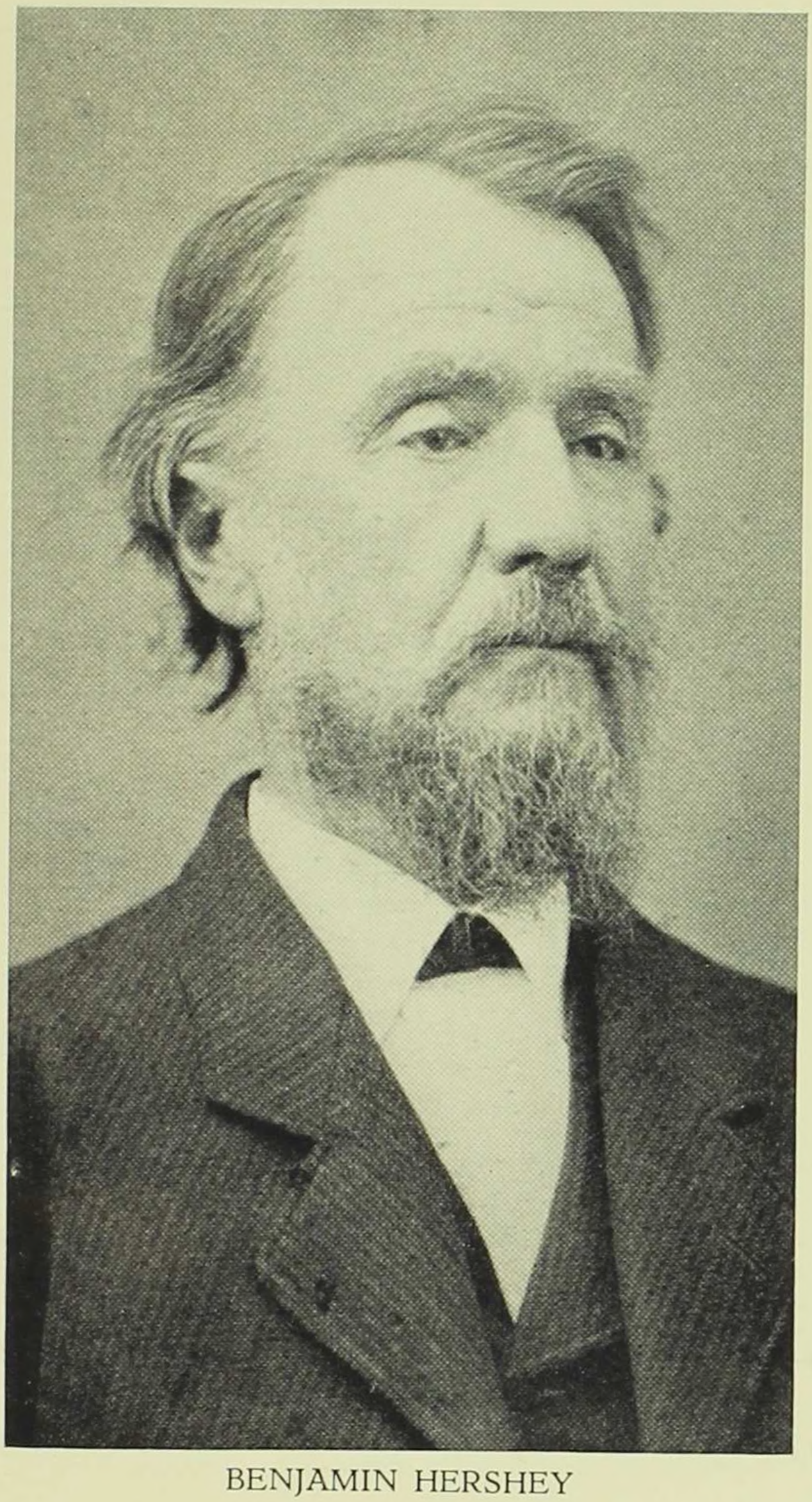
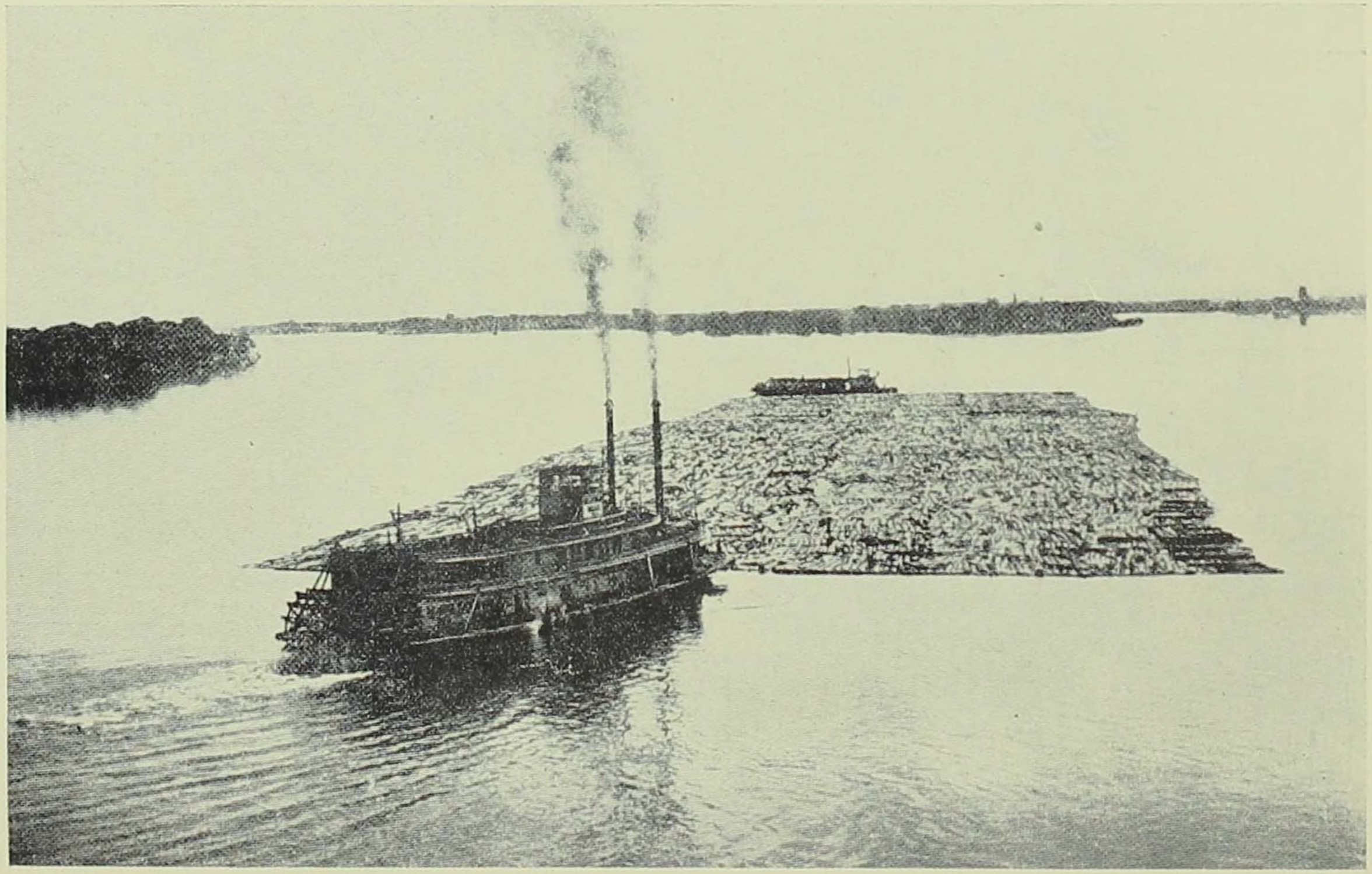


BENJAMIN HERSHEY



LOG RAFT 1898

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Ben Hershey - Lumber Baron

To the early settlers of Iowa lumber was a necessity. A pioneer could protect his family from the rain, cold, and blizzards by building a log cabin, but logs were not always available and lumber was more convenient. A farmer often drove as much as fifty miles with a load of wheat drawn by slow-moving oxen to some settlement where a sawmill had been set up. Having arrived, after several days on the way, he sold his wheat, usually for a small price, and bought some of the resin-scented boards. Then he returned home over the long, weary miles, rejoicing that he had material for his home or at least for some of the furnishings of that home.

But settlers meant towns, and towns meant stores and offices, schools and churches, houses and hotels. After a few years the pioneer was ready to replace his log cabin or his one or two-room frame house with a more commodious dwelling and lumber was the material most often se-

lected. The decade of the fifties was an age of building. The panic of 1857 and the Civil War interfered somewhat with this building program but construction work went on. Pine lumber was in demand.

Iowa, unfortunately, lacked the soft pine logs which made the best building material. The vast pineries of Wisconsin and Minnesota far to the north gave promise of an unlimited supply, but they were five hundred miles away and whether the logs were to be transported to Iowa sawmills or sawed on the ground and the lumber brought to the Iowa markets, the great problem was transportation. Hauling the great logs over the trackless miles was impossible; hauling the lumber was almost as difficult.

There was one means of transportation which was free to all and not too difficult. From the Falls of St. Anthony in Minnesota to New Orleans in far south Louisiana the current of the majestic Mississippi, more powerful than myriads of locomotives, was pulling southward for a thousand miles, pulling night and day, year in and year out, except when the river froze over or the water was very low. Along the way, tributaries added their currents. Men soon learned how to utilize the power of the rivers. Logs or sawed lumber were fastened into rafts and launched on the Missis-

sippi or its tributaries, which carried them to market. The cutting of the logs, making them into rafts or sawing them into lumber, and guiding the logs to the sawmills far to the south or the lumber to market towns became a gigantic enterprise; from this industry there emerged some of the fortunes of the Mississippi Valley and a group of entrepreneurs commonly called "lumber barons".

Some of these men who exploited the pineries of the north found that the great bend of the Mississippi River at Muscatine made an ideal landing place for the logs or lumber. The harbor was excellent and the location was convenient for the consumer in southeastern Iowa. Among the men who centered their lumber business at this place were the Hersheys, the Weyerhausers, and the Mussers.

The founder of the Hershey lumber business was Benjamin Hershey who was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, on April 10, 1813. His parents were farmers of the Mennonite faith and he was trained to habits of frugality and industry. In 1836 Ben Hershey married Elizabeth Whitmore. Four daughters were born to the couple during the years in Pennsylvania.

After several years as a farmer and tobacco merchant, Benjamin Hershey decided to move west and in 1852 he made a visit to Muscatine.

Impressed by the opportunities in the Iowa town, he moved his family to Iowa the following year, rented a sawmill, and was embarked on one of the story-book careers. Two years later he bought the sawmill.

His keen mind soon recognized the possibilities of the river as a transportation agent and in a short time one crew of workmen were felling the trees on the upper reaches of the Mississippi, dumping the logs into the water, and making them up into rafts; other workers had charge of floating the logs down the river to the mill; and a third group sawed them into lumber and placed it in piles. The log rafts had to be guided past islands and around curves and sand bars. With a large raft, a steamboat was absolutely necessary to do the steering.

After the trip down the river, the crews usually tied their rafts near an island ten or fifteen miles upstream from the sawmills, then they would let a portion of the logs loose at a time. These drifted downstream and were caught and tied up in the harbor at the mill. From this point they were handled mostly by machinery. They could be dragged out of the water and lifted in the mill to the screeching saws as easily as if they were so many matches. The bigger the log the better it suited the sawyers.

Hershey soon bought a steamboat and named it the *Ben Hershey*. She was 130 feet in length, with a 28-foot beam, and was said to be the largest and best raft boat on the Mississippi River. This was the first steamboat on the Mississippi River to be equipped with electric lights, a tremendous advantage in rafting at night.

A big raft sometimes contained as much as two million feet of lumber and covered several acres in area. Irving B. Richman, historian, gleaned various items about the rafting industry:

"A monster raft containing 2,000,000 feet of lumber and loaded with 500,000 shingles, 700,000 lath and 100,000 pickets, passed down in tow of the rafter J. W. Van Sant. This was in May, 1872. . . . May 19, 1873, a lumber raft of 1,700,000 feet arrived yesterday, propelled by the steamer James Means. It came from Reed's Landing, about 355 miles in four and a half days. . . . On May 22, 1875, a raft containing 2,300,000 feet of lumber, with the usual top loading, was tied up near Chambers' mill [at the mouth of Mad Creek] and attracted much attention from its immense size, its area being three and a half acres."

In the Muscatine *Journal* of June 5, 1879, there appeared this item: "That Big Raft—There was quite a crowd along the levee last evening to see the Ben Hershey land the largest raft ever brought

down the river. The raft by actual measurement was 310 feet wide and 535 feet long, containing twenty strings."

With the coming of the railroads, the distribution of lumber was greatly accelerated. Carpenters liked to work with pine. It was strong and durable and at the same time it took the nails readily and sawed much more easily than hardwood and the native lumber. Hershey's select soft pine lumber was the delight of every woodworker and builder. Vast quantities were soon being shipped out by rail to the cities and towns of the Middle West. It was the age of building and development and lumber was the item most in demand. Ben Hershey was ready for the opportunity. He had lumber in any amount from a farmer's "jag" to a trainload.

Benjamin Hershey made millions from his sawmills, but at heart he was a stockman and farmer. He liked cattle and horses. He owned an 800-acre farm, located some two miles south of Muscatine and about a mile from the mill. This he stocked with thoroughbred Hereford cattle. To secure these cattle he made trips to England. On one occasion on his return from England, his fellow townsmen had the brass band out at the railroad depot to welcome him home.

The Hershey farm was a place to spend money.

The sleek, fat animals were curried and groomed. The cows' hoofs were sandpapered and manicured. A large dairy barn was started in 1875, topped by a cupola adorned by the gilded figure of a cow. A creamery occupied an adjoining wing, cooled by means of a 500-foot tunnel running back under the Mississippi River bluff. Hershey also raised fine horses, having at one time as many as five hundred animals, either on his Muscatine farm or on his Nebraska ranches which had a combined area of some 13,000 acres.

The Congregational Church at Muscatine usually received an annual donation of $100 from Mr. Hershey, a worth-while gift in those days, and Mira Hershey, a daughter, taught a Sunday School class for boys. Following one trip to England Mr. Hershey invited the minister and the church board members down to his farm to see the new thoroughbreds from England and received this short and decisive reply, "We are not interested in your livestock." That fall, when the church was raising the money for the annual expenses, the soliciting committee, as usual, called on Mr. Hershey and received this laconic reply, "You are not interested in my livestock and I am not interested in your livestock."

Hershey, a Republican in politics, was seldom active in political affairs, but he served one year

on the Muscatine council and was mayor of the city in 1865 and 1866.

One of the prominent characters at the Hershey farm at Muscatine was an Irishman. We will call him Dan Finnigan, although that was not his real name. Dan was supposed to give a flock of Emden geese special attention. Among other delicacies they were fed shelled corn soaked in whisky. It was thought that this would make the roast goose a greater delicacy. One day, one of the farm helpers discovered that the Emden geese were getting shelled corn soaked in water and Dan was drinking the whisky.

It so happened that two eccentric brothers owned stock in the Hershey Lumber Company. They were dissatisfied because, they said, Ben Hershey ran everything; but the company was such a financial success that they made most of their objections in a hushed voice and behind Hershey's back. Few people paid much attention to them, but they continued to complain about Ben Hershey and the company, the "wild spending of money", and the vast spreading out of the logging operations. Finally, they came to a stockholders' meeting and voted against every proposal. They became bolder and finally came to the office and put their wet-blanket questions to the office force, hoping to stir up opposition to the head of the firm.

Mr. Hershey decided to sidetrack these trouble-makers. The next time they appeared at the office, Mr. Hershey received them personally. "What do you want for your stock, gentlemen?", asked Mr. Hershey. "Four thousand dollars", replied one of the brothers. Hershey looked at his secretary, Peter Francis, and inquired, "Do we have $4,000.00 on hand this morning?" "Certainly we do", was the secretary's reassuring answer. "Write the gentlemen a check and take an assignment of their stock", Mr. Hershey ordered. The transfer was made and the eccentrics rushed to the bank, where, much to their surprise, they received cash in exchange for their check. During the next few days their curbstone advisers ridiculed their financial blunder.

During the following years the stock of the Hershey Lumber Company advanced rapidly in value, eventually becoming a real Eldorado, for it paid far beyond the wildest dreams of the investors, a little better than 3,000 per cent on the original investment. Luck was with Ben Hershey. He could produce vast amounts of lumber at very low prices. The average cost of freight, by raft on the Mississippi River, from the pineries to the mill at Muscatine, was only $1.40 per thousand. Now it costs at least ten times that much, and more in some cases, to transport lumber by rail

from the pine-producing States on the Pacific Coast to the Middle West.

Many stories have been recorded of this Iowa "lumber baron". On one occasion, an employee came past the lumber yard in the evening. He saw what he thought was a tramp wandering around among the towering piles of sawed lumber. The fellow wore a slouch hat and was smoking a clay pipe. Smoking around the highly inflammable pine lumber was, of course, strictly forbidden, for most of the driveways through the lumber piles were covered with dry sawdust and shavings. One spark might easily start a roaring inferno. The employee reported to the night watchman that "a tramp is roaming around in the lumber yard smoking a pipe." The watchman hurriedly investigated and found that the suspected tramp was Ben Hershey, president of the company.

The story of Ben Hershey would be incomplete without mention of his daughter, Mira. She, too, had the gift of the "Midas Touch". She later went to Los Angeles, California, and entered the real estate game. She was a builder and laid out new additions. Before long, her efforts began to bear fruit. She built hospitals, office buildings, hotels, and apartment houses. She gave away one hospital in memory of her father, made a gift of $1,800,000 to the Good Samaritan Hos-

pital of Los Angeles, and was lavish in her gifts to orphan asylums. In her will she gave $200,000 to charitable institutions and made a bequest of $400,000 to the University of California.

The end of the great Hershey lumber industry came suddenly and without warning. Mr. Hershey was instantly killed in an accident in Chicago. A tremendous crowd attended his funeral in a Muscatine church. Mr. Hershey's costly gold watch was buried with him. One woman, who was present as a little girl, remembers that as she and her mother were leaving the church in hushed silence, she could hear the watch ticking as she passed the casket.

JESSE J. FISHBURN