

**From: The Wisconsin River: An Odyssey Through Time and Space by Richard D. Durbin, p. 57.**

## **Rivermen**

Old-time rivermen who "ran the rafts" were a hardy lot and had a reputation for carousing and fighting. They believed in the trinity of entertainment - Booze, Bawds and Battle. Many were aptly recalled as, "picturesque and heroic figures in truth, hard-living, hard-drinking, hard-fighting, blasphemous pioneers." They had to be. Living and working conditions were brutal by today's standards - long strenuous hours, always dangerous, much of the time in freezing water, often waist to shoulder deep. The story is told about Jack Anderson, a log-driving foreman, who, when he saw his men hesitate one cold morning, took a running jump into the river, breaking through a half-inch of ice and yelling, "Come on boys, the water's fine."

Henry Sales, a well-known rafter from Jenny (Merrill), claimed to have made forty-six trips downriver and Matt Slutts, a Stevens Point raftsman, never missed a trip between 1845 and 1873. Whether these are records or not is unknown, but they do speak eloquently of a hard and lucky life on the rafts. In any event, they were the exception, for as one rafter observed, "[raftsmen] are usually satisfied with their maiden trip."

A bystander at Little Bull Falls (Mosinee) writing about what it was like to run a rapids said, "I have seen a raft of ten men on, five to each oar, every man of them all out of sight under the water at the same time, not a particle of the raft or men could be seen."

In the days when rafting was just beginning, a pilot was paid three to five dollars a day for his efforts and a raftsman one to three dollars. After 1864 the owners started to pay on a per-trip basis to the river's mouth or St. Louis. Pay then ranged between \$75 and \$125 for the raftsmen and twice that amount for the pilot.

The first pilots through each rapids were well known personalities then: Henry Sales at Jenny, Hiram Stow at Big Bull Falls (Wausau), William Cuer at Little Bull Falls, Draper at Grand Rapids (Wisconsin Rapids) and Francis Shaurette at Conant's and Whitney's Rapids. Of all the tradesmen listed in the 1856 census of Stevens Point, river pilots and carpenters were at the top in number. Even as late as 1886, when the railroads had almost completely supplanted rafting, 362 river pilots were still listed as working on the Wisconsin River. At all the dangerous rapids there was at least one outstanding resident pilot who specialized in taking rafts through there. They were commonly referred to as "star" or "standing" pilots - a sort of nabob in their line, as one newspaperman put it. One old-time pilot wrote, "few, if any of them ever became rich, as they were men of noble, generous impulses, which are the kind never to know or accumulate much of the world's goods."

Every village along the river had its "Hell's half mile" or equivalent district where establishments for drinking, gambling and whoring and soggy, cheap hotels and eating places all huddled together. It was not uncommon for hundreds of rivermen to come into a town at night. As one would expect, drunkenness, fighting, stealing, muggings and even

occasionally killings were commonplace. When asked about what he did besides drinking, one old-time riverman replied, "Sometimes we had a dance, and for amusements we had a good many fights."

Whiskey Jack was the rivermen's equivalent of Paul Bunyan. One story about him, patterned after the usual practice of buying a new suit at the end of a run, says he bought a secondhand suit at St. Louis and started back by steamer, but he drank and gambled away all his earnings and so was forced to get off at Prairie du Chien. He started walking back. But near Port Andrew it started raining and Whiskey's suit began to shrink. At Portage the pants were almost up to his knees and the jacket to the elbows. It kept raining as Whiskey continued along, so that by Stevens Point he couldn't wear the jacket anymore and the pants had shrunk into shorts. When he finally got to Big Bull Falls, he was completely naked so the sheriff threw him in jail.

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