

## MEMORIES OF THE SUSQUEHANNA BOOM:

### The Museum of the Lycoming County Historical Society

BY L. RODMAN WURSTER

A FEW weeks ago I spent an afternoon wandering through the museum of the Lycoming Historical Society. One room fairly bulged with tools, models, and old photographs that recalled the days when Williamsport was the lumber capital of the world.

One faded picture held my interest more than the rest. Countless thousands of logs were massed for miles in a river. Tiny islands, regularly spaced up the river, held this gigantic jumble from swirling downstream.

An elderly gentleman who had been brightening the glass of a showcase now watched me as I studied the old photograph. From the corner of my eye I could see that he needed only a word of encouragement to tell me all about the days when lumber was king.

"Excuse me," I said. "I wonder if you could tell me about this picture. The detail is remarkable for a photograph this age, but I'm afraid I don't know enough about the lumbering days to get out of the picture what it's worth."

"Well, Sir, it's good because Professor Hart took it—back in 1897. He took a good many of these pictures." With this he picked up a log scaler and pointed to the logs in the picture. "This is the Susquehanna boom running from Duboistown five miles up to the Linden railroad bridge. Had to stop there because of a ferry, but it started in again just above and ran up five more miles."

"What are these?" I asked, indicating the little islands.

"Cribs," he said. "Here's a model of one made by Christ Haist. He was channel boss on the boom when it shut down in 1909." He picked up the six-inch-square model of a crib. Judging from the miniature, the original was a cage of giant timbers slanted at the ends and filled with rocks.

"They sank these in the river, and if they didn't sit level, the men just evened them up on top."



*Mr. James Myers standing beside the original sign of the Susquehanna Boom Company.*

*Courtesy Lycoming Historical Society*

"What are these sticks," I asked, fingering two pieces of wood joined by a clevis, which in turn was chained to the crib.

"Boom sticks. They were white pine, seventy or eighty feet long, and they ran between the cribs the full length of the boom. They kept the logs from working out into the river."

Like a picture puzzle the pieces were slowly beginning to fit together in my mind. I had heard of many of the terms before, but had never been able to relate them clearly to one another. With this gentleman's explanations, the parts were forming a whole. Wondering who he was and why he knew so much, I introduced myself.

"Myers is my name," he said. "James Myers. I'm seventy-four years old, and I worked on this boom here for over eight years. Started when I was twelve."

This explained his knowledge, but his phenomenal memory certainly belied his years.

"Yessir," he went on, "came up here to look around after I

retired from the railroad. Started telling people about these things, and I haven't stopped yet. Now these are the platforms that the men worked on when they sorted and rafted the logs." He pointed to a model representing heavy planks spiked together with cross pieces at the ends. "And these are stretchers," he said, indicating a similar looking model, longer and not so heavy. "They ran between the cribs the length of the boom so the men had something to walk on."

Moving to another table, Mr. Myers picked up one of several small sledges with raised figures on the head.

"This is a stamping iron. When the logs were cut in the woods, they were stamped with the owner's mark. This book here has in it over 1,700 separate marks that came through the Susquehanna Boom. When the logs were rafted out, only those of one mark went into a raft. That was a boy's first job when he started on the boom. They called us 'boom rats.'"

"What about this picture called the 'boom tug'?" I asked, wondering how a tugboat fitted into the logging picture.

"That boat came up the old canal," Mr. Myers said. "They used it to haul barges for repair work on the boom, but it got its heaviest use putting up and taking down the boom. In the fall after the last logs were rafted, all the boom sticks, platforms, stretchers, and pilings were taken out and stored. Then in the spring before the first drive started, the tug had to haul all that stuff out and place it again."

The logging industry and the part played by the boom assumed more and more aspects of present day industrial specialization as Mr. Myers continued his explanations.

"Most of these things," he said, referring to the hundreds of tools and other relics of the lumbering days, "were given by families of men who one time made their livings working on the boom. Look at these 'cork' boots now. Henry Bennett nicked up many a log in that river with those boots. And George Blair's dinner bucket here carried a man-sized lunch with plenty of coffee to wash it down."

"How about all the photographs?" I asked, pointing to the numerous albums and framed pictures about the room.

"Well, a lot of them came from old family albums. People brought them in with the idea that the generations coming on around here

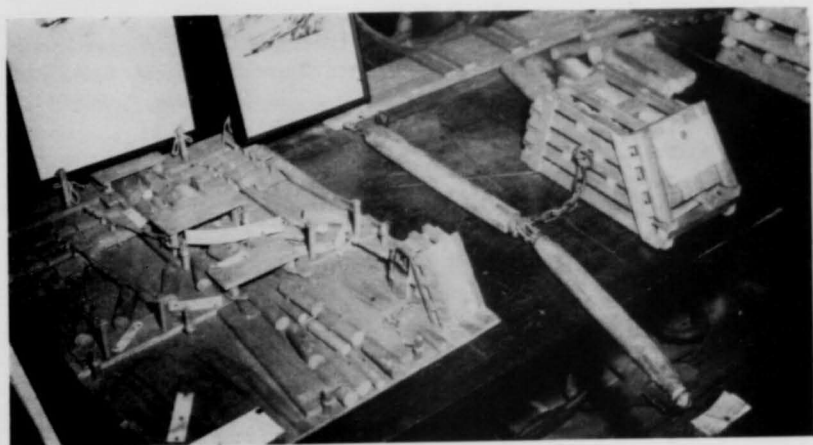
might want to know how their city got its big start. Some of the others came from newspaper files and others came from men like Professor Hart, who took the pictures for a hobby."

A look of pride sparkled in Mr. Myers' eyes as the old boom rat warmed up to his climax.

"In this room we've got tools or models of things that were used in the old lumber industry from the felling of white pines that were really trees instead of saplings to the cutting of those trees into lumber." He tapped his pointer emphatically on a showcase containing a variety of axe heads, then on several different sizes and shapes of crosscut saws, and lastly on a circular saw at least four feet in diameter.

Mr. Myers concluded his lesson—he is an excellent teacher in love with his subject—by explaining in succession models of a log sled, a log slide, a splash dam, a shear boom, a timber raft, a board raft, and a real working wedge horse. On the last the men worked in the winter making the five-inch, red oak wedges which they later drove into the logs for the ropes to be snubbed around in rafting.

Unpretentious in its layout, this exhibit of the Lycoming Historical Society contains a treasure of regional history and industry. One leaves with the hope that Mr. James Myers can keep up his invaluable service for many more years.



*Left: Model of rafting-out platform. Right: Crib with boom sticks made by Christ Haist.*

Courtesy Lycoming Historical Society

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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THE history of lumbering and rafting in Pennsylvania remains to be written. The body of printed material on the subject is not large, but there are sources awaiting the attention of the researcher. Lumber company records, "up-river" newspapers, town and regional histories of the timber country, river histories, and the more elusive journals, tales, and intimate reminiscences of raftmen and lumbermen, would provide the pith and bark of the lumber saga.

For further reading on the subject the following books and articles are suggested:

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