

Sagas of the Early Days

Life Moves Up The Richmond—On Rafts

By Windsor Lang

THE cedar-getters had cut their way up the banks of the main riverway, and those of the tributary creeks which provided sufficient depth and flow of water to enable the floating out of the logs. Some cutters stayed along the banks, and worked the cedar slightly deeper in the bank scrubs where the logs had to be man-handled by lever poles and skids over greater distances than that needed with the earlier logs. Later these men had to introduce animal traction—chiefly that of bullocks, of which but a yoke or two were needed. As the cedar-getter collected his logs at increasing distances from the depot at Ballina, the practice of making his logs into rafts was adopted—but more of rafts at a later stage of my story.

SOME SPREAD out and gainfully explored and exploited the scrubs fringing the banks of the Brunswick and Tweed Rivers. Still other bands like the 18th century French-Canadian "Coureurs-des-Bois" advanced further up the waters of the creeks towards their sources, until at last they had cut their way up to where those creeks had dwindled down to brooks, mere streamlets, or even dry gullies, unnavigable for even flat-bottomed punts of shallow draught.

The cedar trees handy to the banks of these water-courses were cut, trimmed, branded with the aid of

trimmed, branded with the aid of an iron or steel punch, and left lying to wait until the waters were swollen by fresh or flood after rains when they could be floated out. The cedar-getters continued with this cutting for so long as the heavy rains kept off, and the logs awaiting transport by the creek steadily mounted in number.

However, rainy seasons were more frequent in those days, and when a fresh indicated that the cutters could rely on being provided with sufficient body and flow of water, cutting operations were suspended, and all hands turned to the task of rolling and levering the fallen giants into the roaring, rushing, and muddy torrent.

Day and night this work went on, in the rains, without shelter, and with little opportunity of the workers changing into dry clothes. Work went on till all the logs were afloat. Very big logs threatening floating difficulties had been previously fitched. Even then at times one of the smaller logs was still too big for the body of water provided, and it tossed and rolled about churning up the creek bed, but not moving with the flow. Sometimes it chocked the other logs. If this chock were not cleared the transport of the logs would be held up until another opportunity arrived.

arrived.

AS THE LOGS began to move away on the swollen waters, some of the cutters preceded them along the banks and as they were released from the work of rolling the logs into the stream, others followed ready to remove anything that might obstruct the free passage of the timber. In spite of this at times a block did occur. Then those on the banks had to act quickly, and perform a dangerous task. The wet and slippery logs bobbing about in the water offered very insecure footing, yet to relieve the situation men unhesitatingly sprang on to the milling mass, and plying their axes, worked strenuously to free the logs from the jam.

To improve their foot-hold most were bare-footed — rarely did their good fortune rise to the height of possessing a pair of boots with spiked soles. These workers continued with their work until a warning crack indicated that the water-pressure, allied with the weight of timber behind, would free the mass. Then the men scrambled ashore in time to watch the “chock” bulge out, and the released logs go racing away on their rough and tumbling journey towards the “boom” waiting to intercept them. This chain boom was placed across the mouths of Boatharbour (Wil-

THE MOUNDS OF BOATHOUSE (Wilson's) Creek and Rosehill (Leycester) Creek, where they flowed into the main stream. The cable, buoyed up by light planks, was sufficient to arrest the timber. It had to be very strong, and firmly anchored to the banks at each end, for the strain upon it, from the pressure of the flood waters and the mass of timbers behind, must have been tremendous.

I have not heard tell that this "boom" burst on any occasion, and yet it was by no means an improbability. In such an event the result must have been calamitous.

Whilst to the cutters in the vicinity of the shallower streams the coming of the flood-waters was beneficial, for those who still worked on the banks of the main stream below the boom these same flood conditions were often disheartening. These latter cutters had not been awaiting any increase in the flow of water, and if the waters overflowed the river banks their timber, lying in wait along the banks for normal transport, was in danger of being whisked away out of due season. When floods threatened, the main-river cutter used every available means to anchor his logs against the threat.

HE MIGHT have to attend to them in "singles" at separate spots, or it might have been expedient for him to gather them into a raft.

for him to gather them into a raft, and lash that raft securely against the effects of the flood waters. Even in spite of his having taken precautions the time of flood was an uncertain and uneasy one for him. Too often the force of the swiftly-moving stream tore his logs from their moorings, dispersed the logs forming the raft and scattered them far and widely over the inundated country-

side, or worse still carried them out to sea, to be thrown up with other flotsam as debris on the sea-beaches. When the flood waters had receded the cedar-getter had to set out on the well-nigh hopeless task of recovering his scattered treasure. That he did recover much of it speaks volumes for his logged tenacity. Many logs rested for years secure in their hiding-place, until a later generation made a rich find.

As time went by chain booms were set up higher up Leycester Creek and at Boatharbour.

When the flood waters had abated millions of feet of timber rested behind the chain. Then all interested parties joined in the work of sorting out the logs according to ownership.

Whilst engaged in this task the cedar-getter, at times, was subjected to the vexatious activities of a few

to the vexatious activities of a few "cedar-pirates". Although these were responsible for many acrimonious arguments, leading to free fights on occasions, most of the cedar men subscribed to a code of right conduct, and were capable of inflicting punishment on any guilty of a breach of that code, and thus had a restraining influence on these evil-doers.

The logs were passed under the boom, and each floated to join the owner's collection. A few inches were cut off the battered ends, the sides trimmed for market, and from the logs a raft was fashioned, and not in any haphazard manner. The logs were so lashed together that they became secured into a firm platform, unlikely to roll. So stable was this platform that the persons in charge erected, thereon, living quarters complete with tent, and with all the facilities for cooking. As the raft drifted down the river on its tardy

journey with the ebb of the tide, a rowing boat was towed behind. When the tide turned the raft was made fast to the trunk of a tree at the bank. The journey was continued when the tide again flowed out.

Each trip required the services of more than one raftsman because the tides rendered it necessary for the work to be divided into day shifts

work to be divided into day shifts and night shifts. The raftsmen used poles to keep the raft in the running stream, by warding it off the river sides and mud banks in the river, and for fending off any floating rubbish in the course.

SOME MEN worked rafts as their sole occupation. Frequently their families accompanied them on the raft trip, which occupied some days, and returned per rowing boat to the starting point. Then the performance was repeated on another raft. I've heard tell of certain raft-carried families taking their fowls with them on the raft, and also using all the gear associated with the family wash. In later days raftsmen built, and used, utility rafts made of other timbers, and maintained a slow, tide-governed shuttle service between Ballina and Lismore, carrying stores and other commodities. When Mr. William Wilson arrived at Ballina in 1844, en route to take over his property — Lismore Station — from Mr. Ward Stephen, the vessel which he had chartered for the ocean voyage, grounded on the sand-banks near the crossing. The boat was eventually pulled off, and made its way to Mobbs' Bay, opposite the present site of Ballina. Here Mr. Wilson had a raft built, and on this he and his wife and numerous goods — includ-

wife and numerous goods — including a cow — drifted up to Lismore on the tides.