

The White River Drive
Author Unknown

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“Log Jam” painting by Frederick Norman in 1885

Here is another little bit of area history that appeared the “White Lake Reminiscences” publication from 1898. Unfortunately, there was no author listed to give credit to.

All winter the men and teams have been at work in the woods hauling logs to the river bank, and when the snow and ice are gone they prepare to float them to the mills. This is called driving logs.

Driving logs on White River in an early day was a business requiring considerable nerve as well as skill. The men engaged in the work were constantly in danger of being drowned or crushed in jams and roll-ways. They were generally a lot of hardy, active fellows, who were ready to take the risk, as the work commanded good wages and there was no lost time, Sunday included, from the day their names were enrolled on the pay-list.

As the lonely winter wore away and signs of Spring appeared, rivermen began to come in from the woods and congregate at Whitehall, the headquarters for all the camps along White River. From about the middle of March to the first of April, the saloons did a rushing business. The general rule for the river man was to first buy a suit of clothes, including boots with a hundred corks, (sharpened bits of steel) in each. A red sash to tie about the waist completed the outfit, and next to go to the saloon and blow the balance of his cash. This last proceeding generally terminated in black eyes and a bloody nose.

When his money is all spent he is ready to start up the river to the point the superintendent assigns him twenty miles or more away. His friend, the saloon keeper, has equipped him with two quarts of the execrable fluid and a package of peerless tobacco, shakes his hand and off he starts on foot. All day he trudges along a trail obstructed by fallen trees often leading through swamp and swale. About 9 p.m., footsore and weary he arrives at the camp, which consists of a heap of blazing logs 'round which the men gather after the day's work is over. Their wet garments hang upon poles to dry, while they regale themselves with all the delicacies a wilderness affords, a tin cup of very strong tea, a tin plate on which is served boiled potatoes, salt pork, baked beans and warm biscuits.

A little to one side is a large tent furnished with hemlock boughs and coarse blankets. This is the sleeping apartment. On the opposite side of the fire is a smaller tent for the cook's supplies. Here is another fire where the cooking is done. Two crotched sticks are driven into the ground, a pole laid across to support the two or three iron pots in which the boiling is done. Tin ovens open to the fire are used for baking. This department is presided over by a male cook who can chew and smoke as much tobacco as any of the boys.

After supper the evening entertainment begins. It is usually opened by the White-Water-Bill and concluded by a thrilling story from Roll-way-Jack. At its conclusion the men "turn in" to sleep if they can, or if wakeful to be serenaded by "hoot owls" or the hum of the hungry mosquito.

At the first flush of dawn the stentorian voice of the cook is heard calling "Turn out boys", and soon the camp is alive. The men appear with boots in hand that require much pulling and kicking against stumps with some very loud talking before they are settled to their owner's satisfaction. After a douse of cold spring water they are ready for breakfast and the day's work. They shoulder their pevies and headed by the foreman they strike out in Indian file through the swamp and wood until they reach a high bluff at the foot of which is the head of the jam. The logs are piled in great confusion from bank to bank and extend up the river for a mile or more in a solid body.

Below the river runs clear and smooth and winds off through the swamp like a huge snake. The men go down the hill and after considerable lifting, rolling and chopping the jam is broken and the logs begin to move. The great body of water above sends them down with ever increasing velocity often tearing trees from the bank and sending them breaking and crashing down stream with the logs. This the river driver calls a good haul. The hauling of a jam in rapid water is very exciting work. Many a man is thrown headlong into the water for being more daring than the rest. This is a common occurrence, and as the sun rises higher and warms the air, this little episode is soon forgotten as the men jump on the logs as they go rolling and whirling down the river, often having to lie down on the log to get under overhanging branches. Men get to be experts and some will handle a log as easily as others could a canoe. The men scatter along the river in places where the logs are most likely to jam. The men above break them loose and those below keep them moving on over this division to the crew below, and so on to the sorting grounds at the mouth of the river.

Further up is another crew who clean up the drive. It consists of two gangs of men called the jam crew and the sackers. During the drive some logs are crowded out along the shore. The sackers roll these back into the river and are continually wading in the water all day. When the logs are sacked into the rear of the jam, the jam crew breaks them loose and stops them a mile or so below by swinging a boom-stick across the river. This is done to raise the water so the sackers can float the heavier logs that always hang behind the jam. After the sack is brought in the jam is again moved, and so on until late in the season that last log is sacked in and delivered at the mills; then the men are paid.

After fitting themselves in clothes for the Winter, they soon deposit their remaining cash with the saloon-keeper and taking his receipt in sore heads and black eyes they are off again for the woods. Such was the life of the River Driver on White River in the times that are past.