

FROM THE COLLECTIONS

"A NARROW ESCAPE: A PENOBSCOT RIVER-DRIVER'S PERILOUS ADVENTURE," FROM THE BANGOR WHIG AND COURIER, JULY 9, 1875.¹

EDITED BY DAVID C. SMITH

A large number of "drivers," who have seen service on the Penobscot during the last year or two, have been driving on the rivers and streams in the Western part of the State, and the pluck and endurance of one of them who went over "West Pitch" in the Androscoggin, is thus described in the Lewiston Journal.²

Thursday morning the river-drivers were cracking their jokes and stirring up the logs at the head of West Pitch. A jam had gathered at the very verge of this grand water-fall. George A. Newman, of Bradley, above Bangor, stood on the lower log of the jam.³ He is a veteran Penobscot log-roller, and this is his third spring on our river. George got his cant-dog under the log and immediately it rolled. Another river man jumped off, but Newman's iron-clad [caulked] shoes were dull and he slipped, and in he went. He caught hold of his companion's cant-dog, but his hand slipped off and Newman darted down into the Pitch.

He swam off the big curl, and quick as lightening plunged down the awesome abyss. His friends never expected to see him more, but in a twinkling he was seen emerging from the foam at the foot of the falls, and bravely striking out for the island. The shore of the river at this point is now lined with logs, and a rapid current flows there. Newman saw that it would not be safe for him to try and effect a landing at these points, so he coolly swam for the island, distant perhaps fifty to seventy rods from the foot of the falls. He reached the land safely, when at once he was taken in a bateau to the main land. He was pretty well exercised. His hips, knees, arms and back were somewhat bruised. He was taken to the Auburn House, and placed in bed, where his fellows gathered round him, delighted to find him crank and loquacious.

Said he, "I wasn't badly scared. When I fell in I struck right out and kept my head above water. I was calm in there as could be. I pawed a little though."



Before Maine's network of logging road spread into the north woods, rivers were the primary conduits to get trees to the mills. River drivers guided huge quantities of logs down Maine's rivers to be processed into lumber and finished goods that were shipped all over the world. Maine Historical Society.

"Thought I would have to give you up, George, when I saw you going down there," said one of his comrades.

"I didn't think anything of that kind," said Newman, "but it did seem a d-l of a while though. Seems as if I went a hundred feet into that deep hole before I struck. But I kept licking like the d-l and when those big 'biles' com, I jes' kept right on top of 'em to come up on. I tried to kick my boots off, but couldn't. I tell you boys, 'twas peculiar machinery to go through, but I'll go to work tomorrow. I warn't sharp, or I shouldn't have slipped. But I don't want to try it over again. I tell you, 'Lish.'"

The doctors reported no bones broken. Several bad bruises were discovered by the patient, who signalized the discovery by using strong expletives. He continued:

"I held my breath, 'Lish,' from the time I took the plunge till I got to the bottom. I thought 'twas an hour, but I didn't take in a bit of water."

"Don't believe anything else could go over there and live," said one of the men.

"Don't say I ain't tough, any more," said Newman. "But didn't I take care of my head tho' I always did you know."

Some of the crowd asked, "Is he dead?"

"No." said the river driver, "only a little discouraged."

— We doubt if greater pluck, endurance and presence of mind can be shown than George A. Newman showed about 9 o'clock Thursday morning, when he plunged down the deep boiling cauldron of West Pitch. A suicide a few years since, found her dead at this spot, as our readers will remember. The Indian legends say that a large party of Indians were once decoyed into the rapids above the falls and perished in West Pitch. However that may be, we doubt if any man ever passes through what George A. Newman passed on the morning of July 8th, to come out with the breath of life in him.

As one drives from Auburn to Lewiston, it is possible to see what remains of West Pitch on the Androscoggin River. At the time that this piece appeared in the *Lewiston Journal* and the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, in the summer of 1875, the river and its banks were still the scene of logs, lumber, and men moving the logs over the rips and rapids to the waiting sawmills. West Pitch was a notorious location. A dozen years before, in the great spring flood of 1862, eight men lost their lives driving logs in this location. Of these intrepid men, we only now know a dozen or so names from the entire state. This scant record is augmented by the Charles Tefft Statue of "The River Drivers" in Bangor. "Hammond Street Pitch" in the Queen City is a reminder of the halcyon days of the river drives, a time when men described themselves as tough, not dead, only a little "discouraged."

It was said that the cry came up from men when one of their number was lost, "save the cant dog; it is company property." George Newman said he was going to work the next day, probably because he needed the money for the family. "Bangor Tiger" is the name given to these woodsmen as they fanned out across the continent. It is no wonder that the best-known song heard in the bunkhouse was always "The Jam at Gerry's Rock" — back in Maine.

What makes this story such a rich item is that only one person is known by name. Two or three other shadowy figures appear in the hospital room. They might well then have left the scene quickly — as the logs were needed downriver — singing another great river driving song, "Will I Ever See Springtime Again."⁴

NOTES

1. This piece appeared in the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, July 9, 1895, reprinted from the *Lewiston Journal*, July 8, 1875.

2. A pitch was a steep place in the river in which the logs came down to the drivers below. Two such places were known as “Hammond Street Pitch” — one on the Penobscot, and the other on the Pleasant River at Gulf Hagas. Other adventures occurred at the “Big Heater” and “Slewgundy Heater” on the West Branch of the Penobscot. When a man came down through the falls, he was said to have been “sluiced.”

3. The lower log is sometimes called the king log.

4. For more on river driving, see David C. Smith, “The Logging Frontier,” *Journal of Forest History*, David C. Smith *A History of Maine Lumbering, 1860-1960* (University of Maine Press: Orono, 1972), and for a visual look see “From Stump to Ship,” and “Woodsmen and River Drivers” (Northeast Historic Films: Bucksport, 1989). At a party thirty years ago, old time woodsmen Ralph Thornton, Harold Noble, and Colin McGraw ate a meal of beanhole beans, biscuits, coleslaw, and a wonderful chocolate cake at our camp. We toasted the old-timers with blackberry brandy, as was the custom. Then we sang all the old woods songs, and as the party broke up, Ralph Thornton, then in his nineties, who wrote *Me and Fannie: The Oral Autobiography of Ralph Thornton of Topsfield, Me*, edited by Wayne Reuel Bean (Orono: Maine Folklife Center, 1974), said, “Let’s sing Gerry’s Rock again,” and we did.