

In spring, it's time for sightings of the 'River Pig'

By **JOE HERMOLIN**
Langlade County
Historical Society
president

It's said that in spring a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love. But for a "River Pig" spring means thoughts of log drives. River Pigs were the men who drove logs downstream to saw mills. They were a tough bunch, working in water just above freezing while wearing inch thick long underwear, two or more pairs of wool socks, and hob-nailed boots. Getting soaked in ice water was part of the job.

The first loggers came to the Wisconsin Northwoods to harvest the large pine forests. At a time when roads and railroads were nonexistent the rivers were the means of transporting logs to market. North American woodland Indians had long used rivers and lakes as roadways. Waterways as transport networks were made official by the Northwest Ordinance Act of 1787 which stated that navigable rivers and the portages between them were public domain. This was reconfirmed by Congress in 1796 and again in 1803.

Loggers would cut and trim logs in winter and pile them up at the rivers' edge. At the first signs that rivers were opening up the log piles or "rollways" were skidded to the water's edge to start their journey. Dams at various points maintained adequate water levels and flow. Water would accumulate behind the dam and, when the reservoir was full, the sluice gates were opened and the surge of water would propel logs down to where the next dam was located.

River crews were divided into

three main groups. A rear crew was responsible for insuring that all logs were put afloat and none were left behind. They used boats called bateaux which were about 35 feet long and four to five feet wide. They took men back and forth across the river and to sites where logs were hung up on rocks in mid-stream. Men poked stuck logs free with peavey poles. Managing a bateau required exceptional skill and strength.

Seven or eight miles downstream from the rear crew was a jam crew with another jam crew further yet downstream. These two crews made sure that channels were kept open, that the logs did not jam up and were kept moving. At the very rear of this procession was the cooking crew in their wanigans (an Ojibwe word for the floating bunkhouse and supply boat). These wanigans contained a tent set up which served as the kitchen. If meals did not satisfy the River Pigs, the cook was dunked in the river.

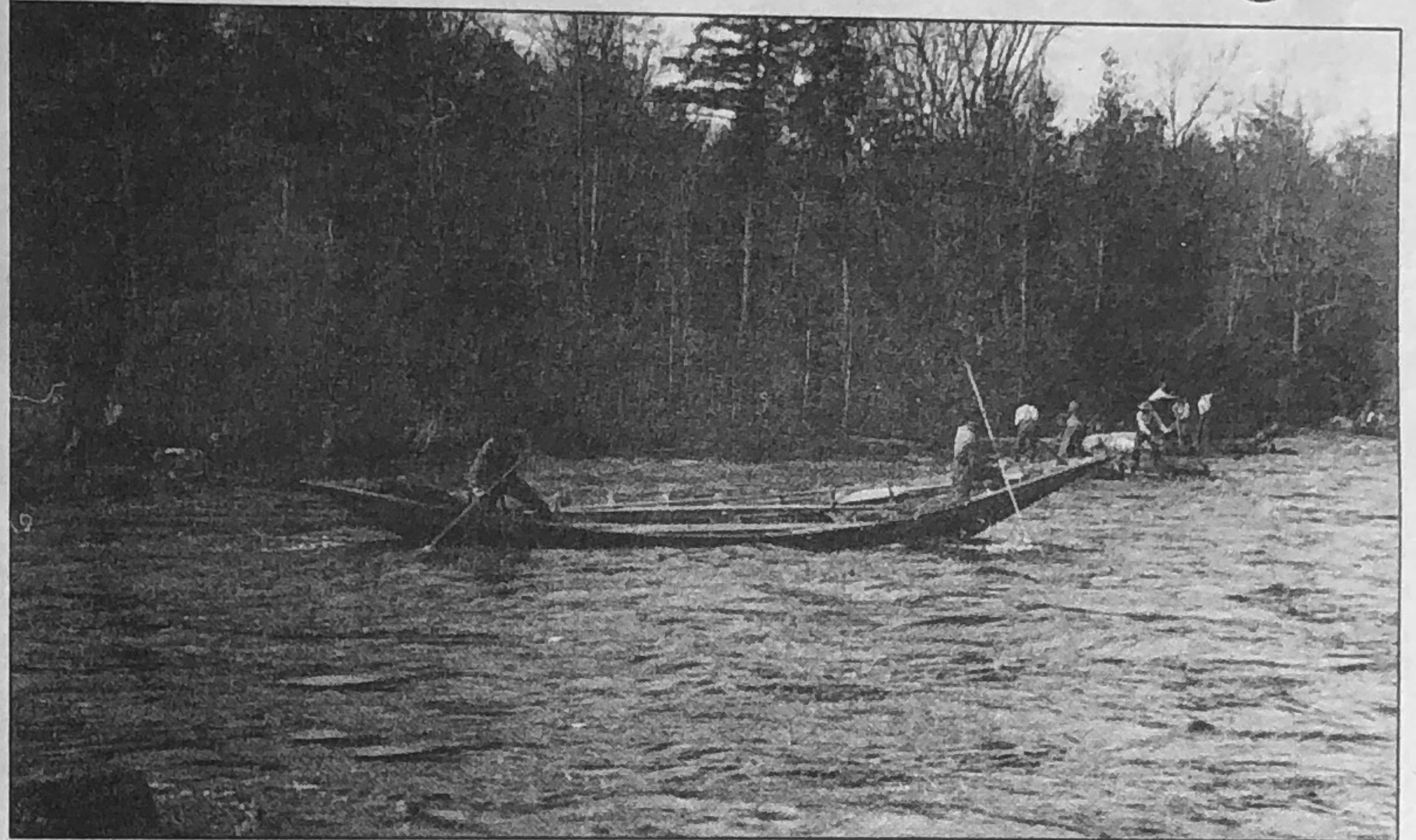
Each night the crews would set up camp at lean-tos or abandoned logging camps, start a roaring fire to dry their wet clothes and retire under heavy horsehide blankets.

Three major river systems brought logs from the Northwoods to mills further south. Going toward the southeast the Rat, Pine, and Popple Rivers flowed into the Peshtigo, Menominee, and Oconto Rivers which supplied mills around Peshtigo, Green Bay, Menominee, and Marinette. Going southwest, waters originating in Lac Vieux Desert and the Eagle River Chain flowed into the Wisconsin River and brought logs to Rhinelander, Tomahawk, Merrill, Wausau, Stevens Point, and Wisconsin Rapids.

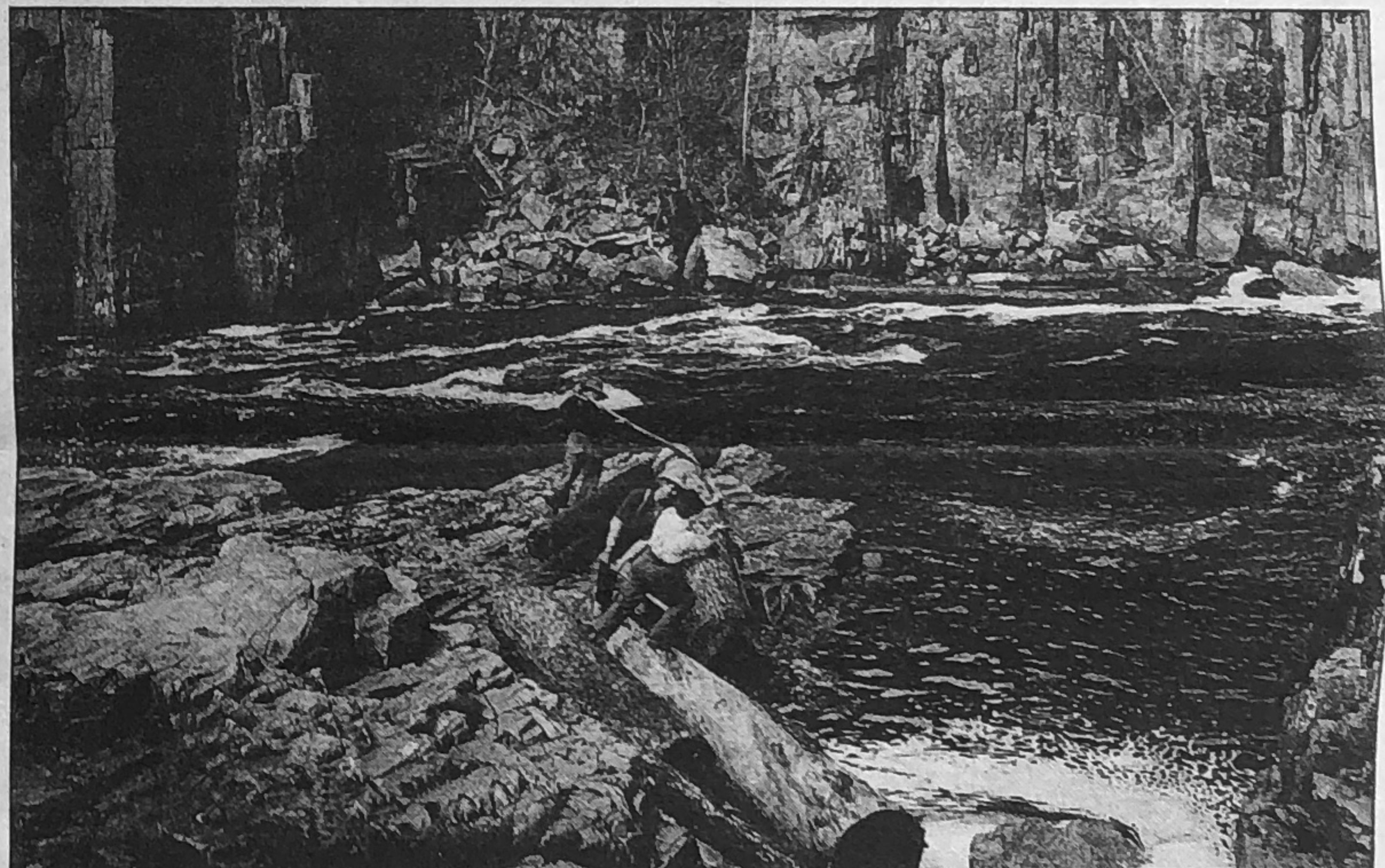
Of interest to this area were the rivers of the Wolf watershed that brought logs to mills in Oshkosh. By the mid-1800s logging was already occurring along the Wolf south of the Menominee Reservation. But the upper Wolf, including Langlade and Menominee Counties was not logged until about 1870.

Log drives required certain changes to the river. The 47 mile segment of the Wolf River that flows through Langlade County has a drop of 10 feet per mile. Changes involved blasting out boulders 4 to 8 feet in diameter, clearing channels of debris, and building dams at several points.

See Our History Back Page



It took great skill to maneuver a bateau. The river crew moved down the river in these boats making sure the logs did not jam.



The Eau Claire Dells was a common spot where logs would have to be freed once they got stuck.



The rear crew on a log drive relaxes while waiting for a surge of water released from an upstream dam.



Provided by the
 Langlade County Historical Society.
 To donate, volunteer or become a
 member, call 715-627-4464.
 Visit the museum complex at
 Superior Street and Seventh Avenue
 or check out the Website
 at www.langladehistory.com.

Our History

Continued

Our History

This was all undertaken by the Wolf River Improvement Company. Only after modifications to the river would loggers begin cutting pine in winter and skidding logs to the river banks anticipating the spring breakup of waterways. Dams were also erected on rivers running into the Wolf: ten on the Lily, three on Swamp Creek, two on Pickerel, and five on the Hunting River.

One famous story involves a civil engineer, J. Gilmore, who was hired to survey the Wolf. Near the Langlade and Menominee County lines he found the river so clogged with boulders and overgrown cedar that he theorized that the river ran underground and that it was impossible to run logs on the Wolf. Today that section is known as Gilmore's Mistake.

Log jams were a constant danger. One of the worst recorded was in 1879 when about 30,000,000 feet of logs jammed, creating a pileup about two stories high. It took 22 days to break it up.

Other perils awaited River Pigs due to the dams. In May, 1874 an accident at the Gardner Dam had disastrous consequences. Six men were stationed there to control the gates and manage the water flow. They awoke at around midnight to the sound of water rushing from upstream, arriving much sooner than anticipated. The men rushed out of their bunks to raise the gates but the dam gave way,



This dam on the Wolf is typical of many that controlled water flow during a drive.

sweeping five men to their deaths. One logger, John Slatterlee, a Menominee, was saved when two bystanders pulled him out from under some logs.

An average drive on the Wolf would last over three months but on occasion might last two seasons. When logs arrived near Oshkosh they were formed into rafts in Lake Poygan, sorted according to watermarks for each lumberman, a sort of branding iron. Lumbermen were assessed a fee according to the amount of

board feet of timber they had driven. That fee went to the Wolf River Improvement Company which maintained the dams and insured good water flow. The watermarks also were used to calculate pay to the loggers for their hard earned harvest.

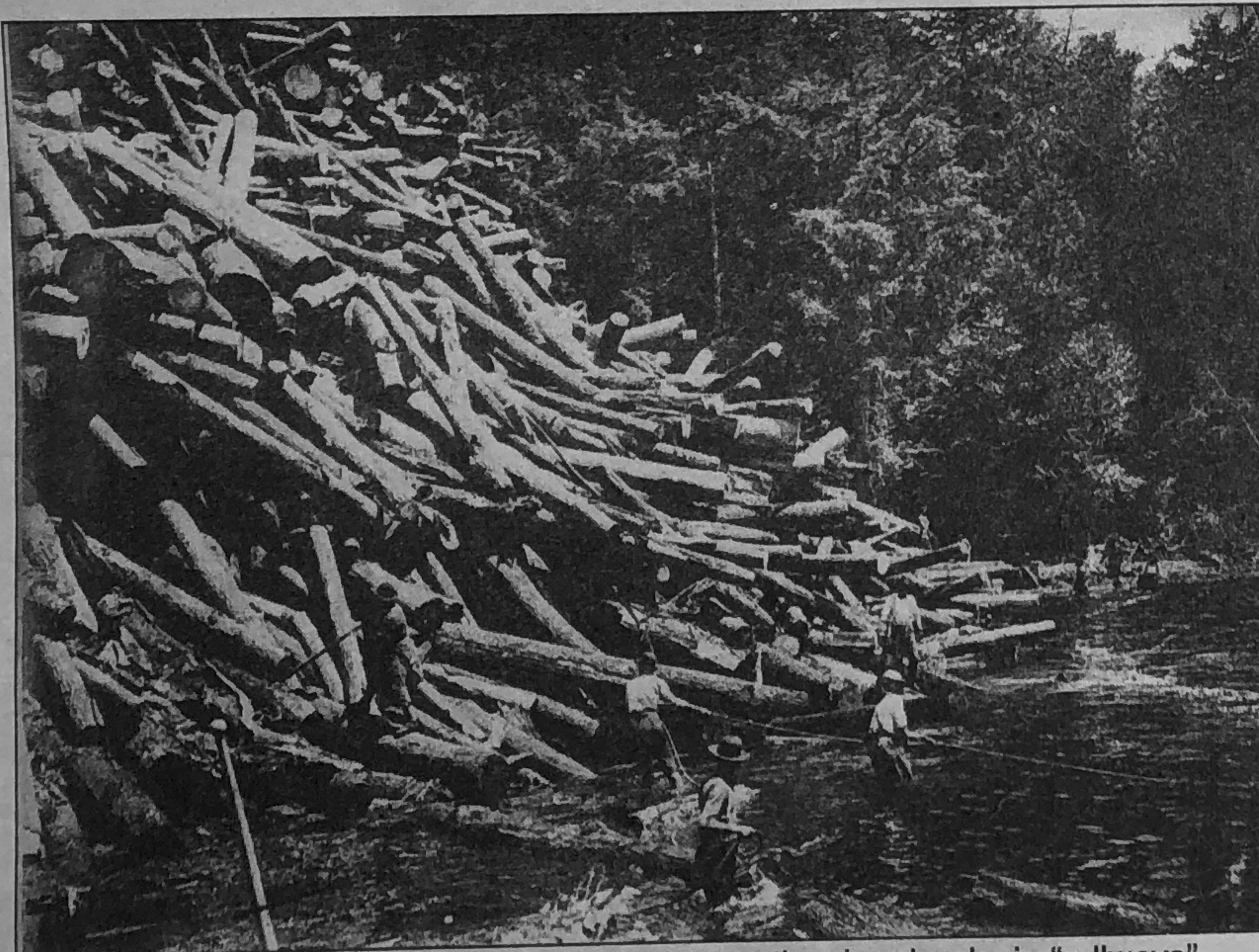
By the 1890s the pineries were thinned out but log drives continued when it was proved that hemlock could also be floated downstream in profitable numbers. River drives became less important with the coming of the railroad but continued until 1917. The last of the logging dams on the Wolf River went out in 1926.

The Wolf River was the major waterway in this area but not the only one. Drives also happened on the Eau Claire River leading to

mills in Wausau and to supply the Screen Door Company in Antigo. The largest drive on the Eau Claire brought four million board feet of lumber to Antigo's Screen Door Company. Several dams aided in the flow of water to carry logs.

Another river which held drives was the Embarrass. With dams east and south of Birnamwood logs could be transported to New London where the Embarrass joins the Wolf.

The era of the River Pigs and log drives in northern Wisconsin was fairly short but it lives on in the folklore, songs, and stories of a group of men who lived a hard and dangerous life to the advantage of the forest products industry and all consumers of wood products.



During winter logging trees were piled up at the river banks in "rollways". Ice melt meant it was time to get the logs moving.



**Make
some bunny
happy!**

Easter Lilies
Celebrating Easter
and the glorious
return of spring.

**Frisch
Greenhouses**

Tuesday-Friday 9-5
Saturday 9-1

106 Seventh Avenue
715-623-4010