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CEYLON CHILDS LINCOLN

From tintype taken about 1868

## Personal Experiences of a Wisconsin River Raftsman

By Ceylon Childs Lincoln<sup>1</sup>

The process of making rafts for descending Wisconsin River was as follows: There were secured some hundreds of white-oak grubs that had been dug up ("grubbed") by the roots. These were then shaved down to two inches in diameter, with a knob at

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<sup>1</sup>The following article is adapted from a paper on lumbering in the Wisconsin pinery, prepared for us by Mr. Lincoln. Ceylon Childs Lincoln was born April 18, 1850, at Naperville, Dupage County, Illinois. While still very young his family moved to Berlin, Wisconsin, and thence (in the spring of 1856) to Wautoma. During the first year of the War of Secession, the two eldest Lincoln brothers enlisted; and in the autumn of 1863, their juniors, Orange M. and Ceylon C., then aged respectively but thirteen and fourteen years, entered the Union army. Ceylon was a member of Company D, 35th Wisconsin volunteer infantry. All three of his brothers were lost in the service; he, the only survivor in his family, was mustered out Dec. 1, 1865.

Returning to Wautoma, Mr. Lincoln began in 1867 to learn the trade of a printer, being employed on the *Wausara Argus*, edited by R. L. D. Potter. It was while working at this trade that he made the voyage on a raft, narrated in the accompanying paper. In 1870 Mr. Lincoln married Melinda J. Duncan of Richford, and began caring for a farm a mile from Wautoma. Later he was blacksmith (1873-75) in several neighboring villages, bought and put in cultivation (1878-85) 120 acres of unbroken land, and afterwards (1885-87) kept the "Lincoln Hotel" at Wautoma. One of the earliest settlers of Tomahawk (1887), he was in 1895 appointed to a janitorship in the State Capitol, being assigned to duty in the Museum of this Society. When the institution moved to its new building (1900), Mr. Lincoln was continued in this employment, and served as the Museum janitor until 1903. He then resigned, because of ill health, and now conducts a small farm in the town of Rutland, Dane County.—Ed.

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one end, and the other sharpened, leaving the whole about three feet in length. Two planks, twelve inches wide by sixteen feet long, were bored at each end and in the middle, to receive these grubs. Placed at a proper distance apart, the lumber was laid on in alternate courses until twelve to sixteen courses were thus placed. The upper binding planks were then put on, parallel with those underneath, and the grubs tightly fastened through them. This formed what was called a crib. Six or seven of these cribs, fastened together longitudinally, were known as a "rapids piece." The latter was then furnished with an eight-inch-square timber at bow and stern, with a two-inch oar-pin in the centre of each.

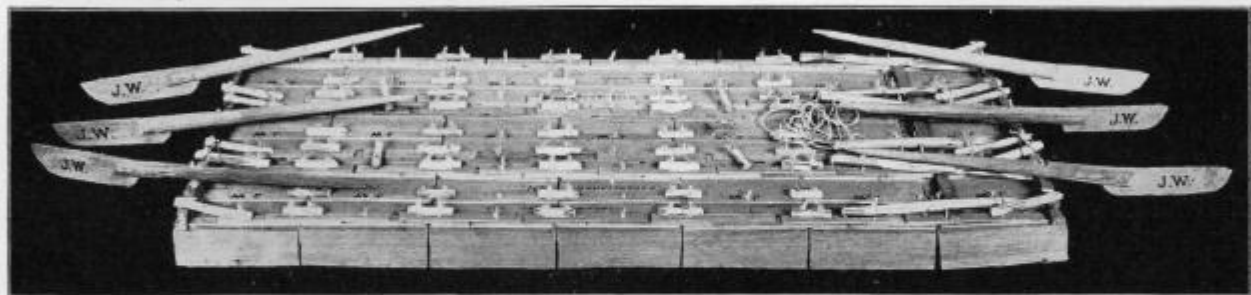
A bow- and tail-oar completed the equipment. These latter were very large, the stems thirty feet long, one foot in diameter at one end, at the other tapering nearly to a point. The blade of the oar (usually sixteen to eighteen feet long, sixteen inches wide, and tapering from three to one inch in thickness) was inserted in the larger end of the stem. The whole was then hung balanced on the oar-pin. It took an expert to handle such an oar so as to give power to the stroke.

A beginner (generally known as a "sucker") made laughable work trying to acquire the art of dipping such oars. He usually had to breast them around, until he learned better. To do good service with one of these oars, it must be dipped with one hand and swung above the head at arm's-length, then surged upon with every step.

### A "fleet"

After these rapids pieces were made and coupled together, they were loaded down with shingles or lath, until they floated about two courses out of the water. A number of such rapids pieces (as many as thirty or forty) constituted a fleet, and contained as much as a million feet of lumber, besides the lath and shingles.

These fleet were run to market either by a contractor, or by the milling company itself. If there were cribs enough to make what are called ten "Wisconsin rafts," a pilot and steersman, ten bowsmen and ten tailsmen are engaged as a fleet crew. The bowsmen must be experienced in running the river, their wages from Stevens Point being about \$90 for the trip; while the tails-



A "RAPIDS PIECE"

From model made by H. O. Halverson of Stevens Point, for the Wisconsin Historical Society

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men receive \$60. The time occupied might be three weeks or six. A cook and skiffsman were also employed; and in running all dams and rapids, extra pilots and steersmen were hired. The crew was run in two shifts, five men at each bow- and stern-oar.

Fleets of lumber that had started the year before but failed to get down during high water, were attempted the second year. These were known to the rivermen as "flood trash," since they were water-logged and floated low and run slowly. The fleets of new timber always had the right of way.

### Dangerous rapids and dams

The dangerous places on the Wisconsin were, Big and Little Bull Falls, Stevens Point dam, Conant Rapids, Grand Rapids, Clinton's big and little dams, Whitney Rapids, the Dells, and Kilbourn dam. The Mosinee (Little Bull) rapids were the most dangerous on the river, which here narrows to not more than thirty feet in width and plunges down a gulch thirty feet deep, with solid rock wall on either side. The rapids, about half a mile long, are a seething mass of foam and waves. When the rapids piece entered this place, a line was stretched the whole length of the raft, called the "sucker line," which each man seized—for quite often the raft dove ten to twenty rods at a time, and all that could be seen of the men above the water was their heads, and sometimes not even these were in sight.

### An early experience

My first experience in rafting was in 1868, when I went down with Homer Chase of Stevens Point as pilot—a first class man. Being a sucker, I was unfortunately hired to make the trip on a flood-trash fleet, belonging to Walter D. McIndoo.

The ice went out of the river April 17, and the next day we started with five men at each oar, to run the Stevens Point dam, near which the lumber had lain throughout the winter. The first trip for a sucker made his hair stand on end, and brought to his mind all the misdeeds of his past life.

We ran down the centre of the river, until within twenty rods of the dam. There the current drew off to the right and came in between two piers, about thirty feet apart; between these piers was the slide, constructed of long logs (called "fingers") faa-

tened with chains to the dam; on either side of the slide, the water dropped about fifteen feet.<sup>2</sup> Below the dam, the river boiled and rolled into whitecaps. If one was fortunate enough to make the slide properly, he could make his landing in the right place; otherwise, there was great danger of saddlebagging one of the piers and breaking to pieces. Sometimes the raft turned a complete sommersault, and the men who did not leap for the pier were drowned. Even when going over the slide, our rafts generally sank until we were standing waist-deep in the water, bumping along on the rocks.

Our fleet was made up of twenty-seven rapids pieces, which when coupled together, three abreast, made nine Wisconsin River rafts. It took twenty-seven trips to get our fleet over each dam and rapids, fourteen for each crew of twelve men, and made a great deal of gigging.<sup>3</sup> After running over some of the rapids we had to walk, or rather go on a dog-trot, five miles with our clothes wet and our shoes full of sand, and be there on time when the piece was set loose.

The next obstacle below Stevens Point was Conant Rapids. There the river makes a big double turn to the right. At the second bend is a large red rock, projecting out of the water about a foot. To make the run here, the bow oar must be pulled several strokes to the right, while the steersman pulled the reverse, and as the raft turned, the tail would just slide over the rock. As soon as you passed this rock, the raft dove through the "hog hole"—a place where the water draws between rocks and dives

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<sup>2</sup> When a dam extended across the river, it was necessary to leave a gap at one point in its crest, from which an incline or "slide" was built down stream. It was often a dangerous operation to conduct a raft safely over such a slide, for at the bottom it would duck under water, and the men be washed off. To prevent this, an apron was sometimes constructed at the foot of the slide, comprised of logs fastened to its lower edge, whose other ends floated free.—A. H. SANBORN.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis, in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, III, p. 442, explains this term as follows: "This footing it up over the falls after a piece is run down, is called by the men 'gigging back;' it is generally done at a quick pace, and the distance traveled, from sun to sun, by a gang in running a rapid and 'gigging back,' is often fifty, sixty, or seventy miles a day, and forms a pretty severe introduction to the green-horns into the mysteries of going down on a raft."—Ed.

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down ten feet or more and then rolls back. These were fearful-looking places to run. The men usually stepped back behind the oars and grabbed the sucker line, and the pilot and steersman held down their oars to keep them from striking on rocks, and being knocked from their hands. Often a wave caught them, and swung them sideways, sweeping some of the men into the river. This was a place where many lives were lost.

The next place to be reached was called Bean Pot Eddy, where the water resembles beans boiling in a kettle. Here the raft sank under water and ran that way for about twenty rods, bumping over rocks. It was about three miles through Conant Rapids, and a very long gig had here to be made.

The Grand Rapids were the next place of importance. It is a sight to stand on shore and see a raft coming down these rapids, between the piers and rocks, the waves rolling, and the foam and mist flying. Although about a mile in length, it only took three or four minutes to make the trip, and the pilot and steersman must make no wrong turns. Just below Grand Rapids bridge there is an eddy where I have seen rafts come to a complete standstill; and below that and just to the left of the river's centre was the Sugar Bowl, a large rock on which many rafts were wrecked.

Below Grand Rapids we come to Clinton's big and little dams, only about thirty rods apart. The large dam is run close to the right-hand shore, and as we passed over it the pilot pulled hard to the left and the steersman the reverse, in order to swing the raft and make the crossing as soon as possible. The distance is so short that one must do rapid work. Just below the lower dam at the right, are two large rocks projecting about three feet out of the water and twenty feet across. Not a few rafts saddlebag on these rocks.

Once when passing here, our second crew overtook us, and at the first dam their bow locked our stern so as to render two oars useless. At the second dam we broke away from them, and in the confusion brought up sideways against the first rock, doubled against it, and partly sank. Some of the men made the rock, while others floated away on bunches of shingles. The other rapids piece saddlebagged the second rock. We were there all day before a skiff took us off, and had a fine opportunity to watch the rapids pieces come over the dams. Scarcely one that did not lose lumber, shooting out from behind. Some men made a busi-

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ness of taking station just below all bad places, in order to pick up loose lumber and shingles that floated to them. In time they would get together enough to make a raft, and then would float it down the river to sell.

Whitney Rapids came next, not difficult to run. Just below them we tied up at Point Bas. There three rapids pieces were coupled side by side to make a Wisconsin River raft. All the oars were unshipped save the centre bow- and tail-oars. This first trip, we had nine Wisconsin rafts; the pilot then took charge of the first raft and all followed, the cook shanty being placed on the last.

The first day's run after this was past Grignon's Bend, a long, continuous reach where a sucker first pulled an oar alone. This was the hardest day's work of his life, for it was a steady pull to keep away from the banks, as the water in a bend draws against the bank. If the tail was allowed to strike, the bow was thrown in, and bucked, or swung, which was liable to break the raft to pieces.

Our fleet being water-soaked lumber, floated low and slowly, and before we reached Portage we were hung up on several sandbars, and had to do handspiking.

We ran the Dells without accidents; but when we came to the Devil's Elbow, I thought the river had come to an end. This was a very difficult place. The pilot pulled two strokes to the left, and then the tail-oar two to the right, and then these strokes were immediately reversed. A notched rock lies just left of the second bend, and if the bow of the raft struck this, it was sure to double under, swing across the river, and break in two.

### Drifting over sandbars

After the dangers and trials from rapids and dams, came the tedious drifting over sandbars. If one of the head rafts crossed too high or too low to keep the channel, it would ground on a bar, and the next raft would throw the men a line and try and pull it off. Oftentimes they only succeeded in swinging the second raft on to the same or a neighboring bar, until several would be hung up close together. Then the rest of the rafts would tie up, and the men be sent back to help handspike off the stationary rafts. If this proved impossible, we would uncouple two or

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three strings and let them float around, until the others could be handspiked loose.

Each of us had to get into the water. There was no hanging back; if one did not jump right in, he was pushed in. Sometimes the rafts moved off before a man could catch on, and he would be in water up to his neck. Men worked that way for days, with no way to dry their clothes. I remember that we were in sight of Portage, handspiking for several days before we were able to pass the town.

We seldom had the chance to go to the raft on which the cook shanty was placed, for our meats. Our food was brought alongside of us by a small skiff that accompanied the fleet. The fare was very good, considering the way in which it was served.

We never floated down at night, but each raft tied up, with a half-inch cable to the bank. When our day's work was finished, we would run the raft close to the bank; the tailsman would jump ashore and make the end of the rope fast with a hitch, while the bowsman secured it on the raft itself. Our rope being old, often broke; then we would ground by shoving a plank down between the pieces until it scraped the bottom and checked the momentum.

There were but few bridges across the river at this time. Those there were, we ran without the aid of a pilot, as a man was generally stationed to give us directions how to steer through the piers.

Our fleet was loaded with newly-sawed shingles, most of which were unloaded and sold at what was then called Upper Sauk Town. There was quite a traffic in shingles during the night. There would come a dip of oars, and a skiff would draw alongside the raft, and want to trade whiskey for shingles. It was surprising to see what a lot of shingles it took to purchase a quart of poor whiskey!

### On the Mississippi

When our fleet arrived at the mouth of the river there was great rejoicing, as the hard work was mostly over. The nine Wisconsin rafts were coupled into one large Mississippi raft, with the cook shanty in the middle, and a long table where men could be seated at meals. Our Mississippi raft consisted of three

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Wisconsin rafts abreast and three deep, making a raft 144 feet wide and 380 long. There were nine bow- and the same number of tail-oars, and we generally ran night and day.

I remember that one day the wind blew hard and drove the raft close to the left bank, where it took all the force, hard pulling from dawn till dark, to keep from bucking the shore and swinging around. Just at night we managed to cross to the right bank. The wind, coming in our rear, drove us forward at what seemed a mile a minute. We sent our skiff, with two men and a rope, to try and fasten us up, and we payed out from the raft nearly a thousand feet of line; but we did not even check her course, and the rope soon broke.

Having pulled all day at the oars, the men had gloomy fears of continuing all night. The pilot, however, steered for what he thought was a slow slough; and although we partly saddle-bagged an island, we finally swung into it, the rear end sliding over young trees. Just as we were emerging into the main river, a large tree was leaning over the water, and as the raft struck this we snubbed her dead with the rope, and were tied up for the night.

We lay there for three days waiting for the wind to go down, but the supposed slough proved to be the main steamboat channel, for many boats passed us as we lay there.

The scenery along the Mississippi in June was beautiful—farms sloping down to the river, and city succeeding city. The rapids at Rock Island, with the railroad bridge, made a beautiful picture. We ran the bridge just at dusk, when it was alight with lanterns of different colors. The Quincy bridge was likewise a fine piece of workmanship.

Finally we reached Alton, where we tied up and awaited orders from St. Louis. We could not cross to the west side, because of a high west wind. One night I was on watch, and having strict orders to call the pilot if the wind subsided, I aroused him about sunrise. Soon we were under way, and reached St. Louis about noon. There were large snubbing-works, with windlasses and two-inch cables, at which to tie up all rafts. Of these there were so many that we lay almost in the centre of the river.

They sent out to us a new rope, with orders to snub her dead



ANDREW E. ELMORE

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on the raft, and they would let out from shore. We failed to hold, as they did not give us enough line. Our snubbing apparatus consisted of a large log lying across a second, both pinned fast. As the rope wound round this block, men poured pails of water on it to keep it from catching fire by friction.

Having missed our landing, our pilot was in a dilemma. As we had floated for some distance, he hailed a steamboat, whose captain agreed to push us back for \$100. The raft was then partly uncoupled, and the vessel tried to come in between the parts; but missing this, the captain backed her off, and then coming ahead struck the raft on its side, and pushed it to shore. this was done so fast that the tiere next shore doubled under. The vessel held the raft against the shore until we could get several lines made fast. Then what rejoicing, to know we had fairly landed! Then and there we pledged ourselves never to make another trip on old flood trash.

Having received my \$60 check, I was escorted by a man awaiting the chance, to a clothing store, and then to see the town. Soon, however, our tickets were purchased for home, where I arrived with but \$8 left for sixty days of the hardest work I ever knew.