Trains and steamboats brought tourists a century ago to view the incredible sight: thousands of logs jammed into the narrow Dalles of the St. Croix River. Lumbermen worried: No logs at sawmills downstream meant possible bankruptcy. The problem: How to free a jumble of logs two miles long

Greatest Logjam Ever!

Edna Curry

THIS YEAR marks the 100th anniversary of the greatest logjam in Minnesota and Wisconsin history. In fact, I have been able to find no record of a larger one anywhere in the world.

It occurred in the Dalles of the St. Croix River just above and between the twin towns of Taylors Falls, Minnesota, and St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin, on June 13, 1886. Estimates ranged from 125 million to 150 million feet of logs piled in the narrow gorge between the high cliffs.

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View looks north along St. Croix River. Bridge at center connects Taylors Falls, Minnesota, left, with St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin, right.

The jam stretched two miles up the river and breaking it required six weeks of effort by 200 men. The aftermath and cleanup work stretched to the next spring, when high water allowed floating the stranded logs downriver once more.

Tourists came by the thousands in trains and steamers to view this once-in-a-lifetime sight. Photographers and journalists also came, some from as far away as Europe. The great logjam even made history books in Sweden, former homeland of many of the lumbermen.

Many of these men worked in the woods all winter, cutting logs and stacking them in piles along tributaries of the St. Croix, waiting for spring's high water to float them 50 miles downriver to the sawmills. There were no good roads, so the river was virtually the only means to transport the huge logs.

Falling Water. That first week in June 1886, lumbermen were discouraged. Everything depended on the weather, and this year the weather had been unusually dry. Instead of rising, the water was falling. Unless the lumbermen could float them downriver soon, the logs might well be stranded along the riverbank until the following spring. No logs at the sawmill would mean no pay for a winter's work; many lumbermen would go bankrupt.

Then, suddenly, everything changed at once. News of heavy rainstorms upriver spread like wildfire. Small dams on St. Croix tributaries — the Snake, Kettle, and Namakagon rivers — were quickly opened.

Lumberjacks shoved thousands of logs into the river in the belief that high water would carry them downriver. A hundred different owners put their logs afloat in a mighty panic to get them to the sawmills. Each log carried its owner's brand hammered into one end; the mighty jumble would be sorted out by brand in the "boom," or sorting pond, at the sawmill downriver.

The "driving crew" was spread along 10 to 15 miles of river to keep the logs in the main current moving smoothly. But the fast current and the huge number of logs fed in so quickly were more than either the crew or the river could handle.

A "jam crew" went ahead to known trouble spots at narrows or rapids to watch for jams and break them up.

One crew was in place in the Dalles at Taylors Falls. Just below the falls was a trouble spot. The river narrowed to a deep gorge between per-

Above: **Townfolk showed disdain of danger by having picture taken on logs.** ***Right, top:*** **Some 200 lumberjacks worked to free two-mile long jam of logs.** ***Right, bottom:*** **Steamboat tugged logs from head of jam.**

pendicular cliffs of trap rock 50 to 100 feet high. Here, too, the St. Croix made almost a right-angle bend around a cliff, appropriately named Angle Rock.

Trouble began shortly after midnight on June 13. The jam crew was catching a few hours of sleep in tents along the banks when the crash of jamming logs awoke them. The flow of logs had "gridlocked" at Angle Rock. Between the cliffs, the unusually swift current was rapidly piling more and more logs on top of ones already caught.

The shouts of men mingled with the crashing of logs and water as the crew grabbed axes, peavies, and poles and rushed to the head of the jam in their red flannels and drawers.

But they were too late. The booms they had built to hold water in the eddies had been broken, and the beginnings of the biggest and most stubborn jam ever had formed.

Tourist Sight. By early morning, the quiet villages buzzed with excitement. People passed the news as they gathered at Sunday morning church services. Though a jam meant big trouble and expense to the lumbermen, it was a blessing to the little villages beside the falls. It meant that some of the lumberjacks' winter wages would be spent here instead of 35 miles downriver at Stillwater.

A logjam was nothing new here. Angle Rock had caused big ones before — in 1865, 1877, and a long one in 1883. The villagers knew that extra men and horses would be hired, food and supplies would be bought, and lumberjacks would spend money at hotels, restaurants, and saloons when they were off duty.

It was also a news event and, coming at the height of the tourist season, a godsend. Steamboats and the new railroad line from St. Paul would bring thousands of visitors. They would come to see the logjam, but would also see the beauty of the valley and the unusual rock formations. Jobs would be plentiful.

People gathered on the cliffs along the river, watching the busy lumberjacks. Some walked on tiptoe and spoke in whispers, as though any sound might loosen the jam even though the efforts of lumberjacks with dynamite could not.

Mothers had a difficult time keeping children off the logs. The young saw no danger, but their elders understood it well. If a man slipped under those churning logs, it might well be months before his body washed ashore, probably miles downstream.

The huge pile-up grew day by day. Logs filled the gorge from one rock wall to the other, and extended from the bottom of the river to 30 or more feet above the water, forming a natural bridge across what had been a mighty river. The flow of water almost stopped, and the river rose behind the jam.

Still the logs came on, released by the lumbermen upriver. It seemed that their fear of missing the drive and having their logs stranded was

stronger than their fear of having them caught in the jam. Each day the position of the jam's rear was reported in the papers — now at Tuttle's Falls, now a mile upriver. Finally, in spite of all efforts to break it, the jam was two miles long.

More than 100 owners of the logs, in amounts ranging from 500,000 to 20 million feet or more, formed an association to share the costs of breaking the jam, reported to be $700 to $800 per day and finally totaling $75,000.

Dynamite and Ropes. Over the next several weeks the number of lumberjacks fighting the jam grew to 200. Dynamite was tried several times with little effect. Steamboats were sent. They tugged away at the head of the jam, assisted by steam engines and horses on shore.

Lines were strung across the river, and the engines and horses attempted to pull out key logs. Over $100 worth of ropes was worn out every day, either by the hard pulls or by fraying on the sharp rocks.

At first the men worked at night as well as day, illuminating the Dalles with powerful electric lights and large reflectors. One reporter thought it a "fairly good representation of Sheol [Old Testament, abode of the dead. — *Ed.*]. The fantastic costumes of the workmen, who are shaking up the logs with long poles and grab-hooks in the weird blue light cast between the ragged, towering cliffs, the fires in the furnaces on the boats, noise of escaping steam, and clangor of iron hooks and cog wheels, mingled with the demoniac yells of the men, combine to form a panoramic view wonderful to behold, and cause many to shudder for fear of the future."

But soon night work was given up; it was difficult to light the 1,000-foot-wide river, and darkness increased the danger.

Crowds continued to camp on the riverbanks, fully expecting the key logs to be found at any moment and not wanting to miss the sight of the whole jam roaring downstream.

On July 8, a 24-pound dynamite bomb was tried. At first it didn't go off. Watchers on shore held their breath until, as the Stillwater *Messenger* reported, "bold Barney Corbett skipped out to the place, extracted the bomb, readjusted the fuse, and dropped the charge down under the logs near the front of the jam.... A mass of logs went up in a sort of artificial water spout...."

For a time, the entire jam was in motion, winding like a serpent. Then it jammed again, worse than before. But the jam had broken in two. The front part had been freed and thousands of logs escaped, but most of the water had gone out as well. That would make the rest of the logs more difficult to extricate. But luckily the long dry spell ended, and it started to rain. More water would be coming downriver.

The struggle to free small hauls continued. Finally the men succeeded in clearing a channel through

the entire jam. Although millions of feet of logs were still left along the banks, the main work on the jam was over. The "sacking crew" would do the rest. Seventy men were still doing cleanup work on September 16.

Greatest and Last. Remarkably, no one had been killed or even seriously injured. But there were several lasting aftereffects of the jam.

The high cost forced lumbermen to join forces to prevent any repeat. They formed the St. Croix Dam and Boom Company. In 1889, the company built the Nevers Dam, the largest woodpiling dam in the world, above Taylors Falls at a cost of more than $200,000. The lumbermen could then control both the amount of water in the river gorge and the number of logs passing through the Dalles.

The greatest logjam also became the last logjam. The great forests were almost gone anyway, and the last logs were sluiced downriver in 1912. The lumbermen then moved on to the great forests in California.

The publicity of the logjam helped gain needed public support to preserve the area's natural beauty. Two interstate parks were built, one on each side of the river, in 1895 and 1900. The upper St. Croix and Namekagon rivers were included in the Wild Rivers Bill signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968. The area is now well protected.

Today, the lovely St. Croix Valley is a tourist area, nationally known for its camping, fishing, hunting, canoeing, kayak racing, cliff climbing, and skiing. Geology classes and history lovers visit here. The only reminders of logging days are the "deadheads" — long-sunken logs — which still pop up on the St. Croix. □

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Autumn Leaves Going to Their Graves

"How pleasant to walk over beds of these fresh and rustling fallen leaves — clean, crisp, and wholesome! How beautiful they go to their graves. How gently lay themselves down and turn to mold. . . . Merrily they go scampering over the earth, selecting their graves, whispering all through the woods about it."

— *Henry David Thoreau*, Journals

Studying the Hunting Success of Raptors

An observer of raptors in Missouri found that the birds' hunting success depends on how and what a raptor hunts. The birds succeeded in 57 percent of attacks on small mammals, in 51 percent of attempts to catch fish, in 80 percent of attacks on insects and other invertebrates, and in 77 percent of attempts on reptiles and amphibians. Most difficult prey? Other birds. Success rate: 20 percent. Peregrine falcons, for example, succeeded in only 19 of every 100 attempts.

— Smithsonian *magazine*