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SIMON AUGUSTUS SHERMAN

From photograph taken in 1884, in his sixty-first year

Lumber Rafting on Wisconsin River

By Simon Augustus Sherman¹

I first came West in 1848, and landing at Milwaukee soon made my way to Plover, in Portage County, where my cousin A. L. Sherman had already settled.

It was in 1849 that I made my first trip down Wisconsin River. April 7 of that year, my cousin and I went up to the Big Eau Claire, and began running lumber over the dam.

The white and Norway pine of the Wisconsin pinery was, as a rule, cut into logs sixteen feet long, which were made into

¹ Simon Augustus Sherman was born at Westboro, Worcester County, Massachusetts, on January 27, 1824. His father was a shoemaker and farmer, and the son was obliged early in life to assist in maintaining the family. His education was much interrupted, but he made use of every opportunity to attend district schools and academies. He learned the trade of carpenter and joiner, and lived in various towns near his birthplace while following this pursuit.

In 1848, feeling that the opportunities for advancement were few in the older states, young Sherman determined to migrate to Wisconsin. Leaving Worcester on October 5, he came by way of Albany, Schenectady, and Buffalo, the trip between the two latter cities being by canal boat. From Buffalo our traveller came around the lakes on the steamboat "Nile," commanded by the noted Captain Blake. After a pleasant trip he reached Milwaukee, and set out at once for the pineries of Wisconsin River.

Settling at Plover, five miles south of Stevens Point, Mr. Stevens worked at his trade until he acquired timber land and a mill site where Plover River enters the Wisconsin, about a mile from the village. For many years, he engaged actively in the lumber business, taking contracts for cutting timber, buying logs, sawing and planing lumber at his

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lumber at the neighboring mills. This lumber was then rafted to market.

The making of a raft

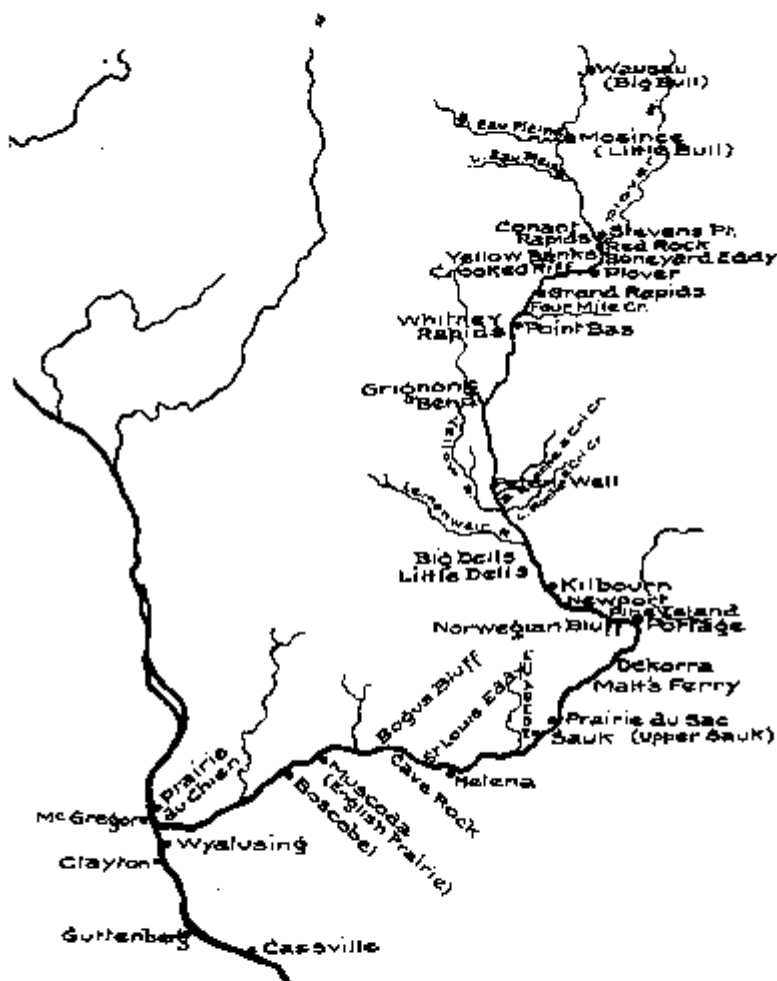
The raft was made by taking three planks and boring two-inch auger holes about one foot from each end and another in the middle. Into these holes grubs were inserted. These grubs were small trees about two inches in diameter, dug up with a portion of the roots, and cut off about three feet above and made to fit the holes, with a head upon the lower end. After the grubs are fitted into the plank, three boards (the same as the grub planks) were put upon the grubs crosswise. Then the raft-building commenced, the lumber being put on crosswise alternately, until sixteen courses were laid. Then binding planks were fastened on to the grubs, and witched or drawn tight together with an instrument called a witch, and then wedged fast. This formed what was known as a crib, and contained about 4,000 feet of lumber.

Six or seven of these cribs were put together, one in front of the other, and fastened by coupling planks. A head-, and a tail-block were put on and very strongly fastened, to which were attached oars, each made of a plank sixteen feet long and about eighteen inches wide, about two and one-fourth inches thick at one end, and three-fourths of an inch at the other. This car was

mill, selling it at retail, and rafting it to market. Although he owned large tracts of land, and handled lumber in large amounts, he never became rich.

Mr. Sherman had literary and scientific interests, but his meagre education furnished inadequate basis for attainments in these lines. He believed in spiritualism, and to some extent relied upon "manufactures." In later life he was much interested in local history, and acted as president of the Portage County Old Settlers' Society. This organization held its meetings annually at his house, near his old mill site, where he had provided picnic grounds for this purpose. At the time of his death, in December, 1906, he contemplated using the biographical materials that he had collected, together with other data of local history, as the basis for a history of Portage County.

Mr. Sherman claimed to have imported from the East, the first planing mill in the Wisconsin pinery. The following article, compiled from his diaries, gives an early and reliable record of rafting operations on the Wisconsin, in the days of the growing importance of that industry.—ALBERT H. SANFORD.



MAP OF WISCONSIN RIVER TOWNS AND RAPIDS
From Wausau to Cassville. Illustrating Mr. Sherman's paper

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fastened into an oar-stem, which was from thirty-six to forty feet long. This made an oar from fifty to fifty-six feet in length, that was used to guide the raft.

Six or seven cribs fastened in this wise were known as a "rapids piece," because in this condition they can be run over rapids and through swift water. Two or more of them make what is called a "Wisconsin raft," and several of those rafts comprise a "fleet of lumber."²

Frequently the lumber raft gets the advantage of the person running it, and passing under leaning trees sweeps him off into the river. I was thus served on the Eau Claire. While at the head of Little Bull Falls (April 15)* I accidentally fell in again. In passing over the falls at the "Jaws," I came very near being knocked overboard by the oar getting away from the steersman. No one thus thrown off at this place has been known to have been saved.

A rafting trip

We passed on down (April 20) to Stevens Point and Conant Rapids. On the 21st we stopped at the Yellow Banks, near Plover, and later were caught on Crooked Riff. We next passed on to Grand Rapids, where three men were drowned. En route we saw drunken Indians, one of whom was fatally stabbed.

May 1, our run was from Grand Rapids to Pointe Bas,³ over the Whitney Rapids, which are the lowest on Wisconsin River. At this place there were a lot of Indians with bows and arrows, whom we set to shooting at a mark. Leaving Point Bas on the 4th, we next day passed Peten Well, a singular rock standing upon a level plain on the bank of the river, from two to three hundred feet high, nearly perpendicular, and difficult to ascend.⁴

² Compare with this description and that of Lincoln (in the following paper), the account by Ellis in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, III, pp. 441-443. See also the illustration, *post*, p. 182.—Ed.

³ So called because it was the lowest point for swift rapids. The word is occasionally spelled phonetically *Bausse*; see J. W. Hunt, *Wisconsin Gazetteer* (Madison, 1853), p. 238.—A. H. S.

⁴ See another description in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, VII, p. 365. The name is a modification of the Indian word *Pe-ton-won*, signifying a quiver—from a fancied resemblance of the rock to a quiver filled with arrows. Other derivations of this word have been given; but A. G. Ellis, who lived many years on the upper Wisconsin, is our authority.—Ed.

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On the 6th we saw millions of pigeons, and passed the Roche à Cri flats. Such flats occur usually at the mouth of some affluent, where the river spreads out very wide and the water is so shallow that at a low stage it is difficult to raft the lumber over.

About sundown on the same day we passed through the Dells. The raft ahead of ours struck Notch Rock, and turned a whole rapids piece bottom side up, breaking it to pieces. The great river, which at some places is half a mile wide, at this point is narrowed down to fifty-four feet, with a rapid current. There is an eddy formed by a rock, which is liable to catch the bow of a raft, and owing to its great velocity dash it against a notch in a projecting rock. Just below this is a bridge which spans the gulf, sixty feet in width, at a height of seventy feet above the water. Directly below the bridge is a sharp bend in the river, which forms a powerful whirlpool or eddy. I have been through there on a lumber raft in high water, when the swirls looked as though they were ten feet deep, and when three oars out of four were unshipped or broken, and some portions of the raft would be three or four feet under water.

The next bend below, is called the Rainbow. Rafts were apt to run into it and strike the rocks very hard. Just below this stood the Dell House, where there was a good eddy to land lumber.

After passing Kilbourn City and Newport, Sugar Loaf Rock appears, and farther down on the opposite side Lone Rock, a solitary pinnacle thirty or forty feet high, much dreaded by raftsmen, since the current sets strongly against it, and rafts were frequently driven to destruction there. This is at the foot of the Dells, which are five miles in length.

From the Dells we passed on by Norwegian Bluff, Pine Island, and Portage City; and still farther down, Sauk Prairie. A few miles below this are the Honey Creek flats. At this point the settlement of Old Helena, destroyed by the Indians, was located. By the watchfulness of General Dodge the inhabitants were

* Apparently this is a confused account of an event in the Black Hawk War. Gen. Henry Dodge and his troops crossed Wisconsin River at this point, while pursuing the fleeing Indian band. See *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xii, p. 256.—Ed.

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taken across the river and saved.* We next passed Bogus Bluffs,[†] which are very high, and noted for their singular caves. New Helena lay just beyond, a little town with a shot tower built by Daniel Whitney. The tower is built upon a rock, with its perpendicular side 175 feet high next to the river; from this, the shot fell.[‡] Mr. Whitney is the same pioneer who built at Whitney Rapids the first saw mill upon Wisconsin River.[§]

The next place I noticed was Cave Rock Slough. From here we passed on by English Prairie and Prairie Dubay to the mouth of the Wisconsin, where on the south side the bluffs are 500 feet high and very steep, and where the great Mississippi fronts us, with her towering bluffs on the Iowa side.

We drifted on to the bosom of the "Father of Waters" and connected our rafts together, thus making what is known as a Mississippi raft. We had scarcely got the rafts secured together, when I heard a roaring noise and looking up over the bluffs discovered a large black cloud rolling over us. In less than fifteen minutes we were engulfed in one of the most terrible thunder storms I ever witnessed. The wind blew a gale, the rain fell in torrents, the thunder rolled, and the lightning flashed. The waves rolled upon the raft, and we were in fear of being broken to pieces. It looked still more awful and sublime, because we were floating along under those gigantic bluffs. Night setting in, left us in total darkness, except when the lightning flashed and furnished all the light we had by which to guide the raft. About midnight the storm abated and another set of men took the oars, when I crawled into my bunk, wet as a drowned rat.

Towards morning I heard the shout for all hands at the oars, and on getting up found the raft sagging[¶] down towards an

* A tradition attaches this name to this place, because it was the resort for a band of counterfeiters. They are said to have been the same bandits who were responsible for the death (in 1845) of George Davenport, for whom the Iowa city of that name was entitled.—A. H. S.

† See an account of this early enterprise in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xiii, pp. 293-374.—Ed.

‡ See *Id.*, iii, pp. 437, 438; also George W. Hotchkiss, *History of Lumber and Forest Industry of the Northwest* (Chicago, 1898), pp. 437, 444.—A. H. S.

§ "Sagging" was a well-known term among lumbermen. When the current is very strong, it sometimes causes a raft to drift (or sag) toward rocks or islands. For instance, the Notch Rock, in the Delta,

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island; with all the pulling we could do, we could not change its course, and the bow struck the island right in the head and ran the front end high and dry upon the land. However, it lay quartering with the current, and by pulling at the oars we swung it around and soon got off.

Some of these rafts cover several acres of surface, and when under motion in a rapid current it requires a great force to stop them. I recollect that one day we were having a game of ball, when the pilot called us to the oars. The raft was sagging into a bend, and into that bend it went in spite of us, one corner striking the bank and taking two or three loads of dirt upon it. With all this resistance, its headway did not appear to be in the least checked.

We finally arrived at Dubuque, where my cousin, another man, and I got into a skiff and went across to Galena, a distance of sixteen miles. I began to feel ill, and before I reached Galena was badly off. The cholera was then raging on the Mississippi, and there was great excitement about it. I went to my cousin's and stopped five or six days; then feeling better, I started back for the pinery on the steamer "Newton Wagoner." After stopping at Prairie du Chien, we ascended Wisconsin River to Portage City. Here my cousin purchased a horse, and we started for Plover, taking turns in riding. We stopped one night at the Marsh House, and the next day reached our destination.

Rafting incidents

The next year, I commenced on April 15, rafting some lumber I had at the Conant mills, and then went up to the Little Eau Claire to get more lumber that was owing me at the Harkness & Fleming mill. Trying to cross the river on the first log I had ever attempted to ride, it rolled me into the water, so that I had to swim ashore.

April 29, we ran a crib of lumber to the lower millpond, where we had to couple it up into a rapids piece.

May 1, we ran our piece to Stevens Point in a terrible snow storm, which fell about four inches deep on our raft.

was very dangerous, for the current frequently made the raft sag upon it. This information is furnished by Eugene A. Sherman of Stevens Point, son of the author of the paper.—Ed.

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May 2, I could not find any pilot to run my raft over Conant Rapids, for they had all gone down the river.¹⁰ I concluded, therefore, to do it myself. Getting together a crew of eight men, I let the raft loose. Although I had never run a piece over in my life, I didn't let the men know it, and did my own piloting. I had excellent luck and got through without accident, and ran other pieces for another man who could get no pilot. These rapids, Shaurette and Conant combined, are from two to three miles long.

An exciting run

We all then went back to run a piece for McNeil. His raft was composed of large timber, poorly put together. We started with it from Stevens Point, and ran it safely until reaching Red Rock, below the Robinson dam. This is a large red granite rock, standing in the channel at an elbow or angle in the river and is a difficult place to get a raft past, being in the roughest water and largest falls on the rapids. When we came to this rock, our raft was unmanageable, and striking with great force began going to pieces. In this emergency I seized a cable and leaving the oar, with the aid of some of the men stretched it across the piece and fastened it to the outside timbers, which prevented the raft from going to pieces and drowning us all. The piece saddle-bagged¹¹ the rock so nearly in the centre that with the oars we swung it off, and went on and landed it in Boneyard Eddy, about half a mile below, where the Wisconsin Paper & Pulp Company's mills are now located. This eddy is thus called, because when people are drowned above, their bodies usually float into it, and are there found.

The next day I ran my lumber down to the Yellow Banks, where my other timber was lying. There, through carelessness, one crib of about 4,000 feet got away and was a total loss.

¹⁰ Pilots were a necessity on Wisconsin River, because of its rapidity. They were men of long experience and hardy character. Ellis is authority for the statement that in the years 1853-57 there were about twenty pilots on the river.—A. H. S.

¹¹ To saddlebag a rock or any other obstruction was to run the raft squarely against it, so that a considerable portion lay off on either side. The raft could not then easily be swung into the channel, and there was danger of splitting it apart.—A. H. S.

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May 3, we started for Grand Rapids, in which one of our men was drowned. After running Grand and Whitney rapids, we passed a place called Devil's Elbow, where the raft came very near sinking and washing some men overboard.

May 7, we left Point Bas and ran to the Peten Well Rock. The next morning, while lying there, a fleet passed us. After breakfast we cut loose and overtook them, all stuck on Roche à Cri flats. The next day we passed on to Lemouweir flats, and were ourselves fast on a sandbar for a day and a half. The 10th, we arrived at the Dells, where I hired a pilot to run us through, which feat was accomplished in two days. The 13th, I hired Anson Polson to pilot out of the river. We were caught four times that day on sandbars.

The lower Wisconsin is very wide, with a great many islands and shallow places which, at a low stage of water, are dry sandbars, sometimes covering many acres. At the time of a freshet or high water, these bars are covered, and the river looks like a lake from shore to shore. Through this body of water there are usually one or two channels, and it is necessary to know where these run; hence pilots must guide the fleet to keep the rafts in the proper course.

These channels are liable to change at every high stage of water, and there is frequently what is called a "pocket." This is where there appears, when going in, to be a good channel; but the river spreads out, the water becoming so shallow that the raft cannot get over the bar. To avoid these difficulties, pilots must be acquainted with the river, and good judges of the draft and currents of water.

Just above Portage City our raft was caught on a bar, and after working vainly all day in the water, trying to get our raft into the channel, at night we sat down around the fire on the cook raft to dry ourselves. For amusement, I took out my clarinet and played a few tunes. In a few minutes some wolves began howling on the opposite bank, and continued their music as long as I did mine. But we apprehended no danger from them, as we were on a bar, out in the middle of the river.

The second day we got off, and passed on to Matt's Ferry.¹²

¹² The present site of Merrimac, where the Chicago & Northwestern Railway crosses Wisconsin River.—A. H. S.

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Here we got into a pocket, which detained us several days. By this time the water in the river had become very low, and the prospect for getting out on that "fresh" was very poor.

May 19, our flour being gone, we sent for more to Barber's Bluff, and the next day stopped at Sauk Prairie and laid in supplies. The following day we ran to Honey Creek flats, and thence to Helena. Here I stopped over a day and went up into the shot tower. While lying here, another fleet passed us with a bear as a passenger. From here we went to below Prairie Dubay, where we had to lay up for wind, and where I mounted the high bluff near Boscobel, to see the wild, romantic, and beautiful scenery.

May 25, we got to Muscoda, or English Prairie, and five days later made the Mississippi and joined with William Fellows, who reached it at the same time.

On the Mississippi

After we had coupled together and run for a day or two, it was thought best for me to get on the first steamer we met, for the purpose of finding a market for our lumber. I boarded the "Danube", and on arriving at Davenport stopped to look for a purchaser; but finding no satisfactory one the next day took another boat, the "Doctor Franklin No. 2," and went on to Oquakie. Finding no sale there, I got on a raft from the Chipewewa pinery, belonging to a man named Gilbert, and went on to Burlington, Iowa. My own raft passed me in the night, when I was asleep. I waited and watched for it until after noon, when another fleet belonging to Kentucky Bill came along, and his men informed me that my fleet had already passed. There I was, alone among strangers and out of money, and knew not what to do.

At this juncture the "Bon Accord" steamboat came along, which I boarded so as to overtake our fleet. After the boat had started, the captain came around for my fare. I told him I was out of money. He replied, "Why didn't you tell me that when you came on? I've a good will to set you off on an island." Then I told him that I had lumber that had passed me in the night, and as soon as we overtook it I could get the money and pay my fare.

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The boat was towing a large barge laden with pig lead, and the sailors were unloading it from the barge to the boat. The captain said that I could work my passage by helping the sailors, so I went to work.

The next place we landed was at Nauvoo, the Mormon paradise, a beautiful place at the head of the Lower Mississippi Rapids. Thence we went on to Louisiana, Missouri, where I overtook my lumber raft and having boarded it, was able to replenish my pocket book.

After this Mr. Fellows and I took turns going ahead of the lumber and stopping to find sale for it. The next boat that came along was the "Mary Stevens." I took passage on her for St. Louis. After arriving, I went to several lumber yards and at last found a customer; but decided to return to Alton, where I met Mr. Fellows with the lumber, and sold it to Hayden Pierson for \$14.50 per thousand.

June 9, I attended the Baptist, Presbyterian, and Catholic churches. This was the second time I had heard a church bell since I left New England in 1848. It seemed like old times, for in those days religious meetings were scarcely known in the pinery. After estimating the lumber and receiving my price, I paid my men, disposed of my traps, and started East, going by boat to Cincinnati, by rail to Sandusky, by boat to Buffalo, cars to Lewiston, by boat to Oswego, and thence by rail to my old home in Worcester, Massachusetts.