THE LAST RAFT
As It Appeared to a Contemporary

BY LEWIS EDWIN THEISS

W ITH the highly commendable purpose of giving the present
generation a glimpse of a phase of the life of the past,
Mr. R. Dudley Tonkin, a lumber operator of Tyrone, Pa., with his
brother, C. Ord Tonkin, in the spring of 1938 constructed the
Last Raft. The craft was put together at Burnside, above Mc-
Gee’s Mills, far up the West Branch of the Susquehanna, and
was to be floated to Harrisburg, approximately 200 miles dis-
tant. There, through the cooperation of J. D. Bogar, Jr., a Har-
rising lumber dealer, the logs would be purchased at the end
of the journey. Thousands of persons would have an opportunity
to see this log raft—the first to go down the river since 1912,
when commercial log rafting came to an end. It was said, too,
that Mr. Tonkin’s effort was also to celebrate the centennial of
his grandfather’s first voyage down the river on a log raft.

However that may be, this was truly an effort to resurrect
the past; for not only would the raft be constructed exactly as
log rafts had been fashioned for generations, but the men who
would operate it were old time raftmen. Necessarily they were
men of advanced years. Seldom has any effort along historical
lines stirred up such tremendous interest. Here was to be no
static picture of the past, carefully posed behind glass display
windows, but an actual exhibition of the real thing—a bit of the
past come to life. Indicative of this wide interest is the fact that,
although the raft was constructed in a tiny community in a
sparsely-inhabited region, an estimated 10,000 persons came to
see the craft the day before the voyage started.

Although Mr. Tonkin’s raft was what lumbermen call a “pup”
raft, on account of its small size, as it was only 112 feet in length,
evertheless it contained approximately 35,000 board feet of
lumber. The logs of which it was made were selected white pine
sticks—twenty-seven coming from the Kylertown region, and
twenty-four from near McGee’s Mills. Glenn Campbell and Levi
Connor, old time raftmen, were in charge of construction. A wooden shack was placed on the raft. It was so high and covered so much of the width of the narrow craft that it was practically impossible for the rear oarsman, or steersman, to see the pilot at the forward oar. To offset this difficulty, doors were cut both fore and aft to enable the steersman to see the pilot’s signals. The raft was completed by March twelfth.

McGee’s Mills is perhaps three miles west of Mahaffey. Down to that point, the Susquehanna is a very small stream; but at Mahaffey, Chest Creek flows into the Susquehanna, greatly enlarging that river. Even so, the Susquehanna is a rather snug fit for log rafts, except in times of very high water. Although rains had swollen the river, there was no big flood; and, before the raft had gone very far, the river began to recede.

From Mahaffey to Curwensville, the first considerable community downstream, it is thirteen miles as the crow flies. By river it is approximately twenty-five. Between the two points, the narrow river flows in innumerable fantastic loops between rocky banks that tower hundreds of feet high on either side. A dozen miles farther downstream is Clearfield, with more of the same sort of country in between. To get a clumsy log raft safely around these sharp bends calls for great skill, intimate knowledge of the river currents, and vast physical power on the part of the oarsmen.

But the Last Raft would face worse hazards than these. Persons who had had experience in log rafting on the Susquehanna, and who knew something about the changes that had occurred in the river during the quarter century since commercial rafting ended, were doubtful of the success of this voyage. They could count up more than a dozen hazards that had come into the river in that period or shortly before it. Most of these hazards no raftman had ever faced.

There was, for instance, a new dam at Lock Haven, with no chute for rafts in it. The chute at the Williamsport dam had been changed somewhat and made dangerous by the destructive power of the great flood of 1936. The dam at Sunbury was torn out by the great ice jam of 1904, making the chute there useless. To be sure, a very few raftmen had been over that broken dam; but where the channel was deepest was something to guess about.
So it went along the course of the Susquehanna. But perhaps the greatest hazard of all was the Reading Railway bridge at Muncy. Originally, this bridge had eight piers. In 1919, the railroad added eight more piers. This narrowed the distance between piers to half the original width. Also, this change was confusing, because raftmen were accustomed to steer between certain piers of given river bridges—as between the second and third piers or between the fifth and sixth piers. These particular channels had been selected because the depth of the water and the set of the current made them the safest passageways. With sixteen piers instead of eight, confusion could arise concerning the best course. Altogether, there were so many new hazards that to experienced river folk the journey of the Last Raft seemed to be somewhat risky.

Although for miles along the difficult reaches of the upper Susquehanna it is difficult to get to the riverside, thousands of persons swarmed to see the Last Raft. It was penetrating a region built on lumber. The harvesting of the timber throughout the area had provided the capital for later development. Practically the entire population of the region was descended from, or related to, lumbermen.
G. A. Stewart, editor of the Clearfield Progress, in an article written for the Associated Press, said that as many as two thousand log rafts a year once floated through Clearfield. Between 1840 and 1890, the lumber taken out of the region was to be measured in the hundred millions of board feet. Practically all of this vast amount of timber went down the river in the form of log rafts. Small wonder that the Last Raft attracted so much attention.

The raft left Clearfield on Wednesday, March 16, at daybreak. Despite the earliness of the hour, newspaper men estimated that fully four thousand spectators lined the banks of the river to witness its departure. According to newspaper stories of the journey, the raft encountered two dams soon after it left Clearfield. It rode the first easily; but at the second it nosed under water two feet and every one on board got wet. At that time there were six members of the crew and thirty-two passengers aboard. The desire to ride on the raft was great. Passengers would change from time to time, but the passenger load continually grew, until some of the old timers thought it was dangerously overloaded. By the time disaster occurred, it certainly rode very low in the water.

Weathering all difficulties, the Last Raft reached Williamsport on Saturday, March 19, and tied up for the night. In the
opinion of many, the Williamsport dam was the only remaining obstacle of any importance. Floods had so damaged the chute and altered the flow of the river there that this dam was considered the major obstacle to a successful trip. When, at eight o’clock on Sunday morning, March 20, Pilot Harry Conner and John Stutzman, an old local river pilot, steered the raft safely through the chute, there was great rejoicing. There were then forty-eight persons on the raft, and all hands believed that it would be smooth sailing all the way to Harrisburg.

As events proved, troubles were just about to begin. The river, which for many miles flows almost due east along the northern foot of the Bald Eagle Ridge, begins to swing in a circle, some two miles above Muncy, and sweeps around in a great curve until it is flowing southwest. In this great curving bend the water is thrown by centrifugal force toward the east bank. As some of the raftmen said later, it was difficult here to keep the craft away from that bank. In the Muncy region are two bridges—the highway bridge that carries the road from Muncy to Montgomery, and, a mile below it, the bridge of the Reading Railroad, that has already been mentioned.

At the first of these bridges the raft barely avoided disaster. The eastward set of the current swept the raft toward a pier near the eastern bank of the river. Only the most desperate pulling on the oars got the nose of the raft past this pier, but the...
side of the raft did swing into it. However, beyond shaking up the passengers, the collision did no damage.

What happened at the second bridge was vastly different. There the current sets diagonally toward the shore at certain passages between piers. To avoid hitting a pier in this current, it is necessary to steer directly toward it and allow the current to sweep the craft to one side sufficiently to enable it to pass through the bridge span. Here raftmen had customarily gone through the third span at the eastern end of the bridge. Now, with sixteen piers instead of eight, the situation was at best confusing. No matter what was the cause, the fact is that the raft hit the fifth pier head on. The crash shattered the wooden shanty and may even have killed the newsreel man who was backed against it. Immediately the river swept the stern of the raft to the right. In the days before the new piers were added, the raft would merely have swung end to end and swept clear through the span. But the distance between piers was now less than the 112 foot length of the raft. The rear end of the craft struck the sixth pier with a resounding crash. Then came the tragedy. The raft rose on its side, and all but one of the forty-eight persons aboard it were shot into the surging, icy waters. In an instant the river was thickly dotted with persons struggling for life.
Fortunately, hundreds of persons had gathered on the railway bridge to watch the raft pass beneath them and a considerable number of Muncy boat owners were afloat in their boats. Among them were Druggist J. C. Harter, Dr. Eugene Bertin, Messrs. John C. Wertman, Webb Broscious, W. F. Dewald, and numerous others whose names were not recorded.

Likewise fortunate was the fact that the shattered pieces of the shanty littered the water. Many of the unfortunates, bobbing to the surface, were able to grasp some of these pieces of wood. The men in the boats strove frantically to save lives. Grasping the floating victims by the wrists, they rowed desperately for shore, where swarming spectators assisted the victims up the bank. Then the boatmen dashed back to bring ashore those who were supported by pieces of wood. The number of those rescued was incredible. Out of forty-seven persons shot into the rushing water, all but seven were saved. It was an amazing accomplishment.

At the time of this disaster I owned a farm below the Reading Railway bridge, that stretched along the river for three-fourths of a mile. My farmhouse was within two-thirds of a mile of the bridge. My own residence was a third of a mile farther down stream. The fact that these two houses were there, along this sparsely occupied section of the river known as the Muncy Dam, was a great piece of fortune. These homes afforded immediate shelter, warmth, and treatment for the chilled and shocked survivors.

Having, as it were, a reserved seat for the show, for the raft would have to pass our home which stood within seventy-five feet of the river bank, my wife and I had not gone to the railroad bridge, where the jam of persons was great, but had waited at home to see the craft go by. When it did not appear on schedule, we sat down to our noonday meal. Our first inkling of the disaster came when someone battered at our front door so thunderously that it was alarming. I ran to the door. A man cried, “Have you got a boat?” Unfortunately, I had sold my boat.

In no time at all, men began to bring dripping survivors into the house. They were shaking with cold. Some, worse off, had to be helped in. At least two were close to death. Altogether, twelve survivors were brought in. Fortunately, we already had
in hand a large pot of hot coffee. More was instantly started. A fire was forced until the room was at 90 degrees temperature. Stripped and rubbed with rough towels and wrapped in blankets, and dosed with hot coffee and in some cases aromatic spirits of ammonia, the poor creatures still shivered terribly. Gradually they recovered sufficiently to be hurried off to the hospital or to hotels.

Those first rescued from the river were taken into the farmhouse where Valentine Fenstermacher and his family and volunteer helpers cared for them. There were twenty-two persons taken into the farmhouse. But seven were gone forever. They included Harry Conner, the aged pilot, from Burnside; W. C. Van Scoyoc, of Philadelphia; W. W. Holley, of Bradford; Malcolm McFarland, native of Towanda, but then a resident of Montclair, N. J.; Harry Berringer, of Tyrone; Thomas Profitt, Universal Newsreel photographer, of Chester, and Dr. C. F. Taylor, dentist, of Montgomery.

Witnesses who were on the raft itself said that Profitt went down practically grinding away at his camera. When the shanty collapsed, he was standing close to it, photographing things forward. Some timbers hit him on the head and he may have been knocked unconscious or even killed. He was swept overboard in a twinkling. His camera was later dragged up from the river bottom; the films were immediately washed and developed and were found to be unharmed. They were later shown in movie houses. Perhaps the most tragic case was that of Dr. Taylor. Five miles more would have brought him to Montgomery. He was a well-beloved dentist and the townsfolk had elected him burgess of the town. They were prepared to give him and the folks aboard the raft a royal welcome when the craft reached Montgomery. They received the news of the tragedy with shocked incredulity.

Never had the Muncy Dam seen such excitement. News of the disaster spread like wildfire. In no time, the roads were clogged with the thousands of motorists vainly trying to reach the scene of the tragedy. Lieut. Col. C. Wilhelm, of the Pennsylvania Highway Patrol, with fourteen patrolmen, moved in and organized the search for the missing. Captain A. M. Banks took charge. Twenty police cars were set to cruising along the banks of the
THE LAST RAFT

river, as closely as might be. A police airplane flew up and down the river, searching for bodies that might come to the surface. Private planes joined in the search. A 24-foot Navy launch and a 22-foot Coast Guard boat were brought in, with their crews. They swept constantly up and down the river. Blasting experts exploded dynamite below the bridge, at close intervals. Men in power boats dragged the stream endlessly, day and night. The police set up tents and a temporary radio on our farmhouse lawn. Firemen from neighboring towns sent powerful search-lights to illuminate the water at night, so that the search could go on without interruption. The Muncy Red Cross chapter set up a canteen at the farmhouse to feed the workers. Burgess Peter Link, of Muncy, bestirred himself to assist in any way possible. So many thousands swarmed to the neighborhood that it became necessary for the police to bar out all persons except local inhabitants and those connected with the search.

As for the Last Raft, it was gotten loose from the bridge piers and it came on down stream. It was somewhat battered but far from being ruined. The shack, of course, was gone. It needed a new oar. It was tied up less than a quarter mile below our house, and remained there for some time while the authorities made some investigation. Then it resumed its trip down stream. Mr. R. D. Tonkin was not aboard of it when the accident happened. He had gone on down stream to take a look at the route ahead.

When, on March 23, the raft continued its journey and reached Sunbury, Michael Surgent, Chief of Police, was rowed out to the raft where he presented to the new pilot, Levi Connor, a memorial wreath that had been donated by City Commissioner Grover B. Reichley. Then the raft shot the broken dam successfully, and another hazard was passed.

But twice between Sunbury and Harrisburg the Last Raft was in trouble. A stiff wind drove it on Herrold Island, near the village of Chapman, in lower Snyder County. It was towed off by a river coal dredge belonging to George Keller. Again it grounded near Liverpool, about 11:30 a.m., on March 24. With the help of boatmen who rowed out to it, the raft was floated about one o'clock. On the final stretch of the journey, the raft was piloted by John Myers, of Lock Haven, a member of a family noted for its activities in log rafting.
The Last Raft entering Williamsport Chute. Harry Conner, pilot, is first on the left; Ord Tomlin, in checkered shirt on the shorty; Ed Sunderland, second from last on the right.
The journey was cut short, however, and the raft tied up at Old Heck’s Mill, some eight miles above Harrisburg, where Mr. Bogar bought the logs. Of the original crew, only three finished the journey at Heck’s Mill. They were Ed Sunderlin, Clyde Fulton (the cook), and Levi Connor.

It was ever a tradition of raftmen never to abandon their rafts. When someone asked Levi Connor why he was willing to go on with the trip after Harry Conner was drowned, he said simply: “I want to finish this trip just for old times’ sake. That’s the way Harry would want it.”

Thus the Last Raft finally came to its destination, with its crew true to the traditions of the years. In very truth, a realistic picture of the days long gone had been presented to those of a younger generation.
INTEREST in the history of rafting on the Susquehanna has increased since March, 1938, when the last square-timber raft made the run from McGee's Mills to Harrisburg. Now, in response to requests from the few remaining friends of rafting days (mostly eighth-graders and four-score-year-old boys) the writer proposes to tell from first hand the story of the last faint breath of a once-great industry (built on the labors of adventurous and heroic men) which was carried by the waters of the Susquehanna River system in Pennsylvania, New York, and Maryland.

It is not an easy story to give to the general reader. For one thing, to tell it properly we must use some strange vocabularies stemming from the British Isles, from Central and Northern Europe, and from localisms of the industry here in America.
Mr. Webster may not define all the words, nor Arthur Brisbane approve of all the phrases. The writer realizes, moreover, that his playing truant from school during the rafting season many years ago, while it may have enriched his experience was no aid to his progress in composition and rhetoric.

The last two square-timber rafts to be run on the river were the product of something which every man finds in his heart—the desire to be a boy again. Childish memories, said Lord Bryce, are among the most precious things in life. It was this desire in the heart of my own father, Vincent Tonkin, which led him in his last years to set aside sufficient white pine standing timber to make what he chose to call an Excursion Raft. On it he intended to invite his boyhood and rafting friends to join him in one last trip down the river to Marietta in Lancaster County. This early raft landing and timber market, now a mere backwater of the great Safe Harbor Power Dam, was in those days the down-river end of the run for pilots from the North and West Branches of the Susquehanna. At fourteen years of age, Vincent Tonkin had made his first trip from Cherry Tree to Marietta as a raft hand, working "under the oar." Pioneer boys developed very early, and at eighteen (in 1848) he piloted his first raft through the hazards of the 250 river-mile trip.

"Vince is going to run an excursion raft to Marietta." This statement soon provided the principal topic of conversation in stores in the villages and at crossroads all over the West Branch Valley. Rafting stories were retold and enlarged until some of the potbellied stoves blushed not solely from the heat, and others broke ribs because of the over-supply of tobacco juice. These con-

1A lumber king of Cherry Tree, Pennsylvania. His well-known "timber stamp" was V T; his "end stamp," the so-called "wee tee"— V. Editor’s note.

2Pilots were the aristocrats of the lumber woods, where a strict caste system was observed. Raftmen formed the highest caste, contemptuous of the loggers who provided the "sticks" for "log rafts" of which the pilots were captains. Below the raftmen were the loggers, who themselves were divided into two castes: loggers of white pine (the noblest of Pennsylvania trees), and loggers of hemlock, the bark of which was used for tanning. Under them came the "pulp cutters"—Swedes, Hungarians, and other "outsiders." On the last rung of all were the "chemical timber cutters"—cutters of wood used in the production of wood alcohol, charcoal, and other derivatives. The feeling between castes was often bitter. During the wars waged between raftmen and loggers, the raftmen have been known to drive nails into white pine logs to injure the saws.
versations generally ended with: "I want to make that trip. I'll see Vince." This many did. A familiar sight was to see old raftmen looking for and hunting up the man who was making it possible for them to run one more trip. One could see the twinkle in their boyish eyes, well-hidden behind gray beards; and the joy of anticipation marked their movements and the tone of their voices.

But the life-line held by these men, the raft rope of hope, was slipping through their hands faster than they realized. The line in Vincent Tonkin's hands came to an end, November 22, 1908. His last words to me were, "Dudley, carry on." Six raftmen carried him to his last resting place on the hill overlooking the river he had loved.

VT

His death wrought a profound change in the plans for the excursion raft. The matter was dropped for a time, except for inquiries from some of the old-timers and some of the younger people who had become interested.

On a rainy day during the early part of March, 1912, two of the Tonkin boys, Ord and myself, met at the old homestead. One said to the other, "It's going to make a flood," referring to a "rafting flood," i.e., sufficient natural "raise" of water to float a raft. The other replied, "We ought to make father's excursion raft." This was the spark that kindled the fire within the brothers to "carry on."

Plans were made then and there to run the excursion raft. I was to see to the making of the timber, my brother to look after the hauling to the "rafting-in" grounds, i.e., a river bank suitable for raft construction. The project was carried through with the interest, cooperation, and hard work of local raftmen. Time was short, as the spring rafting season, when there was sufficient water to float a raft, was already half gone.

Ira Walls and Joe Brothers made the timber and "rafted it in" as soon as it was delivered to the river bank by Ed Walls and Ord Tonkin. Andy Russell cut the lash poles, made the bows and pins, and also the head-blocks to carry the two oars. The oars
(sweeps to some persons) were framed, finished, and hung by many willing hands anxious to have a part in what they believed at that time was to be the last raft. Soon after construction was completed, we had a nice flood, and “tied loose” from near the mouth of Shryock Run for the trip to Lock Haven.

The raft was in charge of an affable, friendly Irish American, a good raft-and-water-man of the second generation of up-river pilots, Harry Conner of Burnside, Pennsylvania. He safely delivered this excursion raft to Lock Haven, carrying many of our friends, young and old, all or part of the way, since everybody was anxious to have a raft ride. Twenty-six raftmen made the entire trip.

As we passed the rocky hazards of the river, or drifted along in quiet waters, the conversation turned to the pleasures and adventures of the trip. It was during the exciting stretch between Renovo and Lock Haven that an idea ripened: “This must not be our last raft.” And on an evening in March, 1912, at the old rafting headquarters, the Fallen Hotel in Lock Haven, we made a solemn compact among ourselves to “carry on”: to run a raft every ten years.

Time, the old tyrant, works fast for most of us between the thirty-second and fifty-eighth birthdays. The ten-year periods flew swiftly by. Essential matters were given preference over nonessential. But our beloved pilot, Harry Conner, never gave up the idea of running another raft. Sometime during 1936 he began to put pressure on me to carry out our compact made in Lock Haven back in 1912. We finally decided to make and run another raft in the spring of 1938. By coincidence the date set to run it was fifty years after my first visit to Lock Haven and one hundred years after the Tonkin family had settled in Clearfield County.

As with Longfellow and his turnip, the idea grew and grew and grew. But by 1938 there were greater difficulties than there had been in 1912. The work of making and running a raft had to be done for the most part by raftmen, but over the period of twenty-six years the raft rope of hope had come to an end in the hands of more men than we realized. The remaining timber makers were in the eighty-year group. Teamsters were gone. There were few horses and there was practically no equipment. The response, nevertheless, of older men to the tasks of past years under the
urge of boyhood memories, made possible the construction of the Last Raft. I have never seen or heard of such a come-back of four-score-year-old men as was witnessed in this undertaking. They must never be forgotten.

At this point let us tie up for a little and interrupt the course of the narrative while we pay tribute to history. It will enable us to understand the ancient traditions that have helped to make rafting a great brotherhood, a calling like sailoring and soldiering, felt in the blood.

Rafting in some form is as old as man himself. Primitive people fastened their round timbers together with vines, withes, or crude ropes made from local fibers. Soldier boys of the last war have seen, in the South Pacific, crude rafts made in this manner. The round sticks in ship-spar rafts in the eastern United States were fastened and held together by hickory withes, with little change from the primitive methods of our ancestors.

The great volume of rafting on the Susquehanna was hewn timber, often called square timber. No other stream on the face of the earth has carried such a quantity of this class of timber. The great rafts of the Mississippi and Columbia Rivers were made up of round timber and logs.

The oldest record we have of hewn timber rafting is found in the Book of Books, when King Solomon began work on his Temple. Hiram, King of Tyre, sent to Solomon to get an order to furnish the timber for the building. He got the order and made the sale, as recorded in I Kings, V, 6: “Now therefore command thou that they hew me cedar trees out of Lebanon; . . . for thou knowest that there is not among us any that can skill to hew timber like unto the Sidonians.” These people were the top timber makers of centuries ago. Again we read, I Kings, V, 9: “I will convey them by sea in floats [rafts] unto the place thou shalt appoint me, and will cause them to be discharged there.” This was the work of raftmen for the King of Tyre.

The reader may ask, what brought about and created the demand for the large amount of special timber delivered to market on the waters of the Susquehanna? The Wise Men in our oldest rafting story said, “There is nothing new under the sun.” Just as Hiram, King of Tyre, wanted to sell cedar out of Lebanon, our early settlers wanted to sell white pine and oak out of Pennsylvania.
The first collective large business in America was shipbuilding. Our Atlantic coast from Boston, Mass., to Charleston, S. C., was but a series of boat yards and shipbuilding plants. The Quakers of Philadelphia were owners of large tracts of pine lands in the State. The same men were in touch with, and very often interested in, boat and ship yards. Here our Temple story is repeated. The land owner sold timber to the shipbuilder. The only methods of transportation were provided by the snow of winter from stump to water's edge, and by the spring floods in the river to carry the timber to salt water. Thus the early market for timber rafted on our river was the ship yards of the east. Some of the finest white pine spars and booms, and white oak keel timbers, were exported to Scotland and England. During the shipbuilding era the great American clipper ships (swiftest sailing vessels ever built), rigged with our spars and booms, carried the Stars and Stripes on their top gallant masts to every known port in the world. Our Pennsylvania timber put the American flag on the seven seas.

The battle between the Merrimac and the Monitor, together with the Great Eastern steamship's plying of the Atlantic, was the be-
ginning of the end of the ship timber business. Steel took over. Ship timber continued to be sold, for repairs to ships, but in lessening quantities. The raftmen were obliged to look to other markets. The circular saw had just come into its own, with the band saw soon to follow. The raft timber on the river was the source of raw material for the small bill timber mills being put up on the banks. The cities of the east were being built. Long timbers were in demand on the farms of our great agricultural counties. These markets took up the slack of the ship timber business. The great building boom in farm, village, town, and city increased the use of Susquehanna timber, rafts and logs, until Williamsport became the Lumber Capital of the world.

This long excursion into the past has been made to let the reader see how firmly this ancient business had been engrafted into the heart, soul, and body of early settlers and their descendants. Sons of our raftmen were to be found in every state of the Union and in many foreign countries. We trust the foregoing will serve to explain an unforeseen problem which confronted us in the operation of the Last Raft: the huge, and sometimes over-eager, crowds that greeted us everywhere, wading into the river and so making it dangerous for us to land for fear of injuring people; the souvenir hunters; and the multitudes who could not be kept off the raft. At Clearfield the crowd jumped off a wall onto the raft and threatened to sink it. After that we had a police escort at most of the landings to help control the crowds.

During the summer and fall of 1937, we traveled many miles over roads in Clearfield County which the Lord had paved with rocks—and the caretaker had since died. We were in search of white pine trees suitable for raft timber. Everywhere we had a good reception. When we found what we wanted and explained our purpose to the land owners, we were allowed to buy timber at a reasonable price. Not one timber owner turned us down. All were happy to have a part in the undertaking. This was the first indication to us of the general public interest which in the end was to grow to such proportions as to imperil our whole venture.

The project was put in charge of Levi (Bud) Connor of Glen Campbell, who along with his father, had worked in timber making for my father, Vincent Tonkin. Bud secured the services of the two Webster brothers, old-time broad axe men, to chop and
hew the timber. They represented the Sidonians of Solomon's time.

When the timber making was completed, the next step was timber hauling. We had a real search to find a timber sled, but located one in Indiana County. We had it brought to Burnside, where Ed Wetzel, experienced in such matters, reinforced the parts weakened by age. We learned that Ed Baird, an old-time timber hauler, had a pair of good horses, equipped with harness to do heavy work. Arrangements were made with him to haul the timber to the rafting-in ground in the old-time approved manner. This gave the cameramen a chance at orthodox hauling methods.

The next move was to make and assemble the rafting materials. First on the list were the ten lash poles. These poles are the cross members that hold the timbers together, side by side. The best quality poles are sapling hickory. The old-time standard measurements are 4½ inches to 5 inches butt diameter, 28 feet long with a 2½ to 3 inch diameter top. Susquehanna River rafts have never exceeded 28 feet wide. Two river rafts side by side make a fleet not over 56 feet wide. Most chutes on the river were 28 feet wide. A fleet of timber was forced to single in order to run the chutes.

Next we had to get bows and pins. These are a multiple device to fasten the timber to the lash pole. The bow is made of tough young white oak sapling butts not over 6 inches in diameter. The wood is cut 20 to 22 inches long, split into ribbon-like strips a scant 1¼ inches wide by about 3/8 inch thick. These ribbon-like strips are bent in the form of a U, and take on the name of bow. The pins are split out of clear ash butts and are 1¼ inches square, 9 inches long. In use the bow is put ends downward over the lash pole into an auger hole in the timber on each side of the lash pole. A pin is then driven tight into the hole alongside the bow, making a very strong connection. Raftmen with hoary heads had their sons or grandsons get them some bow-timber, that they might make a few bows to send us as a token of their interest. It was very touching. One old raftman made the oar pins and headblocks for the job.

The river cleared of ice early in March of 1938. Rafting-in started with our beloved pilot, Harry Conner (no relation of Bud Connor), working with us to have everything ready to tie loose on the first rafting flood.
This was one undertaking that was not lacking in manpower. Young and old flocked to the river to help build the Last Raft. The younger furnished the muscle-might, while the older furnished the know-how. Under the wise supervision of Harry and Bud, the older men were given certain things to do. For example, Ed and Edwin Sunderlin, twin brothers well past four-score in age, took over the responsibility of making, framing, and finishing the two oars. These oars were made on the river bank and were over 50 feet long each. When hung, they were in almost perfect balance.

While the raft was being made ready, young and willing hands built the shanty on the river bank, to be moved and put on the raft later. As they were working without a mental blueprint of an old-time raft shanty, some parts of the finished job required changes. The raft completed, we decided to move the shanty to the raft and at the same time correct the minor building mistakes. This work had scarcely started, on a beautiful March Sunday morning, when men, women, and children began to arrive to see the raft. This should have been an eye-opener to us of things to come, but I overlooked its significance. We were busy with rafting details, not public relations.

Sunday, March 13. The foot traveler, turning his field glasses right or left, as he stands on almost any of the top ridges of the Appalachian Mountain system from Maine to Louisiana, will see Presbyterian Church spires of the Sir Christopher Wren type of church architecture. Our own West Branch Valley is no exception. The running of rafts on Sunday became a moot question in these staid Presbyterian settlements. Finally the question broke into the open and was handed to the Elders. It is well here to note (as indeed the Scotch Presbyterian Session which was handling the matter noted), that the economy of the region rested on getting the timber to market. After due deliberation behind closed doors, the Session decided it was proper to run rafts on Sunday—otherwise the Lord would not have sent the rafting flood. The present writer cannot vouch for the validity of these findings, since they are based on providential determinations made ahead of his time. He will say this, however: that his grandfather on his mother's side was a member of the Session of a church located less than one mile from the head of raft navigation on our river. He was
born in 1820, rafted, lived to a great old age—gray beard and all—and never denied the findings of the ruling Elders.

We did not get off on Sunday. There was not enough water. But a rainfall on Sunday night prepared the way. It gave us a small flood, though not enough to carry us over McGee’s bar. I tied her loose for the trip at about 2 p.m., March 14, 1938, with Harry Conner at the front oar and Ed Sunderlin at the rear. We dropped down to above the covered bridge at McGee’s Mills to await more water.

The Lord was with us at the start. My brother Ord living in Cherry Tree phoned me about 5 a.m. on Tuesday, March 15, “We have a dandy flood.” My reply was: “Tie her loose quick as possible [the rush was an effort to get over the McGee bar], I will meet you in Mahaffey.” As the raft passed under the bridge at Mahaffey, Ord called from the raft up to me where I was standing above him on the highway bridge, “We did not touch gravel.”

Thus we were in Mahaffey, tied below the mouth of Chest Creek. Before we arrived, thousands were waiting there to see the
front oar blade appear. The front oar blade—symbol of romance to all true raftmen—is the first part of a raft to be seen coming around a bend in the stream. The wiser sightseers did not try for a vantage parking space in Mahaffey. They wanted to see the raft go through the Falls. Many of the rafting hazards of the river are misunderstood by the layman, but there has never been any doubt in the minds of river men that Rocky Bend and Chest Falls are the most dangerous places on the West Branch between the headwater springs and Harrisburg. Eighty-five year old Tom Fee of the Patchin family rafting dynasty untied the rope in Mahaffey, and we were off for Rocky Bend and Chest Falls. We cleared the rocks with twelve inches to spare. In less than forty minutes we were safely tied up below the Falls. This stop was made to give the ladies who had abandoned the raft at Mahaffey a chance to come aback. Miss Charlotte Cooper, who stayed with us throughout the day (thus being the only woman ever to ride a raft through Chest Falls) here greeted her returning friends.

In a few minutes we were off again to pass lesser hazards at Hoyt’s Dam, Spencer’s Rocks, and the Sheep Pen. We tied up a few minutes at Irvin Park at Curwensville (Peewee’s Nest to
born in 1820, rafted, lived to a great old age—gray beard and all—and never denied the findings of the ruling Elders.

We did not get off on Sunday. There was not enough water. But a rainfall on Sunday night prepared the way. It gave us a small flood, though not enough to carry us over McGee's bar. I tied her loose for the trip at about 2 p.m., March 14, 1938, with Harry Conner at the front oar and Ed Sunderlin at the rear. We dropped down to above the covered bridge at McGee's Mills to await more water.

The Lord was with us at the start. My brother Ord living in Cherry Tree phoned me about 5 a.m. on Tuesday, March 15, "We have a dandy flood." My reply was: "Tie her loose quick as possible [the rush was an effort to get over the McGee bar]. I will meet you in Mahaffey." As the raft passed under the bridge at Mahaffey, Ord called from the raft up to me where I was standing above him on the highway bridge, "We did not touch gravel."

Thus we were in Mahaffey, tied below the mouth of Chest Creek. Before we arrived, thousands were waiting there to see the
front oar blade appear. The front oar blade—symbol of romance to all true raftmen—is the first part of a raft to be seen coming around a bend in the stream. The wiser sightseers did not try for a vantage parking space in Mahaffey. They wanted to see the raft go through the Falls. Many of the rafting hazards of the river are misunderstood by the layman, but there has never been any doubt in the minds of river men that Rocky Bend and Chest Falls are the most dangerous places on the West Branch between the headwater springs and Harrisburg. Eighty-five year old Tom Fee of the Patchin family rafting dynasty untied the rope in Mahaffey, and we were off for Rocky Bend and Chest Falls. We cleared the rocks with twelve inches to spare. In less than forty minutes we were safely tied up below the Falls. This stop was made to give the ladies who had abandoned the raft at Mahaffey a chance to come aboard. Miss Charlotte Cooper, who stayed with us throughout the day (thus being the only woman ever to ride a raft through Chest Falls) here greeted her returning friends.

In a few minutes we were off again to pass lesser hazards at Hoyt's Dam, Spencer's Rocks, and the Sheep Pen. We tied up a few minutes at Irvin Park at Curwensville (Peewee's Nest to
raftmen) to pick up some of our more distant friends who had overtaken the raft. Then on to Clearfield. From the river bank at Clearfield, where a crowd was awaiting us as the shades of late evening were falling in this section of the beautiful valley, the bright white-pine oar blade—it brings a lump in my throat to remember it—could be seen coming around the river bend above town. This was the signal pre-arranged by Billy Wrigley (a raftman’s son) for each factory and locomotive whistle, court house and church bell, together with all other known forms of noise and merry-making, to let loose. It was a great welcome. Fortunate is the person to have one such thrill in a lifetime. Looking from an upper-story hotel window in Clearfield that night, one had to assume that all the people in the county had come to town.

The next morning, Wednesday, March 16, we tied loose at about daybreak in a drizzling rain, which continued most of the day. The town named after the old iron master Peter Karthaus was to be our next tie. This run is known to rivermen as *Through the Mountains*. Here the river breaks through the great Allegheny range, and offers from the river much of the finest scenery within the State.

A very interesting and heretofore overlooked series of events, with far-reaching consequences, happened on this part of the run. This region, for a few miles back on each side of the river, has many small one-room schools. Many times during the day when rounding a bend we would see a school teacher with a group of little tots at the water’s edge where an old timber road comes to the river. They had walked miles, through the rain, from their schools to see the Last Raft. What a thrill grandparents-to-be will have in telling of this sight to the young Americans of the future.

We had not traveled many miles before the souvenir hunter appeared on the scene. Before we had learned the necessity of posting guards at night, our cook and cookee* lost all their table knives, forks, spoons, and light table ware. The tin cups vanished. An enterprising truck driver loaded up the white pine juggles and chips off some of the nice pine sticks. Then he drove to Lock Haven and sold these bits at from ten to twenty-five cents each. People were proud to show their friends a chip.

---

*The cook’s helper.*
Harry Conner arrested for speeding at five miles per hour and sentenced to hard labor at the rear oar.

Courtesy R. Dudley Tonkin

Souvenir hunters cleared us out of everything at the time of the accident. Several thousand feet of sixteen millimeter movie films, already exposed (four cameras had been at work as we came along) were saved from the wreck and brought ashore. But the souvenir hunters got after them, opened the containers, exposed every film to light, and destroyed the greatest set of raft pictures ever taken.

Two miles above the town of Karthaus we met people on the river banks, and as we neared the town we could see it was alive with human beings. Never before or since have there been so many people in or around the old town at one time. Because of the crowd, we could not get near enough to shore to get out a rope at the old tie-up. I, on shore to make the tie, was thrown a rope just as the raft passed under the bridge, and I made a snub on a small tree—only to see it uprooted without checking the speed of the raft.

Speaking of bridges reminds me of one of the most curious effects of the widespread interest our voyage aroused. As the raft passed under bridges, there were dropped to us letters, papers, and
telegrams. Many of the letter and telegrams, which came from all over the country (Seattle, for example, Portland, Oregon, and Washington, D. C.) had no other address than “R. D. Tonkin, On the Raft.” From Curwensville down, mail was dropped to us from the bridges, provided, that is, we did not tie up. At towns where we did tie up, it was delivered in the ordinary way.

Saturday, March 19. Over Lock Haven Dam at about 8:30 a.m., with thousands watching the only square-timber raft ever to go over the new concrete wall across the river. Below the dam, we tied up to let friends come on for the run to Williamsport. This is a very slow trip, and the shades of night were falling when we tied up in the one-time lumber capital of the world. The evening spent here among the old-time logging and sawmill friends was very pleasant.

Sunday, March 20. The experience best enjoyed by all raft riders is to ride through the chute. The only one on the river at that time lay just ahead to carry us over Williamsport Dam. It is a double chute, 56 feet wide and a large flow of water, so that we knew the lead of the water would bring the raft to it. There was no danger, and fun for all. We tied up below the dam for a few minutes on the north side to pick up some friends from Philadelphia.

From this point the writer, who was accustomed to make the
necessary arrangements ahead for the tie-ups, went overland to Montgomery, because the false work under the new bridge at that place was giving us some concern. There was only one opening the raft could go through. It was arranged that I was to stand on the bridge over that place and signal the pilot. The round timber pole piling driven in the bed of the river to support the concrete forms and weight of the concrete in the arches during construction, had not been removed. A boat or raft could go through the open span, but the others were closed to all forms of water traffic.

The editor of the *Montgomery Mirror* and his friend Burgess C. F. Taylor, a dentist of their town formerly of Weedsville, Clearfield County, came up the evening the raft lay in Lock Haven Dam. They told us of having a special Souvenir Rafting Edition made for the following Sunday. They requested we tie up in their town. This fine gesture from these men could have only one answer: “We will tie up below your new bridge.” Another part of my mission ahead of the raft was to find a solid tree on the river bank where we could snub up, and to see that the crowds of people were held back so that the men could get the rope out for me to stop the raft.

At Montgomery, while I was looking up stream to see the front oar-blades swing back and forth, word came, “The raft has cracked up.”

I refused to believe it. Critics had predicted such things from the very start, but we had anticipated every foreseeable hazard and prepared against it. Within a short time, top materials from the raft came floating down to confirm the story.

I started for Muncy. There I faced the tragedy of my life. The shock was too much. A former friend and brother from Cherry Tree, Horace Lovelace, appeared on the scene and took me to his home in Hughesville.

Words fail to express my appreciation—it is something that can only be felt—of the kindness shown to us at that time by the people of Muncy and vicinity, especially the Theisses and the Fenstermachers, in whose homes those brought in from the icy waters were given hot coffee and first aid.

All America, indeed it seems the whole world, was concerned with our tragedy. Governor Fisher was on the sea, coming from
Brazil at the time of the accident. The captain said to him, "Something has happened up your way." He got the story by radio on the high seas.

When we had pulled ourselves together and got back to normal, we tried to gather evidence and sift the various theories advanced concerning the cause of the accident. The official inquiry, and our own investigations, brought out the following facts.

All forms of water transportation carry an element of risk, but the history of rafting on the Susquehanna shows it to have been a serious, methodical business with a good tradition. It was carried on by steady, reliable men. When the Last Raft first tied loose, its crew were imbued with the thoughtful consideration for life and property which characterized the best traditions of the industry in the past. The river hazards, known of old by the experienced men who were in charge, were prepared for, recognized when they appeared, and safely passed. New hazards—all but one—were carefully examined beforehand and the necessary steps taken to meet them. The one exception was the excitement of thousands of people who lined the river banks, pressed into the water (preventing the tying up in accustomed places), and thronged on to the raft. The people of the eastern states had become raft-minded—without, however, appreciating the serious nature of the business.

What actually happened when the crack-up occurred?

The raft had passed Muncy and was approaching the Reading Railroad Bridge. Since the old rafting days, eight piers had been added to the bridge, narrowing the spans. But the situation here had been examined. The spans were plenty wide enough to let the raft run through safely, though the channels were not wide enough (as of course was true of many other passages in the river) to let it through sideways. Here as elsewhere—in Chest Falls, for instance, or the Williamsport chute—its course had to be kept true.

Boats of many kinds were passing up and down on each side of the raft as it approached the Reading Railroad Bridge below Muncy. It had been decided in advance that the raft should take a certain span, and she was headed for that opening. The raft held her course steady. Then someone coming up-stream in a power boat cried, "There's a railroad car where you are going." We had known it all along. It was the remains of an old car many feet under water. There was no danger. But someone on the raft cried, "Take the other span."
The man at the rear oar, the steersman, who was hard of hearing and who, because of the press of people on the raft could not see the pilot at the front oar, thought "Take the other span" was an order from the pilot, and gave a hard pull to the right. This threw the front end of the raft to the left.

The water is swift at this point. Time was short. The pilot had no chance either to find out what had gone wrong or to correct the error. The raft hit the bridge pier three to four feet deep—that is to say, to about the third stick of timber.

The rear of the raft having been thrown to the right while the left corner hit the pier, the raft, caught in the swift current, was hurled sideways against the next pier to the right. In rafting terms it "saddle-bagged," with slightly more than half of the raft extending past the pier and into the next span. The right side (upper) and both ends sank. Holding in that position for a moment, it righted itself, and then, with the heavy water pressure on the longer part, which extended into this span of the bridge, it swung round and passed rear end foremost through the opening.

When it hit, there were forty-eight people on the raft. Within two minutes forty-seven were struggling for their lives in the water. Forty were saved by swimming and the good rescue work of the many boatmen. Seven, including Harry Conner, were swallowed by the ice-cold water. One man remained standing, with dry feet, on the raft, near where the side struck the pier. The raft did not break or tear up. Swimmers and boatmen boarded it, righted the front oar, which had been knocked off, and started pulling for the left shore.

The writer does not wish to minimize his responsibility, or cast blame on others; but he asks the reader to consider the human element involved. Who could have foreseen the train of consequences stemming from the well-meant interference of the man in the motor boat?

After the accident a telegram came from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina: "Keep oars going. A Tonkin never quits."

Following the coroner's inquest, we tied loose with heavy hearts and ran to Watsontown. Here we met hospitality unsurpassed. The following day at Northumberland, the raft nosed out into the

Harry Conner's place had been taken that day by a pilot who had special knowledge of the new sandbars in that part of the river.
The Last Raft "saddle bags." Photo by bystander on the Reading Railroad bridge.

Courtesy Leo A. Luttringer
THE LAST RAFT

big river, where the North and West Branches join. We crossed the remains of Shamokin Dam and ran on to Selinsgrove. Here J. D. Bogar, Jr., of Harrisburg came on the raft, looked it over, and bought it in real old-fashioned style—no papers, just the buyer's word. Leaving here, running McKee's Half Falls, and drifting into some new sand and coal bars, we at last tied up in Greene's Dam near Clark's Ferry Bridge.

The next day Pilot John Myers of Lock Haven nosed his way, following the proper raft course, among the rocks near the left shore, to reach Fort Hunter about noon. *March 25, 1938.* Here I tied up the Last Raft in the mouth of Fishing Creek, and ended an epoch in history.

*In great attempts it is glorious even to fail.*

Longinus, *On the Sublime*

*Dismantling the Last Raft. This photograph by Mrs. Agnes Tomlinson, of Philadelphia, took second prize in the 1951 historical photography contest of the Indiana County Historical and Genealogical Society.*