

THE PALIMPSEST

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Rafting on the Mississippi

Lured westward by the same adventurous spirit that had enticed the earlier *coureurs des bois* and *voyageurs* into the region that had been the outpost of the great French empire of America, the hardy, steel-sinewed, agile, pioneer woodsmen of a more thrifty type hewed their way into the forests of Wisconsin and Minnesota during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Before many pioneers had ventured far beyond the high bluffs bordering the Mississippi, before the wagon trains of the Mormons had left the imprint of their wheels upon the grass-grown prairies as they wended westward, while bee hunters and fur traders in frail canoes were yet pushing up the smaller streams, and while the Indian still claimed Iowa as his rightful home, the first log rafts—harbingers of a great industry—came floating down the Mississippi. Although the lumber for the first frame houses in the river towns

of Iowa may have been imported from Ohio or Indiana sawmills, it is a fact that "in 1839 the pineries of Wisconsin were beginning to send their products southward by rafts."

How the logs were brought from the northern forests to the sawmills of Iowa towns forms one of the most colorful chapters in the story of the Mississippi. Before the era of steamboats the huge, slow-moving rafts were swung around the bends by means of long sweeps fore and aft, manipulated according to the orders of the pilot. The crews of strong, resourceful, unshaven ex-keelboatmen, upon whom depended the safe delivery of the raft, were generally rough characters. On duty night and day, and seldom ashore from the beginning to the end of the trip, they nevertheless found plenty of time for smoking, drinking, card playing, boasting, gambling, and fighting between watches and crossings. It was a typical raft and crew that Huck Finn visited on his runaway trip down the river.

With the rapid settlement of the Upper Mississippi Valley and the subsequent growth of towns, the demand for lumber attracted many native Americans and, later, Scandinavians to the northern lumber camps. All through the piercing cold of winter these men worked tirelessly, and early spring saw great log drives on the streams tributary to the Mississippi. During the first years of the lumber trade, rafts were simply allowed to drift to their destination at Winona, La Crosse, Lyons, Le Claire,

or Hannibal. The advent of the steamboat only served to alter the method of navigation and increase the commerce in logs. Nowhere else in the United States did the steamboat play such an important part in the lumbering industry or stimulate so much the practice of rafting. Peculiar to the Upper Mississippi alone, this industry reached gigantic proportions and attracted men who were skilled alike as lumber-jacks and boatmen.

The first experiments with the steamboat in the rafting trade were not encouraging, but finally successful trips were completed and a new field of activity was open to the river-man. The lower river might boast of its palatial packets and its stern-wheelers piled high with bales of cotton, but the upper river had its rafters.

Since the raft-boat was destined for a life of usefulness, she lacked much of the showy ornamentation of the packet. Designed to tow long rafts downstream, she was, of course, always a stern-wheeler. The "rafter" carried no swinging gang plank and boasted no "Texas", but nevertheless her lines were trim and clear-cut, suggesting utility, speed, and safety. Long after the use of electricity on packets, the rafter still clung to kerosene lanterns on deck and lamps in the cabins, and for many years the headlight alone was electric.

In navigating the rapids of the river, smaller, light-draught steamers were used to take the rafts over in sections. It was this practice that suggested

to Captain George Winans the possibility of using them to replace the clumsy sweeps which were still used in guiding the bow of the raft. The *Rambo*, *Pilot*, *Irene D*, *Joe Long*, and *Wild Boy*, originally used on the rapids between Le Claire and Davenport, were among the first "bow-boats". Thus it was that the terms "raft-boat" and "bow-boat" came into use to distinguish the steamers that handled the great rafts.

Outstanding among the many raft-boats that have appeared upon the river in a period of more than sixty years were the *Kit Carson*, *Saturn*, *Thistle*, *Rutledge*, *Van Sant*, *Neptune*, *Artemus Lamb*, *Silver Wave*, *Nina*, *Everett*, *Luella*, *Molly Whitmore*, *Hiram Price*, *Lily Turner*, *Dexter*, *Stillwater*, *Last Chance*, *Robert Ross*, *Brother Jonathan*, *Hershey*, *Bella Mac*, *Iowa*, *Tennebroeck*, *Silver Crescent*, *Weyerhauser*, *Gazelle*, and *Eclipse*. Going downstream these boats and their rafts presented a pleasing picture from the shore. Only the low throb of the engines, the slow motion of the wheel as it churned the water, the faint jingle of the boat's bells, and the long line of smoke trailing lazily behind or drifting across the bluffs marked the progress of this water caravan.

To name all the rafters and their bow-boats that have appeared from time to time on the river would require many pages; to tell the experiences of the boats and their crews would fill a book. It is enough to know that the nautical careers of many of them

were filled with adventure and often disaster. Boiler explosions, fires, hurricanes, ice jams, snags, and rocks exacted heavy toll. Some of the old rafters were dismantled and their hulls left to crumble along the shore, while others were taken to the lower river where they may be still in use, for the life of a boat is not measured by a year and a day.

Around the arrival and departure of these boats and rafts of lumber and logs the lives of many people along the Iowa shore were centered—captains, pilots, deck-hands, merchants, or traders. And with the passing of these efficient stern-wheelers from the river rafting became only another historical epoch in the industrial life of the Upper Mississippi.

But what of the rafts themselves? What of those “great masses of white, sweet-smelling lumber which floated along with the current of the river?”

The logs were left at the “rafting works” by the lumber-jacks and it was there the rafter picked them up for the trip to the mills. Since all logs were notched by the woodsman’s ax, and each lumber company had a distinguishing mark, there was no delay or confusion over logs. Every rafter carried her own kit of lines and her crew was adept in handling them. Guy-lines, A-lines, cross, fore, and aft lines, all tightened with a Spanish windlass and fastened with several varieties of sailor’s hitches, made the unwieldy mass of logs all snug and tight. When finished, the raft was strong enough to bear the weight of the huge cribs of lumber piled upon it.

These rafts were hundreds of feet in length—some of the longest exceeding twelve hundred feet in length and two hundred and fifty feet in width and drawing as much as twenty-eight inches of water. One of the longest log rafts ever brought down the river was piloted by Captain George Trombley of Le Claire. It was one thousand four hundred feet long. The *J. W. Van Sant* was the pilot boat and the *Lydia Van Sant* the bow-boat. About 1896 Captain Otis McGinley is said to have delivered a raft at Rock Island which measured fifteen hundred and fifty feet in length and two hundred and seventy in width.

At almost every town along the river from St. Paul to St. Louis there was at least one sawmill. Lansing, Dubuque, Bellevue, Lyons, Clinton, Le Claire, Davenport, Muscatine, Burlington, Fort Madison, and Keokuk were Iowa towns that turned out thousands of feet of lumber every year. Pilots and captains reckoned a round trip under good conditions from Beef Slough, Wisconsin, to Muscatine as requiring ten days, while to the Davenport mills the trip might be made in eight days. One captain, making five trips in fifty-five days from Prescott, Minnesota, to Keokuk, established a notable record. As the rafting industry increased many of the larger lumber companies owned and operated their own boats, but smaller mills depended upon the regular steamboat companies and the free-lance captains.

Under the best conditions, rafts were cumbersome,

and passing bridges, avoiding sand-bars, and the navigation of the bends and rapids along the Iowa shore required skill, good judgment, and keen eyesight. Accidents and delays were familiar occurrences in the lives of the captain and crew. Fortunate, indeed, was the pilot who came through an entire season without being snagged or hung up on a submerged rock. Storms, too, played havoc with rafts, often breaking them up so that for days the crew was busy catching drifting logs and rebuilding the raft. To negotiate the rapids, it was sometimes necessary to divide the raft and "double-trip", especially if the water was low. No pilot took his raft over such a place after dark: the risk of piling it up on a reef was too great. For the boys of near-by towns, the rafts that tied up along the shore at night or while "double tripping", offered fascinating playgrounds. Diving from the logs, swimming underneath, or playing "follow the leader" across the loose logs was a thrilling pastime.

One of the best tests of the skill of the pilot was the manner in which he could "split" his raft on the bridge piers; that is, divide or split the raft down the center, so as to allow one section to float through on one side of the pier while the "rafter" and bow-boat towed the remaining section through on the opposite side, and then unite the two sections when the bridge was cleared. River-men say that the bridge opposite Sabula was one of the "prettiest" for "splitting". And one of the most treacherous

bridges was the drawbridge at Clinton. Since the draw-span was not wide enough to permit passage, the raft had to be taken over to the outside span on the Illinois side. After the raft was started through the bridge the raft-boat cast off her lines and made for the draw, which afforded the only passage through which she could clear the bridge. To pass the bridge and catch the loose raft again before the logs were piled up on the shore required considerable speed and masterly piloting. More than one boat met disaster at that bridge, as when the *Julia* swung her bow-boat, the *Satellite*, into one of the piers. The on-coming raft forced the *Satellite* up on the pier while the logs and cribs of lumber piled about blocking navigation both north and south.

A full crew on a rafter numbered about twenty or twenty-five men including the officers. They were usually men who had followed the river from boyhood. A job on a raft-boat offered variety and fair pay. The work was not too strenuous and many of the captains, pilots, and engineers on both packets and raft-boats began their careers on the decks of a rafter. All of the deck-hands were white on the raft-boats, while the packets, for the most part, employed negroes from the South. There was no driving mate on the raft-boat, such as might be found on the packet, and captain and crew shared alike in the toil and leisure.

"We did nothing unless there was something to do, and that might be to hang on a line, coal up,

stand watch, go out on the raft and tighten the lines, pull up 'dead-heads' (water-soaked logs), or cut wood for the cook", said a river-man in describing life on a raft-boat. "That last was the worst job of all! Some of those cooks were so blamed particular that they wouldn't burn anything but oak in their stoves.

"And they were some cooks, too! On the rafters we got the best of everything: the captain didn't have any better food on his table than the crew had on theirs. The milkman and the iceman made regular trips to shore in those days, and fresh fruit, meat, and vegetables always appeared on the tables. Some cooks were famous for their corn bread, jamboli, steaks, and desserts. But the cooks were apt to be temperamental. Why, I remember one we didn't dare speak to in the morning until he had filled and lighted his pipe! Once in a while there was a company or a captain who wanted to save money by cutting down the kitchen expenses, but the men all were wise to that and wouldn't go out on those boats if they could keep from it. We called one boat the 'Dr. Tanner' boat because we fasted most of the time on it. And there was the 'dried apples' boat and the 'boom-plug' boat—prunes were called 'boom-plugs'. On a rafter all hands ate upstairs in the cabin—no eating left-overs below deck off a tin plate like the deck-hands on the packets.

"Going down-stream we never took off our clothes. Though we had bunks in the deck room, we

'roosted' any place. We had to be ready to go out on the raft at any hour of the day or night, whether it was raining or not—and those logs sure were slippery sometimes, even for our 'corked' shoes. There was no telling when some unexpected thing might happen, such as a storm blowing up or the pilot landing you on a bar or a rock.

"We played cards a lot and then, when we tied up at night, there was always something to do in those old river towns. Our 'corked' shoes were hard on floors—especially in saloons—but one bartender told me they could well afford to put in a new floor every week!

"You could always tell when your neighbor came off the river: all his clothes would be decorating the back fences. Why were his clothes on the fence? Well, sometimes those bunks were inhabited by other creatures than us and the women folks just naturally wouldn't let a fellow in the house until he had left all his clothes in the wood-shed. About the first thing a man did in the way of refitting his wardrobe was to buy a Stetson hat and a pair of box-toed shoes. Whatever else he got, those two things were absolutely necessary.

"Deck-hands earned about twenty-five dollars a month and the captain two hundred dollars. Of course, we all had money in the fall. Maybe we wouldn't have it in the spring, but we had it in the fall. We loafed around in the winter—slept late, danced, played cards, and called on the girls. Maybe

a few were ambitious and went up north to the woods or worked in the boatyards.

“Oh, yes, there were boatyards in Iowa. Why, they built lots of boats at Eagle Point, Lyons, and Le Claire—built them as well as repaired them. Dozens of boats were pulled up in those yards in the fall. Their hulls and machinery were thoroughly overhauled and they got a new coat of paint. The ‘steam-box’ for bending the wood and the ‘pitch-can’ were familiar sights around those yards. And all the old butter in the country was used to grease the cradles and rollers when a boat was to be launched!

“But when the steamboats went out of business most of the men drifted away—some went South, others went to the Pacific Coast, and a good many struck out for the Yukon. The rest of us go out on the governments boats. But it’s all changed now.”

With the disappearance of the forests and the raft-boat, most of the sawmills along the river have disappeared too. Many of the buildings have been torn down, the machinery taken out, and the site occupied by some new industry. But along the river bank an inquisitive stroller may still uncover part of a heavy timber, a rusted spike, the link of an old log chain, or the trace of sluice-ways—all that remain as evidence of the great traffic in logs and the time when the buzz of the saw and the fresh, clean smell of newly sawed lumber filled the air.

MARIE E. MEYER