Ojibwa, meaning "water that falls over rocks") was located at the Hwy. 52 "Falls bridge" in Wausau. Formed by a granite ledge running across the river, the rapids dropped nineteen and one-half feet in a third of a mile; it was very rough and rocky with water velocities of ten to twenty miles per hour. There was a 320 rod portage along the river's right bank.

Little Bull Falls, rarely called **Spruce Falls** (*Oh-ka-kan-dah-go-kag* in Ojibwa), at Mosinee was the most dangerous rapids on the river. Over one-half mile long, much of it was in a thirty-foot-wide gorge. Over this distance it fell twenty-one feet, and for about 100 yards the pitch was greater than 45 degrees. It contained a violent whirlpool towards the bottom. A 240-rod portage ran along the west side.

Shaurette's Rapids (sometimes called **Chaurette's** or **Shaw's Rapids**) started below the Clark St. bridge in Stevens Point and ended below the Soo Line bridge. It was named for Francis Shaurette, an early trader who lived opposite Bukolt Park.

Conant's Rapids (often combined with the next rapids and called **Conant-Bloomer**) was named for Gilbert Conant, who built the first mill near it. Earlier, it was probably called Red Cedar Rapids. It is generally considered that this rapids extended from the bottom of Shaurette's Rapids to just below the Conant-Campbell, or Lower Stevens Point, dam, a distance of about three miles. Although not considered the most dangerous, it was among the most difficult to navigate. It had a forty-two-foot drop. Portaging around it was a 1,280-rod haul.

Bean Pot Eddy's exact location is unknown but it probably was just above Bloomer's Rapids. Some sources, however, place it between Little Bull and Knowleton at Bean's Eddy, while others say it was below Jenny Bull or Biron's Rapids. It's quite likely that the name was used at several locations.

Sometimes called **Hog Hole Bean Pot**, a folk tale says some hogs drowned here. The water at the eddy resembled beans boiling in a kettle. Because such foaming, aerated water has reduced buoyancy, rafts would sink down and bump along the rocky bottom for several hundred feet. In high water there was a dangerous souse hole associated with the eddy (souse holes were commonly called "hog holes").

Bloomer's Rapids was situated just below the mouth of the Plover River. It was named for Robert Bloomer, a pioneer lumberman in the area.

Brawley's Rapids was a minor set of rapids located just below Mill Creek. It was named for an early lumberman who ran a sawmill on the creek. The rapids was flooded out by the Biron Flowage.

Crooked Rift or **Crooked Drive** was a shallow riffle situated about four miles above Biron. It dropped about three and one-half feet. It also was flooded out by the Biron Flowage.

Biron's Rapids was located just below the site of the present dam. Slides were put in to help the rafts pass the rocks. It was originally called Draper's Rapids after Joshua Draper, who piloted the first lumber rafts from Biron's mill.

Grand Rapids was at Wisconsin Rapids. Its Ojibwa name, *Ah-dah-wa-gam*, means "two-sided rapids." It was the first in an almost unbroken, ten-mile-long series of rapids with a sixty-foot drop that extended to Pointe Basse. Grand Rapids itself, a mile long, ended above the Grand Ave. bridge; it had a twenty-seven-foot drop. A section by the old railroad bridge as sometimes called Lyon's Rapids, in reference to Lyons' sawmill situated nearby. Downstream by Witter's Island was another set of bad rapids. There was a bad stretch at Hurleytown, too. Some sources speak of White Bull Falls and Barker Rapids, which were purported to be located by Port Edwards, but no details are known about them.

Grignon's Rapids was situated just below the Port Edwards dam.

Moccasin Rapids was a set of small rapids by the outlet of Moccasin Creek.

Whitney's Rapids, rarely called Sill or Lower Rapids, was a set of five rapids having a twenty-three-foot fall. They started below the mouth of Moccasin Creek (Nekoosa Junction) and ended by the Hwy 73 bridge. It was here on the left bank that Daniel Whitney built the first commercial sawmill on the river. The Ojibwa name for the rapids, *Bun-gah je-wim*, appropriately, means "end of the rapids."

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