



River driving required a stout heart and a talent for staying on a log in the tumbling waters of a Maine river. Each of these drivers learned the tricks of the trade as a youth and he probably endured some right of passage before gaining entry into the fraternity of men who made this dangerous business their stock in trade. *Maine Folklife Center Photo #302.*

“THE ONLY MAN”: SKILL AND BRAVADO ON THE RIVER-DRIVE

BY EDWARD D. IVES

Handling logs on Maine's swift-flowing rivers demanded great skill and dexterity, and it was a source of pride for those who could do it well. Not surprisingly, stories about river driving have become an important part of Maine's heritage. Not the least of these stories involve the “only man” to accomplish some particularly dangerous or difficult feat of prowess and bravery. These tales were bound up with the coming-of-age process along the banks of the Penobscot and Kennebec rivers, and the accomplishments they relate signaled a person's acceptance into the select ranks of legendary loggers—if they didn't go too far in testing their mettle against the fates. Edward D. “Sandy” Ives is professor emeritus at the University of Maine and former director of the Maine Folklife Center. His publications, concentrating on the oral traditions of Maine and the Maritime Provinces, include LARRY GORMAN: THE MAN WHO MADE THE SONGS; LAWRENCE DOYLE: THE FARMER-POET OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND; JOE SCOTT: THE WOODSMAN SONGMAKER; and GEORGE MAGOON AND THE DOWN EAST GAME WAR.

FLEETWOOD PRIDE, who was ninety-five when I met him in 1959, had grown up on a small St. John River farm. “My earliest memories,” he wrote in his autobiography, “are of drifting along on logs in the slow currents of the dead water and chiseling gum out the seams of the big spruce logs I was riding.”¹ That was play, but the skills involved in staying on that log were to serve him well in work when every spring for many years he hired on the drive, helping to bring thousands upon thousands of sawlogs downriver from the lumber woods to the mills. His summation of that part of his life is worth quoting in full:

I have been on the log drives of all the big rivers here in the East and on many of their small branches. The big rivers I have driven are the Miramichi, St. John, Penobscot, Kennebec, Androscoggin, and Connecticut. Some of those drives from the headwaters of the tributaries to the mills took as many as 120 days. I like to remember that along all those rivers I worked shoulder to shoulder with men who were men. They smoked pipes and wore braces and didn't spend half their time lighting cigarettes and hitching up their pants.”²

Becoming a man among men was any boy's dream when he hired on the drive, and obviously it required a whole lot more than acquiring pipe and braces to make that dream a reality. Especially it required the ability to "go on logs," to be able to keep one's balance on a floating twelve-to-sixteen-foot stick of pine or spruce and use it as a raft of sorts to move from place to place as the work demanded. Tom MacLeod of Baring remembered hiring on the St. Croix drive:

It was tough when you stop and think. Take a young fellow like me way up there in that country. The boss would come along and say, "Can you go on logs?"

"Well, I can go some."

"You better be able to go some, because you're on your own. Nobody's going to look out for you here. You gotta look out for yourself."

That's about the way it was . . . Used to be pitiful sometimes. Some fellows that would go on the drive wouldn't realize what they were up against until they got there, and they'd have to come right back home.³

Since Tom grew up on the banks of the St. Croix, he had ample opportunity to get an early start on those necessary skills through play, as did Fleetwood Pride on the banks of the St. John. Ernest Kennedy (b. 1889) gave a similar account of growing up in Argyle on the banks of the Penobscot. "I was just like a sandpip," he said as he described playing on old logs stuck in the bushes. Then at age twelve or thirteen he hired to sort logs on Argyle Boom and was assigned to the beginner's work of rafting along the shore as the logs were kicked in to him by his checker, Hunker Campbell.⁴

No job on the boom required greater skill and agility than that of checker. Out in mid-river, hanging to a line that ran from shore to shore and standing on a single log, he had to check every log that came by him. If it bore one of the marks his shore crews were rafting, he would kick it in to them. Frequently, if logs floated out of his reach he'd have to go after them by moving from log to log. Since the work could be both demanding and intensive, checkers usually worked in pairs, spelling each other, turn and turn about. The whole sorting process—and that's what Argyle Boom was all about—depended on men like Hunker Campbell. Then one day his partner failed him, and Ernest got his big chance:

The fellow that was checking with him went downtown one time—it was Saturday night or something—where he could get full. Didn't get back anyway. And I used to play on the logs a lot around there [when I wasn't busy rafting], and Hunker said, "You're pretty smart on



Sorting booms on the Penobscot River guided logs into holding ponds, where a mill company usually took charge. The men in the lower photograph checked the logs for company marks, then sent them through the corresponding gaps in the boom. Their work required great skill as they spun the logs, checked the marks, and kicked them to the shore crew. *Maine Folklife Center Photos # 618 and 417.*



logs. Why don't you try the checkline?"

And I said, "I don't know but I will."

I had hold of that checkline, and I done all right. And I checked there with old Hunker all that summer on that line.⁵

Precocious he may have been, but Ernest made a man's place for himself by the simple expedient of doing a man's job and doing it damned well. Sometimes, though, a new man had to deal with the teasing and testing of older hands. For example, back in 1963 I was interviewing Fred Campobell (b. 1883) of Arthurette, New Brunswick, about his long acquaintance with Joe Scott, the celebrated songmaker, and he told me how he first came to meet him. Scott was a man in his thirties, and well-known as a crack waterman. Fred was an unknown of about eighteen, and the two of them were working together on a crew clearing logs out of a big deadwater. They were well out on the logs when the call came for lunch, and they started for the shore:

Joe Scott he started in across this eddy. It was right full of logs, you know, and you could run, step from one to the other. Well, when you do that, you know, the logs starts bobbing in the water. And he thought he was going to kind of confuse me a little, but just about the time he'd leave a log I'd step onto it, and I was getting them right after him. He looked around to see whether I was in the river or whether I was drowned or what happened. And I said, "I'm right to your ass, John Ross!"

He was almost a stranger to me then, see? He never forgot it. Anytime he'd . . . happen to come on me in surprise, why that's what he'd say.⁶

To make his point to the older man, Fred invoked the name of the great John Ross, a fabled river-driver who rose to head the Penobscot's West Branch Drive. Ninety-five-year-old Fleetwood Pride (b. 1864) told me how—under Ross's watchful eye—he bested Top Campbell and Dingbat Prouty, two of the most notoriously skillful watermen on the Penobscot. At one point, the drive was being boomed down Chesuncook Lake against a nasty headwind when one of the booms broke, scattering loose logs back into the drowned bushes along the shore. There was nothing to do but haul them out one by one and boom them in again, and since boats were not immediately available the men worked along the shore by riding individual logs. Campbell and Prouty were old hands, and when John Ross assigned young Pride to work with them they decided to have some fun with him:

And when Ross sent me in to work with them [said Pride] they said they'd "build me some bridges." They were going to lay logs crosswise so I could run in on them. And I ran in on one very long straight log and they were both on it an I went to shoot it out from under my feet . . . and I kept shooting it out into the lake and they had to leave the log or I would be onto their feet with my corked shoes. And instead of having to bridge me onto the logs, they needed bridges to keep up with me. There wasn't a man in the world as good on logs as I was! . . . And John Ross offered them a hundred dollars a piece if they would do what I was doing every day, and they never learned to do it. And he never learned to do it. . . .

He turned to Dingbat and Top and said, "Young Pride had you two fellows trimmed. He is the only man I ever saw who can reach straight out from the end of the log he stands on and pull for all he is worth without losing his balance." My seventeen-year-old conceit went up a notch.⁷

All these accounts came to me from elderly men telling me of the days of their youth, when they worked at an occupation long gabled for its dangers, and each comments in its own way on a young hero's crossing of a threshold: boy to man. In each a young man demonstrates his competence in the presence of established experts, but in Pride's account the young man goes one step further: he discomfits the experts and speaks of himself as the best there was, the only man with that particular deadwater skill. Later in the same interview he described riding a log through the Raceway, a particularly nasty stretch of white water on the Connecticut, "and I'm the only man alive that ever went through it!"⁸ Claims of this sort are common enough among men who do dangerous work, especially when they are talking to outsiders, and as a classic outsider I have always accepted them with a grain or two of salt. That is how I felt about David Severy's claim to be the only man to ride a log down the mile-long sluice around the falls at Rumford. But I was wrong.

A certain amount of background is necessary in order to see what this story is all about. Just above the town of Rumford the Androscoggin River narrows and sends its waters crashing over three falls with a total drop of about 170 feet in less than a mile. Rumford historian William Lapham, writing in the late 1880s, described the upper falls, which had an almost perpendicular drop of a hundred feet: "The torrent of water pouring down with the noise of thunder and dashing itself into foam as it chafes the rocky walls, produce[s] an effect of wonderful grandeur. Persons come long distances to witness these falls, and are well repaid for their time and trouble."⁹

John Ross, the fabled river-driver, gave Fred Campobell an opportunity to make a name for himself as a boy of eighteen. Following Ross across a mass of bobbing logs, Fred made the grade, and ever after could invoke the name of the legendary riverman to make his point with the older men. *Maine Folklife Center photo # 329.*



All very well for the sightseer, but for the lumberman these falls were very bad for business. All logs destined for the brand-new paper mill at Rumford had to run this bruising gauntlet. The company did what it could by blasting rocks and building wing dams, but the result was still huge jams of rotting logs, especially on the upper falls. As a solution—one that had been successfully applied elsewhere—it was decided to build a wooden sluice around the falls. Walter Sawyer, a contemporary, described the basic vee-shaped structure: “It has a large timber at the bottom, perhaps about a foot in width, with planked sides, at an angle of about forty-five degrees, and the whole trough will be about four feet in depth vertically and . . . six to seven feet wide at the top. They can drive logs through that trough with about 200 [cubic] feet [of water] a second.”¹⁰

The logs went through this sluice one at a time—“very fast,” said Mr. Sawyer, “a continuous stream.” In order to keep the grade constant the sluice had to be mounted on trestles in several places, sometimes as high as twenty feet. As the accompanying photograph makes clear, it was a remarkable structure, and it should come as no surprise to find that as soon as it was built rivermen began to dream of riding a log all the way down it to deadwater. And then one day—through the purest serendipity—I met the man who claimed to have realized that dream.

It was late August, 1966, and since my Guggenheim Fellowship to research the life and songs of Joe Scott was in its last days, I was frantically

trying to clean up a still rather daunting list of possible interviewees. At the moment I was down in Gray talking to Daisy Severy who had known Joe very well indeed—had even gone to dances with him!—and I was excited by what I was hearing.¹¹ Then at one point—entirely out of the blue—her husband David placed a photograph in front of me, explaining that here was the lower end of the sluice around the Rumford falls. “And this sluice, the logs come from way up here three-fourths of a mile,” he said, pointing off to the right of the photograph. “I worked at the bottom of it here. I worked at the bottom. And can you see anybody in there?”

I saw a number of men standing around. “Yes,” I said (I really wanted to get this interruption over with so I could get back to talking with his wife.)

“That’s where they’re waiting for me to come down,” he said.

Then I noticed something else. “There’s a man riding a log down there,” I said.

“That’s me! That’s me!” he said excitedly.

“Three-quarters of a mile you rode that log?” I said, perhaps a little too quizzically.

“Yes, sir,” he said. “A ninety-five foot drop from where we started down to here. Ninety-five feet! I’m the only man that ever accomplished it. That was on August the nineteenth, eighteen ninety-nine!”¹²

With this, the conversation turned back to Daisy and more important matters, at least more important at the moment to me. It was only as I listened to the tape thirty-six years later that I heard the urgency and pride in his voice. For sixty-seven years David Severy had treasured that moment—and remembered that date—when, at sixteen years old, he became “the only man.” Even so, I kept that grain of salt.

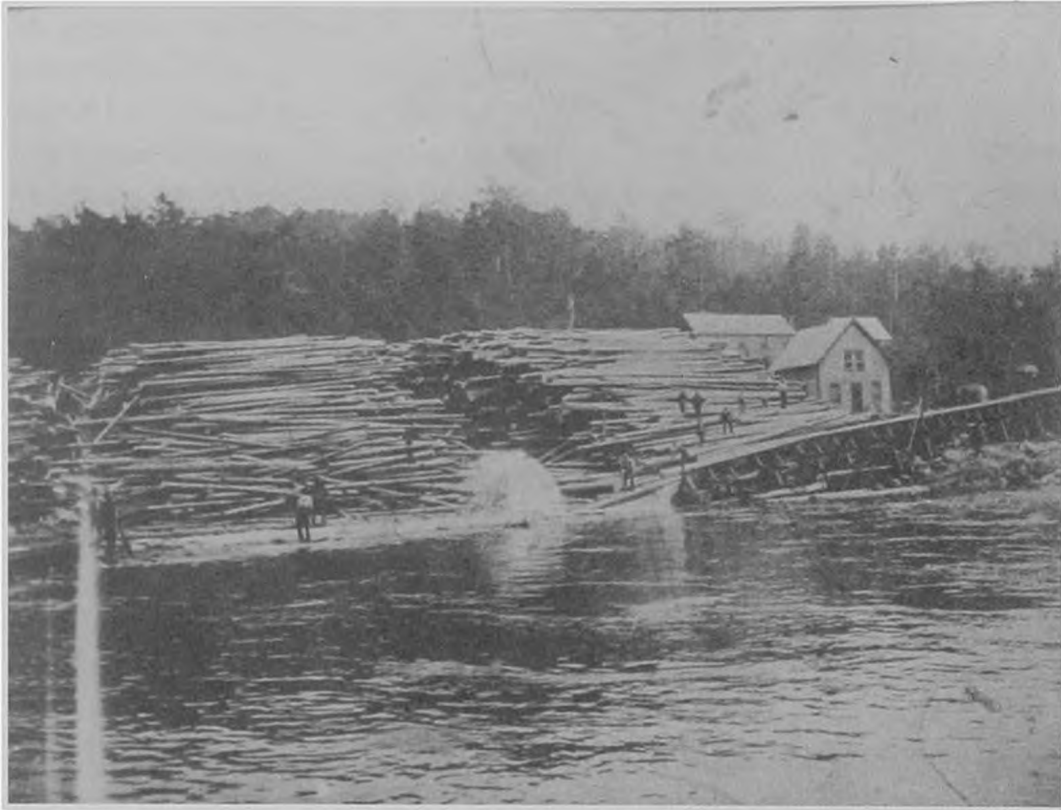
A little over a year later, I was talking with another Androscoggin driver, Ned Stewart of Rumford Center. Ned was about seven years younger than Dave Severy, but since both had worked the same waters at about the same time, I thought I’d give it a try.

“Did you ever know a man by the name of Dave Severy?” I asked. His answer was emphatic, almost as if my question was a bit silly.

“Dave Severy? Certainly I knew him! He lives down around Topsham—somewheres near there.”

“Gray,” I said. “I talked to him just last year.”

“Boy,” he said, “there’s a man—outside of Dan Bossy¹³—there’s a man that I think was as good on logs as any man I ever saw in my life.



David Severy's famous ride down the Rumford log chute.
Maine Folklife Center photo courtesy Edward D. Ives.

By God he was! He wasn't a very big man, but Mister Man, he was just like a sandpiper. Just like a sandpeep. He could ride anything!"

"He told me that he was the – "(I decided to hold back a bit) " – that he rode a log down the sluice around the fall at Rumford."

"Oh he did!" said Ned spiritedly. He's the only one that ever rode a log down the sluice and into the canal and stayed with it after he got into the canal.¹⁴ He's the only man that ever done it. I tried it several times. Fremont Coolidge, there's another man. He was damn good, but by God he couldn't stay on one after it went into the canal as Dave did. Oh, that bird was some boy!"

I asked how long the sluice was, but he couldn't remember. "I know one thing, though. When you got on the log up at the upper end, by the time you got halfway down you were *moving*!"

"I bet you were," I said. "Couldn't have been any joke to fall off a log on that thing."

"God," said Ned, "you couldn't fall off if you wanted to. Going too damn fast. You couldn't fall off if you wanted to. But once you went into the canal, *there's* the fun. 'Course she'd go in. She'd dive—front end

would dive. You'd want to be on the back end. By God, when that [*front*] end would come up and the back end went down, you wanted to be able to shift up onto the [*front*] end and get there pretty damn quick. If you didn't, you'd wind up in the water, same as I did. Dave was the only man that ever come down and stayed on that log."¹⁵

Over the next few years, I heard Severy's deed corroborated by at least two other rivermen. From a folklorist's point of view, the important point here is less whether he actually *did* it than that it was generally *accepted* that he did, but for me that quickly became a distinction without difference. Overlaid on the old man telling me the story, my mind's eye also shows the young man—hired for the dull work of poking logs down the canal as they came off the sluice—looking up and wondering, could he do it. He knew well how logs behaved when they hit the deadwater, and he thought he knew why others who tried had failed. He chose his time, walked to the head of the falls, and gained a lifetime measure of hero stature among Androscoggin drivers. That is quite an achievement for a sixteen-year-old. And I am pleased both to celebrate it here and finally to dispense with that grain or two of salt.

Before we move on, I should point out that Dave Severy's act differs from the others in one significant detail. Ernest Kennedy, Fred Campbell, and Fleetwood Pride proved they had the skills necessary to the work they were doing, and they demonstrated their competence *on the job*. Not so David Severy. Nothing required him to do what he did; as far as his work was concerned, it was an entirely supernumerary act and probably represented a break from work, something that is borne out by the number of men who are standing around watching. In brief, he was *playing*, engaging in sport, and in that sense his feat had more to do with the discus or pole vault than it did with working on the river. Granted, the skill involved grew directly out of river-driving and would feed back into it, but for the moment it had become detached from work and was being cultivated for its own sake.

Bravado is one thing; hubris quite another, and the Maine woods have their share of stories about men who went too far and were brought low. They say Joe Scott was one. A tree he was falling lodged in the branches of another and hung perilously halfway down. Angus Enman heard it this way from one who claimed he saw it happen: "Well, Joe hung this tree up . . . and he got right under it and he defied the Lord to fall it on him. And he went on . . . calling the Maker names. . . . And this man said that the limb broke like *that* [*slapping hands*] and Joe just got away with his life. He just took his ax and said, 'I'm all done in the

woods.” He never worked another day in the woods, and he went out and started making those songs.”¹⁶ Swearing, even taking the Lord’s name in vain, is not the problem, being too quotidian even to be worth notice, but when a man wagers with Destiny by challenging whatever powers may be, that is “swearing wicked,” and it is traditional wisdom that Destiny may call that wager in.¹⁷ Joe Scott got off with a warning, but according to Fannie Hardy Eckstorm in her wonderful book, *The Penobscot Man*, Goodwin of Stetson was not so lucky on the West Branch Drive:

The man who had seen this told the others, “I seen him stand there like he was on a barn floor, and I seen him lift up his fist and shake it right stret [sic] in the face of old Katahdin, an’ I heard him holler like his voice would rattle lead inside him, “To hell with God!” An; then when I looked the Gray Rock was all empty, an’ in the water I seen only two sets of fingers movin’ slow like in the mist that sticks close to the black slick of the falls. I seen ‘em open once, and’ then they shut an’ was gone.”¹⁸

Goodwin’s fate had nothing to do with manliness or even the bravado and daring that has up to now been our subject. It was simply—and so ran the verdict of his fellows—a judgment on his foolhardiness. He just went too far, and so did Larry Connors, another notoriously wicked swearer. There was a dangerous jam in Ripogenus Gorge, and, according to Mrs. Eckstorm, Connors was heard to say, “I’m goin’ to break that jam if I go to Hell doing it.”¹⁹ He broke it alright, but his body was not found until long after, and the same is true of the driver Tom MacLeod told me about in 1957:

There was another drive comes into the Spednic Lake called North Brook. And there’s a nasty little place on it they call the Winding Stairs. It was very steep and winding around like that [demonstrating]. A jam of logs got jammed up on it one morning, and a young fellow went out before breakfast and started that jam. And somebody said, “Be careful.” They called to him, and one of the boys said, “Be careful.”

“Oh,” he says, “I’m all right. I’ll take that off of there or I’ll eat my breakfast in Hell.” And possibly he ate his breakfast in Hell. When that thing broke he went in, and they never saw him for two days before they found his body.²⁰

Stories about men who defy God or his agencies and are punished for their impiety are common enough, probably world-wide,²¹ but it is interesting to find a version turning up along Maine rivers in very local-

ized and only slightly variant forms. I have heard a couple of versions, for example, where the man declares he'll have his "next cup of coffee in Hell." But the vow and the pledged event are still the same. Witness the following, told me by Larry Carroll of Norway, Maine, about Erastus (Ross) Loveland, a well-known Penobscot lumber operator and river boss:

And this Loveland, I think it was at Five Islands where they had this bad jam, and they worked on it several days. . . . And one morning he told me, he said, "That jam will pull today, or I'll eat my next meal in Hell." And I suppose he did, because he went over the face of the jam, and nobody—I don't know whether they could have saved him or not! He was the most disliked man!²²

Unlike the nameless young chap in Tom MacLeod's story, and unlike any of the other anonymous drivers I've heard the story about, Loveland was a well-known figure along the Penobscot, and his fate can be documented. He met his death on June 24, 1886, by being sucked under a jam, and while I have never heard that he was a notable wicked swearer, as Carroll suggests, he was known to be an extremely irascible and mean-spirited boss. Fleetwood Pride had worked for him. "Oh yes," he said, "he was a quick-tempered ugly old devil."²³ And perhaps, at least from the crew's point of view, that was as bad as wicked—bad enough, at any rate, to cause this widespread floating anecdote to become attached to his name.

After this extended divagation on men who went too far, I would like to return to my "only man" theme with another of Fannie Hardy Eckstorm's stories from *The Penobscot Man*: "Lugging Boat on Sowadnehunk."²⁴ The style is literary, and Mrs. Eckstorm is not above imagining a conversation or two, but my experience is that she can be depended on when it comes to "what really happened," especially on the level of the general story. She was far too concerned that readers in the know—among them the great John Ross himself—would approve her story to have fudged her facts.²⁵

The story takes place at Sowadnehunk Falls, a stretch of water no one had ever run and lived to tell about it. Two crews have just finished lugging their heavy boats on the customary forty-rod carry around it and are resting and waiting for a third crew under Sebattis Mitchell to come join them before they all put back in to continue downstream. But Sebattis and his bowman—almost on a whim and to the utter consternation of their watching friends—decide to run those falls, and, save for

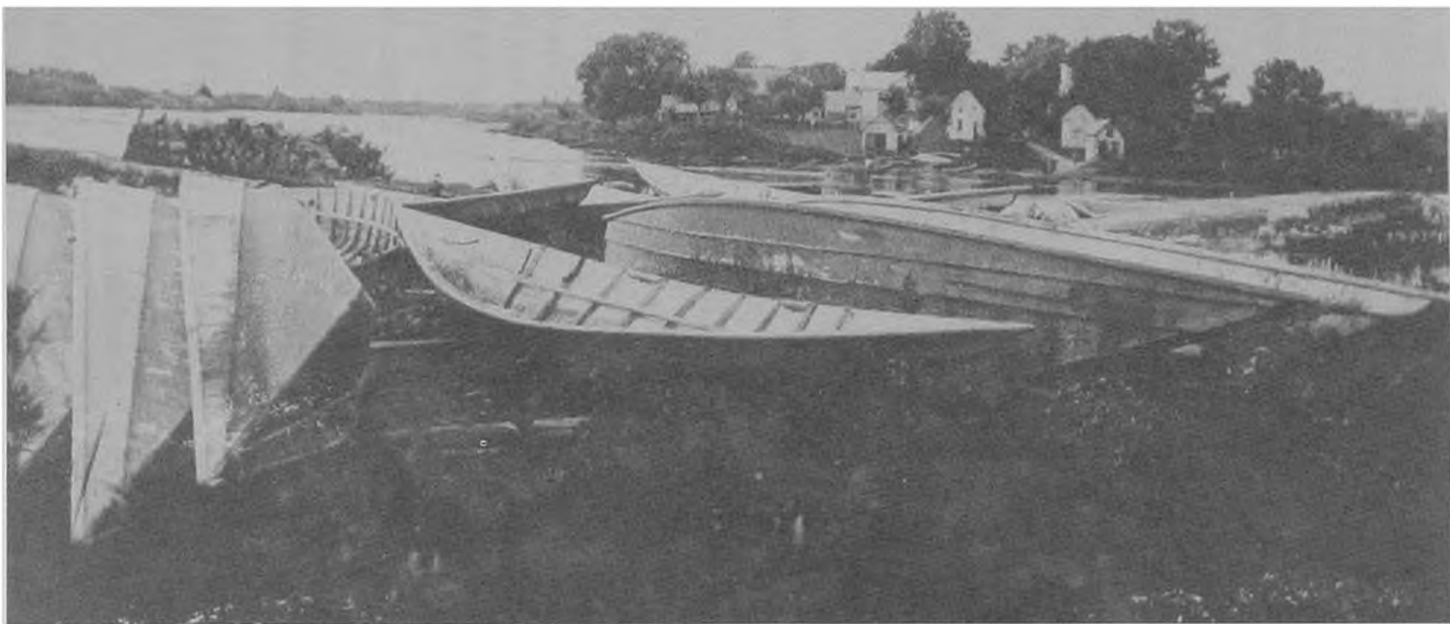


In the lore of the log-driver, one never tempted fate by defying God or his agencies. Swearing was safe, but a vow to "clear the jam or eat my next breakfast in hell" was going too far. *Maine Folklife Center Photo #308.*

shipping some water, they are gloriously successful. Without a word, the other two crews lug their batteaus back up the carry to try a run themselves. One man is drowned, both batteaus are reduced to matchwood, and Big Sebattis Mitchell emerges as the only man ever to run Sowadnehunk Falls.

Mrs. Eckstorm's comment on this story, though somewhat aslant of the "only man" theme, is interesting, and I will use it to bring this paper to a close: "The man who led off gets the credit and the blame. He is the only one remembered. But to an outsider, what wins more than passing admiration is not the man who succeeded, but the many who followed after and failed, who could not let well enough alone when there was a possible better to be achieved."²⁶

To conclude, I'd like to call to your minds that thrifty old farmer who kept a jar on his workbench labeled "string too short to be saved." When asked why, he said, "You never can tell." I leave you with this one thought: The old farmer was right. You never *can* tell.



Bateaux on the Penobscot shore. *Maine Folklife Center Photo # 331.*

NOTES

1. Edward D. Ives and David C. Smith, editors, *Fleetwood Pride 1864-1960* (Orono, Maine: *Northeast Folklore*, IX, 1967), p. 10.

2. Ives and Smith, *Fleetwood Pride*, p. 16.

3. Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, NA Ives 57.1, p. 48. All references to Northeast Archives material will simply be designated NA, followed by the accession number.

4. For a thorough description of what work on a sorting boom was all about, see Edward D. Ives et al., *Argyle Boom* (Orono, Maine: *Northeast Folklore* XVII, 1976).

5. Ives, et al., *Argyle Boom*, pp. 50-51.

6. Edward D. Ives, *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker* (Champaign IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 36.

7. Ives and Smith, *Fleetwood Pride*, p. 21.

8. Ives and Smith, *Fleetwood Pride*, p. 19.

9. William B. Lapham, *History of Rumford, Maine* (Augusta, Maine: Maine Farmer, 1890), p. 161.

10. St. John River Commission, *Proceedings* (testimony taken before this international group), 1909-1916, Bangor Public Library, p. 2035.

11. See Ives, *Joe Scott*, pp. 39ff.

12. Material taken from my interview with Daisy and David Severy, Gray, Me., August 24, 1966. NA Ives 66.7. It is worth emphasizing that Severy's figures are quite conservative. The sluice was more nearly a mile long, and the drop was nearer 165 than 95 feet.

13. For more on Dan Bossy, see Robert E. Pike, *Tall Trees, Tough Men* (New York: Norton, 1967), pp. 191-200.

14. The canal was an artificially created deadwater leading directly to the mill.

15. This material is taken from my interview with Stewart, July 28, 1967. NA Ives 67.1.

16. Ives, *Joe Scott*, p. 54. See also p. 63.

17. For a good consideration of "swearing wicked," see Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, *The Penobscot Man* (Bangor: Jordan-Frost, 1924), pp. 29-32.

18. Eckstorm, *Penobscot Man*, p. 131.

19. Eckstorm, *Penobscot Man*, p. 40.

20. Taken from my interview with Tom MacLeod, Baring, Maine, June 5,

1957. NA Ives 57.1, p. 46. I have found two other variants from the St. Croix River system that are almost identical to MacLeod's, save that they are about a man who swam out to capture a driving boat that had broken loose from its mooring. See NA 1030.007, and *Calais Advertiser*, May 8, 1929.

21. See, for example, Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955-1958), especially Q221.4: *Seaman who defies God shipwrecked*; Q221.4.1: *Dam builder remarks that God Almighty could not sweep completed dam away*; Q221.4.2: *Man vows to recover loose boat or go to Hell trying*.

22. Interview with Lawrence Carroll, Norway, Maine, Jan. 31, 1957. NA Ives 56.1, p. 88.

23. Ives and Smith, *Fleetwood Pride*, p. 22.

24. Eckstorm, *Penobscot Man*, pp. 3-22.

25. See Eckstorm, *Penobscot Man*, pp. 329-51 for her own apologia.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 22.