

# Rivers Were Main Highways When Lumberjack Was King

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Sixty years ago the main highways leading into Merrill were the rivers. The Wisconsin, Prairie, Copper, Wood, and Hay Meadow rivers were a necessary medium to bring the thousands of pine logs down from the woods to feed the hungry mills in Merrill.

Those were the days of the genuine lumberjacks and "river pigs," who were caked shoes and heavy woolen. They were the kings of the day when they "showed-off" with peavy and pike pole on a real unruly log.

The drives in the spring, during the high flood waters, started anywhere on the Wisconsin from the Copper river to Tomahawk. The logs were floated down from the log decks on the river banks and were sorted at three places called divides or booms.

When the logs arrived at the third boom shanty, at the mouth of Joe Snow creek, they were given their first sorting. The third boom shanty was a big two-story boarding house where the boom men lived during the river season. The late Ed Chase was foreman of the third boom.

The first sorting divided the Merrill logs and the Wausau logs. The Wausau logs went into the smaller of the two channels, and the Merrill logs into the larger division. After being sorted the logs floated down to the second boom, which was located above the second dam or the Alexander dam today. At the second boom the Wausau and Merrill logs were checked again for any that had been missed at the third boom.

The channels were marked by a string of piling and booms, like an

endless chain. The boom stick was a long log fastened to another by a large chain, usually made of one-half to three-fourths inch iron.

The sorting was made possible by a mark on each log known as a watermark. It was chipped through the bark when the log was cut and each mark designated the lumber company ownership. Besides the watermark each company had a distinctive symbol on the cut end of each log. For instance, P. B. Champaign lumber company had a watermark of three notches and on the end were the initials: P. B.

The logs were sorted by boom men who stood on a raised platform between two booms. As the logs passed under the platform they were identified by the watermark and shoved off into the proper place. Pike poles were used for this operation.

So the logs were sluiced over the second dam and floated down peacefully to the first boom, located where West Main street reaches the Wisconsin river on the west end of the Sixth Ward. There was also a large two-story boom shanty located nearby.

Here is where the fine points of sorting the logs for the different mills was done. The logs were sorted and floated into a pocket holding the logs for each mill. A pocket was an area surrounded by booms and piling. For the Merrill mills there were eight pockets. When the mill ponds of the respective mills became empty, logs were sluiced over the first dam and down to the mills to keep them running.

Below the first dam there were three channels: P. B. Champaign

Lumber company on the east bank; Merrill Lumber company on the west bank; (they being the first two mills on the river) and the center channel, known as the Wausau channel, used for sluicing all other logs.

Opposite the mills a wide flat boom was used to swing across the center channel so that the logs could be sluiced into the mill pocket.

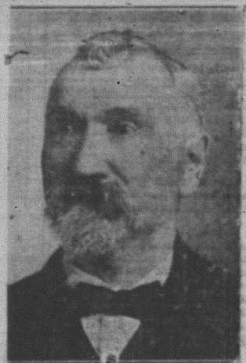
Down the river from the P. B. Champaign mill and the Merrill Lumber company mill was the Gilkey-Anson company mill, located on the island between the Sixth Ward and the West Side. The H. W. Wright mill was located where the Kinzel mill stood in later years.

The Wausau channel followed down the west side of the island and two or three hundred yards above the west Sixth Ward bridge, another flat boom could be swung across the channel for the logs of the Comstock Lumber company, or "Big Mill," later the Wisconsin-Michigan Lumber Co. It was located just south of the Merrill Woodensaw plant. The woodensaw was the "Big Mill" planing mill.

At this mill another boom could be swung across the channel to sluice the logs of the Wolf River Lumber company, located at the mouth of Devil's Creek. This mill was the first in the city to go out of production, and was the only mill that had no slab or refuse burner. All the waste from the mill was burned in an open fire at the junction of Devil's creek and the Wisconsin.

The Merrill mill, later the A. H. Stange mill was east of the Tannery town bridge. Below the mill the river was clear of piling down to the canal that connected the Prairie river and the Wisconsin and where the logs could be sluiced into the T. B. Scott pocket. The Scott mill was located at the foot of Mill street. Here was another dam known as Scott's dam which was used to keep water high enough to float the logs.

The canal mentioned before was located at the east end of the Stange lumber yard and was about 16-20 feet wide. It is not in existence today.



W. H. Kaiser, among the wisest known citizens of Merrill, having lived here many years, and served in public offices, including that of county treasurer several terms.

The dams across the river served to hold a high water level and provide extra water to flush the river during low water periods in summer. The Tomahawk dam, built in the early 80s was used to provide enough water to get the logs over Grandmother and Grandfather falls and Bill Cross rapids.

The Merrill Boom company was an organization that built the dams, booms, boarding houses, pier booms and sorting booms to see that the logs brought down during the spring drives were sorted and delivered to the various mills. The lumber companies paid the boom company for this service according to the number of logs delivered.



This picture shows how the wires were strung along the main streets in the old days. They were placed in the alleys in 1915 when the Wausau Street-Railway company took over the Merrill plant and overhauled the entire system.

## Grandma Worked Hard

to keep her

## BEAUTY

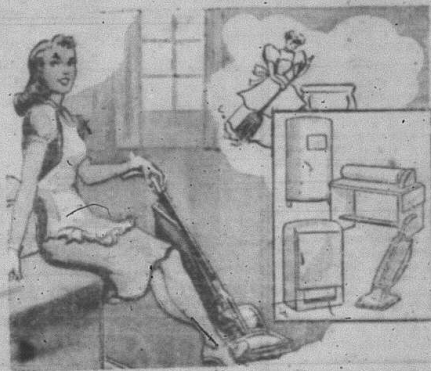
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