

The Rafting Era

For more than 20 years, millions of logs were rafted down Lake Superior to sawmills on Lake Huron. As early as the summer of 1885, an immense raft of what lumberjacks called cut logs made its way down Lake Superior from the South Shore to sawmills near Bay City, Michigan. Shepherded by the tug *Winslow*, the raft totaled more than 3 million board feet of lumber and covered several acres of the placid mid-summer lake. "Raft towing through the lakes is becoming more conspicuous this season," a Detroit correspondent to a Duluth newspaper wrote, "while the weather to that end has been all that could be desired."¹



Giant spruce logs are towed in a double boom by the tug John Roen III in this photo from the June-July 1971 edition of the Minnesota Timber Producers Bulletin. (Lake Superior Marine Museum Association Archives, Lake Superior Maritime Collection at University of Wisconsin-Superior)

Rafting as a transportation venue was pioneered by Michigan's Lake Huron lumber barons in the mid-1880s as a means of getting white pine logs from Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Canadian Crown lands north of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay to the mills on Michigan's Thumb. That first raft that departed the mouth of the Two Hearted River in May 1885 was destined for sawmills in Bay City and was an experiment that would prove to be one of the most successful methods of transporting cut logs in history. The lumbermen quickly discovered that chaining the logs together to form a circular enclosure or "boom" gave the raft stability, even in stormy weather. In fact, the Michigan lumber barons almost immediately found out that larger booms rode out storms with less log loss than smaller booms.² The rafts devised by Bay City lumbermen in 1885 were an improvement on those used on Michigan's inland lakes. Tug captains said that when properly contained, the boom resembled a bag or balloon on the surface of the water.³



A floating teardrop embracing some 4,000 cords of pulpwood is towed from Grand Marais, Minnesota, to a Consolidated Paper, Inc., mill in Ashland, Wisconsin, by the John Roen III. When this photo appeared in Consolidated Paper's newsletter in November-December 1987, the caption said rafting operations ended in 1972. (Lake Superior Marine Museum Association Archives, Lake Superior Maritime Collection at University of Wisconsin-Superior)

Log rafting caught on quickly. In 1887, an estimated 30 million board feet of logs were towed down from the Upper Lakes to the mills on Saginaw Bay. The next year, 40 million board feet were rafted south, and by 1891, the total had doubled to 80 million board feet. For the rest of the decade, until 1898, the tonnage rafted from the Upper Lakes to Lake Huron's Saginaw Bay never fell below 180 million board feet a year and topped out at just over 300 million board feet in 1894.⁴

Logs started going down Lake Superior in rafts from the North Shore as early as 1887, but rafts in the late 1880s and early 1890s were as likely to be assembled at river mouths along the South Shore and towed to mills in Duluth as well. In 1887, the Inman tug line in Duluth made arrangements with Twin Ports sawmill owners to tow more than 15 million board feet of logs from the mouths of the Brule and Amnicon rivers to Duluth mills.⁵ In May 1891, the Murray & Company mill in Duluth opened the season by taking delivery of 2.5 million board feet of logs rafted across the western end of the Lake from the mouth of the Amnicon River.⁶

"Few people stop to consider the amount of logs daily towed into this port," a reporter observed in the spring of 1887. "An average of three tugs are constantly employed in towing logs to Duluth from points along the north and south shores. Receipts from these sources average about 3,500,000 feet a week. This may not seem a large amount weekly, but in the year's summary of trade it cuts quite an important figure."⁷

The log tows that were rafted down from western Lake Superior and the Upper Peninsula were frequently the subject of litigation and discord with other Great Lakes carriers. To get the logs from Lake Superior into Lake Huron, the tug captains had to maneuver the rafts down the St. Mary's River. The job took nerves of steel, and more than one upbound vessel was run aground when logs filled the entire channel between the two Lakes.⁸ In 1889, a small Canadian steamer wandered into a log boom on Pigeon Bay of Lake Erie in the fog and was carried 15 miles before she could extricate herself.^[9] Tug captains mounted locomotive lights on the bridge to warn passing vessels of the hazards posed by the raft towed behind.¹⁰

"If there is anything the average vessel man fears, hates and despises it is a raft," an 1890 editorial in the *Marquette Daily Mining Journal* described the passage of a raft down the St. Mary's River. "The raft contains a fine lot of

logs, but the air along the St. Mary's River will be blue with expressions theological but not orthodox when it goes through."¹¹

The situation deteriorated to such an extent that in 1894, the newly-formed Lake Carriers' Association marshaled sufficient opposition to rafting that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers agreed to hold hearings on the controversial practice. The association, founded in Cleveland in 1880 to represent U.S. Great Lakes vessel owners, demanded that severe restrictions be placed on rafting, particularly through the navigation channels between Lakes Superior and Huron. The Lake Carriers' Association wanted rafts restricted to 50 feet by 500 feet, or about 40,000 board feet of lumber. The association also suggested that two tugs shepherd the smaller booms.¹² Since the typical log raft at the time comprised 1 million board feet of logs or more guided by one tug, lumbermen from one end of Lake Superior to the other mobilized to fight the restrictions, which were under consideration for inclusion in Congressional River and Harbors legislation.¹³ The pro-rafting camp had strong supporters. General Russell Alger, the Michigan lumber baron, was one of the powers behind the scenes in the national Republican Party. Alger quietly worked to get the measure killed in Congressional conference committee.¹⁴

Four years later, the controversy was rendered moot when the province of Ontario established tariffs on Canadian lumber that required raw wood to be processed in the province. Overnight, the rafting industry on the Upper Lakes literally dried up. Some rafting continued well into the second half of the 20th Century from Grand Marais on the U.S. North Shore to mills near Ashland, Wisconsin, but the rafting era on Lake Superior ended for all intent and purposes in 1898.¹⁵

¹ "Detroit Special," *Duluth Daily Tribune*, June 21, 1885

² Karamanski, *Deep Woods Frontier*, p.75

³ Rector, *Log Transportation in the Lake States Lumber Industry*, p.167. To keep the mass of logs stable and contained within the boom, the rafting crews threaded short lengths of chain through the ends of a series of large logs that served as a fence for the remainder of the boom.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.167-169. During the same time period, an average of more than 300 million board feet of logs was rafted down the Mississippi River from the pineries in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

⁵ News Item, *Duluth Daily News*, May 23, 1887

⁶ "Superior Siftings," *Duluth Daily News*, May 6, 1891

⁷ "Log Towing," *Duluth Daily News*, June 16, 1887

⁸ Karamanski, *Deep Woods Frontier*, p.76. In 1890, the bulk freighter *Joliet* was forced aground in the St. Mary's River by a log raft. The owners billed the loggers \$30,000, a considerable sum at the time, for damages.

⁹ News Item, *Duluth Evening Herald*, June 11, 1889. An occupational hazard for the rafting crews was

Lake Superior's weather. When a boom did break apart in a storm, logs were likely to be strewn across 20 miles of shoreline. Many a home and barn along the South Shore were built with logs salvaged from booms that ripped apart in a storm.

¹⁰ "Notice to Mariners," *Toledo Blade*, June 14, 1870

¹¹ "A Huge Raft," *Marquette Daily Mining Journal*, July 30, 1890

¹² "They Have a Kick," *Duluth News-Tribune*, April 12, 1894; See Also, "Major Sears on Rafting," *Duluth Daily Commonwealth*, June 15, 1894

¹³ "Raft Towing Regulations," *Duluth Evening Herald*, July 4, 1894

¹⁴ "Will Be Knocked Out," *Duluth Evening Herald*, July 30, 1894

¹⁵ From 1944 to 1971, Consolidated Papers' Minnesota Timber Division rafted logs from Sugar Loaf Landing on the North Shore across the western end of Lake Superior to a company paper mill near Ashland, Wisconsin. Bob Hagman, "Sugar Loaf and Sawbill Country," Loggers of the '80s: Your Friends and Mine (Duluth: The Author, 1987), p.100