

THE WHEELER AND DUSENBURY LUMBER COMPANY OF FOREST AND WARREN COUNTIES*

BY SAMUEL A. WILHELM

ONE of the largest producing lumber companies in the northwestern section of Pennsylvania during the nineteenth century, as well as one of the most exciting from the standpoint of daring and pioneering activities, was the Wheeler and Dusenbury Lumber Company located at Stowtown (now Endeavor) in Forest County. This company, the first to open lumber operations along the Tionesta Creek section of Forest County on any noteworthy scale, started in 1837 and ended in 1939, a period of one hundred two years.¹

William F. Wheeler, a dominant figure in the company, was brought up in a lumber-operating family. He was born in the town of Hancock, Delaware County, New York, on June 13, 1811, of parents who had migrated there from Blandford, Massachusetts.² His father, in association with others, purchased and cut pine timber on the hills overlooking the Delaware River and sent it for delivery in the market at Philadelphia. The first raft was "stoved," in raftmen's terms, that is, dashed to pieces and lost; but the owners, still with good credit, continued to cut timber and send it to Philadelphia. In 1813, the Wheeler family moved to Deposit, New York, which was fourteen miles from a tract of timber and sawmills owned by the father.

Young William Wheeler's parents had intended that he should be a farmer, but, when the boy was fifteen years old, he went to Philadelphia with his father's lumber and at that time contracted a taste for rafts and the life of a lumberman. He enjoyed cutting logs in the winter, piling lumber in the summer, and living in the

*A paper read before the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association on November 2-3, 1952.

¹ *Autobiographic Sketch of the Hon. William F. Wheeler*, edited by Lilla C. Wheeler, 1892 (in possession of Wheeler's grandson, W. Reginald Wheeler, New York City), p. 14.

² *Ibid.*, 1.

"shanty" with the other men. This kind of life did not train a man to be a farmer, but, because he was not forced to make an early decision, the lad postponed facing the issue.

Early in 1833, at the age of twenty-two, Wheeler was walking in front of the store of Dusenbury and Gregory, in Deposit, when Gregory called him in and told him that he had been talking with a man named Kelsey of Bainbridge, Chenango County, New York. Gregory said Kelsey had been out on the Allegheny River and reported that it would be a good place for an enterprising lumber company to begin business. Kelsey had not any particular property in mind as a possible purchase, nor any individuals with whom to form a company. He was simply talking, continued Gregory, of what he thought might be done. Of this conversation with Gregory, Wheeler says:

. . . the account which Mr. Gregory gave me of this conversation with Kelsey produced in me a strong desire to see this region of country, and inspired in me a strong hope that I might some day be a lumberman on the Allegany [*sic*].³

Nothing resulted immediately from the above meeting between Wheeler and Gregory, and in April of that year (1833) Wheeler took charge of his father's farm in Greene, Chenango County, New York. It was soon evident to Wheeler that he had neither taste nor talent for farming, and although he worked hard, his mind kept turning to thoughts of the pine trees, sawmills and rafts on the Allegheny. As he himself said in his autobiography, "to my eyes, pine trees were the most beautiful objects on earth, rafts were my delight and saw mills [*sic*] had a great attraction."⁴

Subsequently, he saw Kelsey and engaged him in conversation. The result of the talk was that the two men were to meet at Wheeler's father's home the following week. At this meeting, in Deposit, they procured maps, studied the statistics of the region, and concluded that this was the main source of lumber for the whole valley of the Mississippi.

Young Wheeler spent one day with his father and others considering this matter, and the final decision was that, if Deacon Ezra May and Henry Dusenbury would join with Wheeler's father

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

and Gregory, they would set up residence at Portville, New York, on the upper Allegheny and make a purchase of pine timber. As the plan evolved, Wheeler's father, Deacon May, and Kelsey went to Portville to look over the territory. Their first transaction was to buy 1,500 acres and a sawmill on Dodge's Creek, a site known then as the Mayville sawmill but known now as the town of Portville, New York.⁵

Upon the return of these men to Deposit, an agreement was entered into forming a company, the members of which were Ezra May, William F. Wheeler (the son), Henry Dusenbury, Edgar Gregory and Russell Kelsey, and the firm name of Dusenbury, Wheeler, May and Company was decided upon.⁶ Kelsey, having failed to make any payment, forfeited his claims to the property after about a year of association, and Henry Van Bergen bought his interest. Representing this company of men, young William Wheeler arrived at Portville in February, 1834, to start lumber operations.

The zeal of the young manager was excelled only by his speed. About the first of July of that same year (1834), the Allegheny River was in flood stage, and the company started its first raft from Portville to market. Young Wheeler went with the lumber, but his experience with the drunken hands made him wish he had not gone. No liquor was furnished the men, of course, but when stops were made along the River they could get it on shore. Upon arriving at Pittsburgh, Wheeler had to sell his lumber, good pine lumber, at \$4.75 per thousand feet, more than a dollar less than it cost to make it and run it.⁷ More disappointing was the fact that he had to take three horses as part payment.

Three years later, in 1837, the company started its operations of cutting and running lumber in Forest County (then Venango County), Pennsylvania. In that year the Portville firm opened a lumber yard at Cincinnati, Ohio, with Gregory and Van Bergen in charge. Soon after the yard was in operation Van Bergen wrote to Wheeler at Portville that there was an opportunity to buy timber lands and mills on the Tionesta Creek in Pennsylvania. An

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ R. R. Chaffee to Samuel A. Wilhelm, October 13, 1951 (in possession of the latter). Mr. Chaffee was the last chief forester of the Wheeler and Dusenbury Lumber Company.

⁷ *Autobiographic Sketch*, *op. cit.*, 11.



Bark peelers removing bark from hemlock logs. The bark was used for tanning leather.

Courtesy W. Reginald Wheeler

appointed time was set for the two men to meet at the mill site. After a difficult journey through the snow, Wheeler reached the Siverly mill property. There he met Van Bergen who had come from Cincinnati and who had been waiting just an hour and a half for him. After greetings, they looked over the possibilities of buying and were well pleased. They found there a sawmill of the sash or frame type equipped with sash and gang saws operating in an up and down motion,⁸ as well as good water power, four thousand acres of pine timberland, and some log cabins for the men. After due deliberation, and after spending two days in the woods, they decided to buy the tract and went to Franklin, the county seat, to draw up the necessary papers. This property was located in what is now Forest County, Kingsley Township, near the present town of Endeavor. It was operated under the name of Wheeler and Dusenbury Lumber Company while the holdings at Portville remained under the name of Dusenbury and Wheeler. The Tionesta partnership was formed with a slightly different ownership interest from that of the Portville company.⁹

⁸ R. R. Chaffee, *op. cit.*, October 13, 1951.

⁹ *Ibid.*, October 13, 1951.

The courageous Wheeler and Van Bergen had promised to make a cash payment of eight thousand dollars within a period of thirty days, but the firm had no money with which to do it. After his one-hundred-fifty-mile ride on horseback, returning to Portville from Franklin, Wheeler changed horses and, without rest himself, went directly to the nearest bank which was at Bath, New York. There he got only fifteen hundred dollars—all the money he dared ask for. Securing such a small portion of the necessary amount, he was still faced with a sizable problem, and he travelled on to Deposit to see his father, who gladly gave him what more was needed.¹⁰

From these sources, then, the money was secured, the purchase was made, and operations of the Wheeler and Dusenbury Lumber Company were started in northwestern Pennsylvania. For several years the business was conducted without profit, but undaunted the company continued to purchase timberlands.

About 1850, Hamilton Stowe, of Olean, New York, bought into the firm. He soon moved his family and personal possessions on a raft to Hickory, then on an ox sled for twelve miles to the mills, where the Stowes made their home for thirteen years. At the time of his investment in the company, Stowe was made manager. After about two years Wheeler and Dusenbury bought out Stowe's interest, but he continued in their employment as a successful manager until 1865 when he and his family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. In those days energy was not only required to make lumber, but a very great deal of energy was required to get the lumber out of the Tionesta Creek and into the River. However, Stowe never failed, and his company's lumber was always among the first to reach the market in Cincinnati.

Sometime during Stowe's management the company purchased more land along the Tionesta Creek, the center of operations becoming known as Newtown. In 1865, when Stowe moved to Cincinnati, Nelson P. Wheeler, the son of William Wheeler, assumed the management of the entire property and took up residence at Newtown. In October, 1867, William Dusenbury, a son of Henry Dusenbury, joined Nelson Wheeler in management of the business, and under their direction the company operations were conducted even more efficiently and profitably than ever.

¹⁰ *Autobiographic Sketch*, *op. cit.*, 15-16, quoted in following article by W. Reginald Wheeler.



An original hemlock, with Elias W. Edwards, woods boss of Central Pennsylvania Lumber Company, on Bear Creek, Elk County.

Courtesy Colonel Henry W. Shoemaker and the Pennsylvania Department of Forests and Waters

before. As evidence of the wide-awake and aggressive policy of the company, the *Forest Press* (Tionesta) reported:

Lumbering is now coming out of the Creek. The first rafts were those of Wheeler and Co. from Newtown on Sunday last, very choice lumber. The Company will run about 1,600,000 feet the present rise.¹¹

And in the *Forest Republican* (Tionesta) it was stated that "the Wheeler and Dusenbury Company cut and rafted 2,155,000 feet of boards and timber."¹²

¹¹ *Forest Press* (Tionesta), March 21, 1868.

¹² *Forest Republican* (Tionesta), April 11, 1883.

It is noteworthy that during this period the Wheeler and Dusenbury Lumber Company had the first successfully operated band mill in the United States. The band saw was built in Erie, displayed at the Centennial in Philadelphia in 1876, and put into operation by the company very soon after that.¹³ It was operated by the sawyer from behind the band instead of from in front of the saw, as is now standard. The mill cut 20" x 20" x 72', and the sawmill carriage operated both a front and two rear extensions. In 1887 the company first installed steam power in the mill at Stowtown, and it was the first lumber company to use the caterpillar tractor in Pennsylvania woods for logging and bark hauling.¹⁴

The progressive spirit of Wheeler and Dusenbury was not confined to the timber-cutting process alone. The welfare of the workers was also of great concern. In this connection it is worth noting that the company operated the first electrically lighted lumber camps in Pennsylvania and installed the first steel bunks in the bunk houses.¹⁵

About 1850, the firm began to purchase land called the "Hickory Property," consisting of seven thousand acres of choice timber near its Tionesta tracts. The policy of the firm was to continue from time to time to buy available timber lands in Forest and Warren Counties until a vast acreage was owned. John C. French wrote that this company owned "between one hundred and ten thousand to one hundred and twenty thousand acres of pine, hemlock and hardwood timber on the Tionesta and tributary streams,"¹⁶ but this appears to be too high. W. Reginald Wheeler, the grandson of William F. Wheeler, estimated the company's holdings at about forty thousand acres,¹⁷ and R. R. Chaffee reported the company's holdings at fifty-four thousand acres. He also stated that the company operated fifty-four miles of railroad at one time.¹⁸

The maximum number of persons employed by this company at any time was three hundred twenty-five, both at the mills and in the woods. According to an early Log Book some of the woodsmen were John and F. E. Allison, Solomon Byers, Joseph Hannah,

¹³ R. R. Chaffee, *op. cit.*, October 13, 1951.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, October 13, 1951.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, October 13, 1951.

¹⁶ John C. French, "Tionesta Rafting Days and Later Forest Conditions," in Herbert Walker (ed.), *Rafting Days in Pennsylvania* (Altoona, 1922), 77-78.

¹⁷ W. Reginald Wheeler to Samuel A. Wilhelm, September 19, 1949 (in possession of the latter).

¹⁸ R. R. Chaffee, *op. cit.*, October 13, 1951.

Willard Littlefield, Henry Makins, John Stitzinger and Josiah Mealy.¹⁹

The *Eighth Census of the United States* (1860) stated that forty women were employed in the lumber industry in Pennsylvania, and thirty-two of these were in Forest County.²⁰ R. R. Chaffee reported that women were employed by Wheeler and Dusenbury only in the office at Stowtown.

There is no doubt that Forest County was one of the most prolific lumber-producing sections in the State during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Along with the Hall and May Lumber Company at Balltown on the Tionesta Creek, the A. W. Cook and Sons Lumber Company at Cooksburg on Tom's Run, and the T. D. Collins Lumber Company at Nebraska on the Tionesta Creek, the Wheeler and Dusenbury Lumber Company supplied a very great amount of this immense production.

By 1830 the expansion of villages and cities in western Pennsylvania and in the mid-west was creating a demand for lumber. And in this construction work pine boards were the most favored of all the various types of wood. Both because of this demand and because of the available supply, this species furnished the bulk of the timber cut in the nineteenth century. Of the virgin forests in Forest and Warren Counties, along the Allegheny and Clarion Rivers and their tributaries, the pine and hemlock were veteran trees. They numbered from seventy-five to two hundred on each acre, and the yield per acre was from twenty thousand to forty thousand board feet of lumber, with occasional acres going much higher.²¹

In 1922 the firm of Wheeler and Dusenbury sold about two-thirds of its acreage to the federal government to be incorporated in the Allegheny National Forest. The company gave to the federal government twenty acres of virgin timber in what is known as the Heart's Content tract, and at the same time the government purchased one hundred acres so that one hundred twenty acres of virgin timber have been preserved in that area.²²

¹⁹ Wheeler and Dusenbury Lumber Company Log Book, 1858-1862, 15, 16, 21, 25, 30, 38, 84 (in possession of W. L. Phillips, Endeavor, Pennsylvania).

²⁰ *Eighth Census of the United States*, 1860, *Manufactures*, 520.

²¹ Albert B. Mickolitis to Bruce A. Smith, June 18, 1942, in Bruce A. Smith, *Historical Collections of Sheffield Township, Warren County, Pennsylvania* (Warren, Pa., 1943), 64.

²² W. Reginald Wheeler, *op. cit.*, September 19, 1949.