

THE KENTUCKY RIVER

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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At one time the State of Kentucky formed plans for the building of locks and dams on the Green, Barren, Licking and Kentucky Rivers. The Licking never had any lock and dams built; the Green and Barren Rivers had all their locks and dams built. The Panic of 1842 (a financial depression) ended the construction on the Kentucky at Frankfort's Lock 4. From then until 1885 when the Corps of Engineers took charge of the river construction the one hundred and fifty-nine miles of the Kentucky between Lock 4 and Beattyville ran unstoppped by dams.

The building of the Lock 14 at Beattyville swelled the town's population from three hundred to over a thousand. The lock being constructed wasn't the standard lock where boats entered and then was lowered or raised to the next pool of water. This lock resembled a 'Bear Trap' having a long dam with a gap or 'chute' set in it. The Bear Trap gates were two panels hinged on one side of the foundation with the upside panel sitting on top of the downside panel. When the pool wasn't needed to hold rafts or boats the two panels could be separated to allow the river to run through.

By closing the two panel's water backed up behind the dam. When a raft or boat needed to pass through the panels were collapsed onto the foundation. In theory this allowed the raft or boat to run through the chute and glide down a gentle slope to the channel below where it could ride the wave of released water down to the river below. That was the theory. There is theory and then there is reality.

There were men who had their doubts about the Bear Trap working. A crowd had gathered for the test of how well the dam functioned. The panels rose and fell as if on cue. However when the panels lay flat the dammed up water rushed through with a mighty frightening surge and seemed to gain speed as it passed down the chute's slope to where the water churned around in a cauldron of boiling water at the bottom of the chute.

The theory of the Bear Trap's operation was that the boat or raft coming down the river had only to center in the sixty-foot wide gate, without striking either side and then descend a gentle slope to the river below. That had been the theory.

Rafters were by nature brave men; otherwise they would have never ridden the rafts through rapids and dangerous hazards on the river. However, running through the gate was in a class by itself. There were men who saw the first collapse of the Bear Trap and still had nerve enough to try bringing a raft through. Rafters manned their rafts and pointed them towards the gate and some, seeing what was before them left their rafts and swam ashore.

Crewless rafts shot through the gate and then lurched against the guide walls and were torn apart. Those rafters who had kept their nerve and stayed aboard entered the boiling

water when the shattered rafts hit the caldron below the chute. There were no reports of any men being drowned.

Local legends say that dynamite was used to blow the Bear Trap dam away. Today the old Bear Trap sits under the backwater of Lock 14 which is about five miles below Beattyville. In time locks were built up to Beattyville and even a railroad reached the town.

The booms and lumber mills at Beattyville and Proctor didn't get all the logs coming down from the ten counties of the Three Forks. Mary Verhoff wrote in the Louisville-Courier of 1905. "The ice gorge in the Kentucky River continues. The mercury fell to zero Sunday night, causing the river to begin freezing with a thirty foot rise below Jackson, and the logs and ice are now packed tighter than ever. The worse parts of the gorge are below Beattyville, about two miles, and extends clear to Irvine, Estill County, a distance of thirty miles. There in various places, ice is stacked to a height of twelve to twenty feet, surrounding these piles of finest walnut, poplar, and oak logs, while in the center for miles fifty-foot logs have turned on end, and standing that way in the water. A careful estimate by a riverman holds that the loss already sustained by the Swan-Day Lumber Company, and the Swan-Babb Mill will reach one half million dollars, and 20,000 logs are now in the water, ruined and ground to pieces in the jam."

The grinding up of these logs was an extreme example of what could happen to logs run in the river. Ronald Eller said, "The percentage of logs lost between the mountains and the sawmills was high. Some were damaged by floods or accidentally breaking of splash dams, while others took years to work their way downstream, arriving at the sawmill waterlogged and worthless. But the greatest problem for the producers was the uncertainty of supply, which kept many mills shut down during the dry seasons of the year."

Enter the railroads. "After 1890, most of the railroads had continued to build branch lines deeper into the mountains, enabling the lumbering company companies to establish their mills close to the source of the timber supply. By adding to the branch lines (Dinky lines) the lumbermen were able to reach the most remote hollows and coves."

Continuing the ice gorge story; "The cold snap is causing much concern today, as men can hardly stand the strain of standing in the water, on booms for twelve hours at a stretch, and many are quitting the work rather than freeze."

"The efforts to dynamite and clear the gorge have so far been fruitless, the huge explosives having no more effect on the ice than a giant firecracker."

"The heaviest loss of the ice gorge will fall on the log men of the extreme mountain counties, whose timber had been lying for two years in the valleys waiting for a tide. These men have no other way of making a living, and with their timber buried in the rivers, their

entire labor of three years has been swept away.”

Mary Verhoff’s report of the ice gorse will be picked up later.

As the track laying crews of the Rhiney-B Railroad worked their way up the river to Beattyville sawmills sprang up on the river as they now had a means of shipping their lumber. Joseph Brandenberg raised two sons and six daughters in the village of Hedliberg which was created to serve the sawmills. His two daughters, Hetty and Betsy, set up boiling facilities for making maple syrup and sugar. Hetty and Betsy formed maple sap into small lumps which they sold. Walker Jameson told his daughters as a young boy he had visited their ‘sugar camp’ where he bought their ‘pressed cakes of sugar and carried them in his pockets and would take them out to eat like candy.

The Sawmill Branch comes out at Old Gal Bar where the rafts were landed and the sisters sold their maple products. The rafters landed at the bar where Bob Smith said, “Lumber mills---might buy whatever logs the timbermen of the mountains might have to offer. If the rivermen thought they could get a better price down river they might untie their rafts and continue their journey

The William Buckles & Sons sawmill kept fifteen to twenty men busy sawing 20,000 board feet of yellow pine, poplar and oak every day. Thomas Forman had a mill there in 1911. When ‘Big Henry’ Hensley and his brother’s mill at Bellepoint burned down they came and built a mill. Many mills had a farm where they raised food to feed their workers. A long time buddy of mine, Tom Hensley, was a great-nephew of Big Henry and Tom remembered Big Henry raising a 900 pound hog on the farm. Big Henry never risked running his own logs but purchased logs and rafts at the mill.

The West Brothers store sat opposite the railroad station and catered to rafters and sawmill. There were many people employed at Hedliberg. John C. Combs and his wife, America ‘Meci’ Gay Combs came to town so he could work in the woods logging, mostly for the Bellepoint Company. Meci ran a boarding house near one of the mills. She was both a spunky woman and a midwife. Once while comparing the numbers of babies she had delivered with Dr. Preston Jones the doctor tried teasing her by saying “You never stopped a pain in your life.”

Meci shot right back “Maybe not but I never charged ‘em for it.

A Mr. Moore was interviewed by Lanonda Moore and told, “My father en mother, I member they told me back in the 1920’s---They lived in Heideberg, Kentucky, that’s in Lee County. En my mother, she run a boarding house, en washed them

clothes en furnished em a good bed to sleep in fur a dollar a week. En had as many as, I don't know, eight or ten. Purty good bunch of boarders."

While canoeing down the river I stopped for a while at Heidelberg and then across the river to the mouth of Sturgeon Creek, which was said to be the longest creek in Kentucky. Bob Smith wrote an article entitled, "When Timber Was King Along Sturgeon Creek." Some; but not all of the following information is taken from that article:

Standard and narrow gauge railroads ran up the creek and its branches as far as Jackson County. At times fifteen freight cars would be at Ida May, along the creek, unloading goods which were put on wagons drawn by oxen or mules for delivery all over the hills. A lumber mill in Caryton was three stories high, 50 feet wide and 300 feet long. A nearby small town, Cressmont, had 30 new houses, said to have electricity and running water, a company store, and a school building. This was before 1913. In time the town had a church, a movie theater, a company clubhouse, baseball field and a tennis court.

Like so many men Lee Congleton was a man of many parts. He ran a sawmill, logged, purchased other men's logs and ran them down to Frankfort where two of his brothers ran a sawmill. Lee's son Claude recalled as a young boy he played at being a rafter. Claude said, "I also learned how to make a raft from cornstalks and float it to a branch which ran by the house. A make believe logging adventure, copying Papa's work."

In 1903 a Cincinnati Coopersage Company established a beer stave manufacturing plant in Heidelberg. They bought bolts of white oak and put them through a dressing machine to make staves. Claude said his father became interested in making bolts "and started making and selling these bolts floating them down to Heidelberg". Lee quit floating bolts when he began losing many of them in the high water. In 1904 he bought a mill and hired an experienced mechanic to run it. He hauled the rough cut bolts to his plant on wagons. When the white oak began to run out he scouted around to establish his mill elsewhere.

He found Rosses Creek just downstream had few people but a vast number of white oak trees to feed his two stave mills. Rosses Creek was "an out-of-the-way place, sparsely settled by moonshiners, bootleggers and rustlers." Lacking capital Lee took in a banker as a partner. Lee built a new house for his family and a large barn to keep his many mules and horses needed to pull the tram cars over the tracks he built. His mills processed the best logs while the poorer logs were cut into lumber or railroad ties. The wood products from his 20,000 acres were hauled five miles to Evelyn which sat on the opposite side of the river.

