

## LOGGING & BEEF SLOUGH IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### Third In A Series Of Articles On The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Photography Of Gerhard Gesell

*This article liberally extracts and combines excerpts from the 1888 History of Buffalo County, Wisconsin by L Kessinger and the 1919 History of Buffalo and Pepin Counties Wisconsin compiled by F Curtiss-Wedge*

Today as you drive Wisconsin State Highway 35 north of Alma, Wisconsin it is hard to imagine the activity that took place in this area, especially in Beef Slough, a great center of the Wisconsin's 19<sup>th</sup> Century lumber industry. The Slough was a sluggish branch of the Chippewa River that provided an excellent storage point for the logs floated downstream by numerous logging companies. Here loggers were employed to arrange the mixed-up logs into orderly rafts to be towed by steamboats to sawmills on the Mississippi. In 1919 from *History of Buffalo and Pepin Counties Wisconsin* we learn that "in no body of water in the Northwest, and probably not in the whole country, have so many logs been boomed".

In 1888, Lawrence Kessinger wrote in *History of Buffalo County, Wisconsin* that the "Beef Slough is a branch of the Chippewa River setting off from the main channel ... it then pursues, though with considerable meanderings and numerous sharp turns, a general southern course until its confluence with the Beef River a short distance about the River's entrance into the Mississippi. The Slough was used for driving logs from Flat Bar to the rafting works. This part of the Slough or River is navigable for good sized stern wheel steamboats which are employed as raft tugs or pushers."



Along the Chippewa and its numerous tributaries there was an almost inexhaustible supply of pine timber that had grown up from times immemorial. The question was how to transport it. Easy enough one should think. But although logs would float, and rafting had been practiced long ago, much had to be learned, contrived and arranged to make the wood in the log a profitable piece of merchandise, an object of wholesale traffic. The most natural idea was to reduce the pine to lumber and as early as 1828 the first attempts at carrying out this idea were made. The permission of the Indians being necessary for settlement and establishment of any factories or posts, Judge Lockwood of Prairie du Chien obtained that permission of Wabasha, the chief of the Sioux, to build a saw mill on the Red Cedar, now Menomonie River.

It became apparent that the transportation of the pine timber had become not only necessary for the wants of the people dwelling below along the Mississippi, but that it would no longer be profitable to have all the lumber manufactured upon the spot. The owners of pine land had an indisputable right to dispose of their timber as it suited them, and navigation upon the Chippewa for their logs could not be prevented nor prohibited. The question was to find some safe reservoir for the reception, storage and manipulation of these logs. This reservoir was found in the Beef Slough

and the conflict between the Chippewa mills and the Mississippi mills begin in earnest, resulting in the so-called "Beef Slough War".

On April 27, 1867, in the village of Alma the *Beef Slough, Manufacturing, Log-driving and Transportation Company* was organized by the Mississippi mill men, breaking the virtual monopoly of the lumbering businesses along the Chippewa River by the Chippewa mill men. At that time the coupling and combining of lumber and lografts from the Chippewa was carried on at Reads Landing, Minnesota which had become a rendezvous point for pilots.

About 50 million feet of logs were contracted for the Slough Company in 1868 and the spring opening placed a force of 125 men on the river with a watchman at every boom and mill to guard the interest of the new company. The first effort was not altogether successful; there were only 5,785,000 feet rafted the first season. In fact the Old Beef Slough Company had become bankrupt.

In 1872 the Mississippi River Logging Company, whose president was F Weyerhaeuser of Rock Island, Illinois, bought a controlling interest in the Beef Slough Company's stock. Conflicts were resolved in 1881 when a third organization united parties under the corporate name of the Chippewa Logging Company, commonly called the "Pool". Under this arrangement the logs were all bought in common and the Chippewa saw mill parties took out a sufficient amount to supply their mills, letting the balance pass on to Beef Slough. The Chippewa Logging Company had its principal office at Beef Slough.

As a matter of course there were many arrangements necessary to catch and manage the logs coming down on the spring log drive to be rafted. The first arrangements are the shear-booms at Round Hill, one of them directing the logs to the Buffalo County side, the other directing them to enter Beef Slough. There was also one at the head of Little Beef Slough, for directing stragglers that escaped the upper booms into the little and main slough. The logs were stopped at the Jam Boom and they were let out at an opening in it according to the demand of the working force below, passing by old Farmer's Home, down the Devil's Elbow, by Flat Bar, Perrin Sough, Wabasha Bridge and other stations until they come out of the swampy precincts to the open deep water along the bluffs where they were sorted, passed down the pockets arranged into a compact mass, the joints overlapped like those in the front of mason work. Instead of rafting, the logs were brailed.

A brail is a combination of logs in the same way as a raft, but these logs are not separately connected or secured. There is a boom around the whole mass, the logs of this boom being fastened by iron links, and prevented from spreading by galvanized wire lines at a distance of 50 feet from each other. A brail is 550 feet long by 45 feet wide. Six of these brails coupled together constituted a full Mississippi raft.

When a brail is completed a steamboat is hitched to the stern of the raft and it is nudged into the open water and a bowboat is tied crossways to the raft at the bow. Neither the steamer nor the bowboat was expected to push or tow the raft; it was managed by making use of the currents. Navigation was very important through river bends and to avoid numerous sand bars. Sometimes forward motion was suspended until the proper channel had been reached by the bow swinging round. To carry on the operations on the Beef Slough there were about 600 men engaged during the rafting season but during the remainder of the season about 100 were retained for different kinds of work.

The total reported output in log feet through the Beef Slough boom and works from 1867 to 1889 aggregated 5,301,019,170 feet; starting with 5,785,000 in 1868 when the Slough opened, peaking in 1888 at 542,000,000 feet and dropping to 149,933,000 feet when West Newton Slough opened.

So what happened to cause the drop in activity? Wisconsin passed a law to levy a tax on all logs processed at Beef Slough. Minnesota, on the opposite bank of the Mississippi, did not exact a tax and a shear boom was built at the mouth of the Chippewa River to direct logs away from Beef Slough and across the river to West Newton where a new sorting works was constructed. However it was only a few years before the great inventory of white pine in the Chippewa Valley was nearly exhausted. The harvest was over and the West Newton works were closed. The operations of the West Newton boom and works reached a peak of 632,154,160 feet in 1892 and declined from there, the total output of both Beef Slough Boom and West Newton Boom was 10,000,000,000 feet.

Rafts went as far south as St Louis and the voyage down and return consumed a considerable part of a summer. The work was hard, the treatment rough, the wages often small, payment not always secure, so the raft hand who managed to save a few dollars out of a trip, might consider himself fortunate. But at home there was nothing to do and nothing to earn, so any prospect for improving the situation was eagerly accepted. For many the rough work and life had its charms and they followed rafting during the summer and went into the logging camps in the winter.

Gerhard Gesell documented much of this activity in his 19<sup>th</sup> Century photography and L Kessinger documented much of this activity in his 1888 *History of Buffalo County, Wisconsin* which is excerpted liberally throughout this article. You can visit the Alma Area Museum and their large exhibit on timber and logging in Buffalo County.

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*Photo: Swing Boom, Beef Slough (WHS Image 25790)*