

# Grand Rapids

Like a woman, or any awesome natural force, our Wisconsin in a solstice season radiates beauty and comfort. Yet in the period of equinox, the river can knock a guy around pretty good.

That whimsy has provoked governmental attention. In order to prove the Wisconsin a navigable stream, the Federal Power Commission held a hearing in 1930. Power companies with dams on the river brought witnesses, long familiar with the wiles of the Wisconsin, to maintain she could not now nor ever be civilized. Included was testimony by Theodore W. Brazeau (1873-1965), the noted attorney. "I was born in Wisconsin Rapids, which was then Grand Rapids," said Brazeau, "a place I think then of about 800 inhabitants, with three or four saw mills; and the principal industry was lumbering."

Brazeau said he learned at an early age to swim in the river and spent all his boyhood along her banks, riding on rafts over the rapids when the jacks would let him stay on, walking on the log jams, watching men drive logs over the rapids, watching them raft and going on the rafts when they laid up, to get pieces of prune or dried apple pie, swimming off the rafts, riding logs, and entering 4th of July log-rolling contests. "I fished all along the river when I was old enough to carry a fishline in my pocket, and turned over the stones to get thunder bugs, and fished for bass, suckers in season. I went down the river in a

boat as far as Kilbourn with some boys, and camped on the banks. I went up the river above Biron and fished and camped."

Above Biron, said Brazeau, there were shallow rapids called Crooked Drive, which were bad enough but not as bad as those below. At Biron was a sawmill and a dam with slides to let the rafts through and rocky rapids below it. "Shortly below Biron you came to what is known as the eddy. Between there and Big Island, rafts laid up after going through the Biron dam to repair the pieces. There was always some grub or something that got loose, or something broke, and then they would gig back. They had what they called gigging cars. The old lumber jacks kind of liked the little boys and let us ride in the gigs into Biron. Gigs generally had three seats, and the men sat in those seats and went up to take the next piece down."

Below Biron awaited the "worst piece of rapids that I knew anything about," said Brazeau, referring of course to the great, granite, "grand rapids."

"The stream was tortuous and the rocks were rugged; impossible to navigate, or even go over with a raft without artificial help so they built little wing dams. There was a couple of brush dams that threw the water into a narrow channel, and there was another place where they had a sort of crib dam."

Brazeau said the rafts were taken through the channels at "German Rock" at high water. "In low water it was impossible and they took them over then with the wing dams and the chutes. These chutes were arranged with logs laid side by side, extending down a couple of hundred feet. On the end of those logs were fingers. Those fingers were like the fingers of a hand and they were loose, so that they could float up and down with the water."

After lumber rafts got below the main rapids, said Brazeau, they generally pulled in at the bridge here and laid up. Sometimes, while tied up, the water would "get away" from them and they would have to wait weeks "for water to get below them."

"Then we would swim off of those rafts, eat off the cook shanty, and have a good time," he said.

Just below the bridge was Neeves Island and a series of bad rapids. "The rocks were not as high, but when you didn't have a good stage of water you couldn't make it over there at all because the rocks were almost continuous.

Brazeau said there was a bad stretch at Hurleytown, on the south side, and a dam of some kind. At Port Edwards,

there was also a dam. "You went through there on a slide with fingers," he said. "One time when the slide got out of repair some way, they blew a hole in the dam, and turned the channel to go through there."

At Nekoosa was Whitney Rapids. Below Nekoosa, what was known as the Bayous. There, "they struck sand bars all through and in ordinary or low water you could not get a row boat through there without getting out and pulling it off or taking your oar out and pushing off the sand bars."

"When we got down to Kilbourn then we had a Dells to run," said Brazeau, "which is a narrow tortuous course, and many great fleets broke up on it, many men drowned and a great many men drowned at Wisconsin Rapids, in log driving and rafting."

To conclude his statement to the power commission, Brazeau said, "There has been no carrying of goods up and down the Wisconsin River. The only kind of traffic I ever saw, and that was one way, was lumber, logs and rafts. That was difficult, hazardous, expensive, great loss of the product, both of logs and lumber. As soon as they could find another way of carrying it, they quit."

The smallest component of a Wisconsin River lumber raft was a "crib" of planks pinned together with "grub stakes"—stout pegs fashioned from small trees. Planks were laid across the crib, which was then filled with 16 alternating courses

of lumber.

Six or seven cribs, each containing about 4,000 board feet of lumber, would then be fastened in tandem to form a "rapids piece." Two or three such pieces together comprised a raft.

# The Centralia Dam

"Making the first trip over the new dam at Centralia," reminisced Gustave Giese years later, "the crew was not feeling any too susceptible to dry jokes."

The dam had been built the previous season (1887) after the lumber rafts had gone down. It was much higher than the dangerous Clinton dam at Port Edwards and, said Giese, "there was no talk whatever among the men for no one had any idea of what we were up against."

With Giese in 1888, the Wisconsin's last rafting season, on the trial trip over the Centralia dam were Jack Claire, Joe Whitney, Frank Brown, Ed Wheelan, Hans Halverson, Bill Madline, dirty Jack Mullen, George Bennett of Baraboo and Charles Stainbrook. The first four were old river captains, said Giese, along to satisfy their curiosity. The second four were new men who had never been down the river before. Two of them quit for good after one trip. The other two quit after the second trip, both near-drowning cases.

Dams were provided with a "slide," over which went the raft or "rapids piece." When the first section crested the recessed slide, it kept going down until it hit bottom. All or partially submerged in the icy water, the men hung on for dear life to a "sucker line." For many neophytes, one trip sufficed. More-dedicated river rats "gigged back" upstream to ride another rapids piece down.

The year 1888 was not a good one for rafting. An ice jam in April not only took out the Grand Rapids-Centralia bridge, but also busted up John Farrish's lumber rafts waiting at the Biron saw mill. Twenty-four rapids pieces broke loose and scattered for 20 miles downstream.

Other obstacles were man-made. An April 28, 1888, Centralia Enterprise and Tribune described the Centralia Pulp & Water Power Co. dam, built the previous year. Two and a

half million feet of W.H. Cochran's lumber waited above it in rafts. A few days earlier, three trial rapids pieces had been successfully sent over.

"The water is high and strong," wrote the Enterprise, "and while the experiment shows that the slide has been properly constructed, it requires the cool judgment and knowledge of a thorough riverman to steer a heavy raft in safety over the raging waters of the old Wisconsin, where they rush through a narrow passage at the rate of forty miles an hour."

"Another fleet of lumber rafted last fall, the property of Mr. J. Farrish," continued the Enterprise, "will also have to be run over the South Centralia Dam. We hope that it will meet with as good success as that of Mr. Cochran."

The rival Wood County Reporter of Grand Rapids, across the river from the Enterprise, offered a more jaded view. "We learned from rivermen in Centralia and Grand Rapids who have run the Wisconsin river for years that this slide is the most dangerous as it now stands of any on the river . . . that they run a piece of John Farrish's lumber the past week and they stove the front crib and next to the last one all to pieces . . . the lumber just buries itself under water at the foot of the slide, and men actually stand in danger of their lives."

The Reporter accused the Enterprise editor of a special interest in the Centralia dam and continued its attack on May 24. "Every piece of lumber run over the Pulp mill slide at Hurleyville, belonging to Mr. John Farrish, has been more or less broken up. The rivermen have become disgusted and insist that they are entitled to extra pay for rafting the same. "While running the slide Monday four men were thrown into the water. The rivermen stand in fear of danger running every piece of lumber."

Two days later, the Enterprise said Cochran's rafts had been run over the South Centralia dam without much damage. "An immense volume of water passing over the slide through a comparatively narrow channel, caused, however, the forward cribs to dive below the dam and the front oars to break."

A portion of Farrish's lumber, having been assembled in rafts the previous summer, was also run over, "and it appears that all the hind cribs were badly broken."

"Mr. Farrish has yet a number of rafts above the dam and another fleet in waiting at Biron's mill," said the Enterprise. "It is also stated that J. Edwards and Co.'s little dam is, on account of a part of the large dam below being taken out, a bad place to get over. It would seem as though lumbermen and mill men had more than their share of trouble this spring."

That "trouble" was responded to dramatically and controversially.

"On Thursday evening last," said the Enterprise, "a hole about fifteen feet wide was blown out with dynamite in Messrs. J. Edwards & Co.'s little dam, to open a passage for Mr. John Farrish's lumber, in obedience to the latter's orders and in disregard of Mr. Edwards' protest."

"The use of dynamite to force solutions and remove obstructions," opined the Enterprise, "will be considered by many as an unwholesome precedent, when more conciliatory means are within reach."

With more dams obstructing the passage of wood, it was probably fortunate that the raw material had been largely exhausted. "Even if we had the timber we would not put it on the river," said Giese to the 1930 Federal Power Commission hearings. "They have the railroads, and they will never use the river again for rafting."

"The pine that we have now, that will be used by the paper mills. By the time we get any more timber, by that time we will have airplanes that can carry several thousand feet, so the river will never be used again for that."