

LUMBERING ON THE BLACK RIVER

AT

ONALASKA, WISCONSIN

1852 - 1902

A SEMINAR PAPER

PRESENTED TO

THE GRADUATE FACULTY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - LA CROSSE

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

HISTORY 761

BY

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INTRODUCTION

In the last half of the nineteenth century, the area of West Central Wisconsin became synonymous with logging and the lumber industry. As the forests of this region were being exploited to their fullest, men and women poured into the regions along the rivers which served as highways to the pineries. One of the main centers of activity was an area which encompassed the point at which the Black River joins the Mississippi. At this point, settlers established two rival settlements within two years of each other. One of the cities, La Crosse, became famous as a lumber town; the other, Onalaska, became a "boom town", but never was able to rival her competitor in population or economic growth.

The story of La Crosse and her lumbering history has often been related in papers and theses, but the history of Onalaska has been only half told in various civic directories, short newspaper articles, and centennial brochures. Since local history has long fascinated me, and since I am now a resident of Onalaska, I decided to explore Onalaska's early history as a subject for my seminar paper. It soon became evident that Onalaska history was also going to be a history of lumbering on the Black River, since that industry was the reason Onalaska was established.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to recount briefly the history of lumbering along the lower Black River, and to describe its effect upon Onalaska from 1852 through 1902. By reading old newspapers, city and county records, and various printed materials concerning the subject

and area in question, I believe that I have been able to compile a paper which is both interesting and informative, and academically acceptable as a research project.

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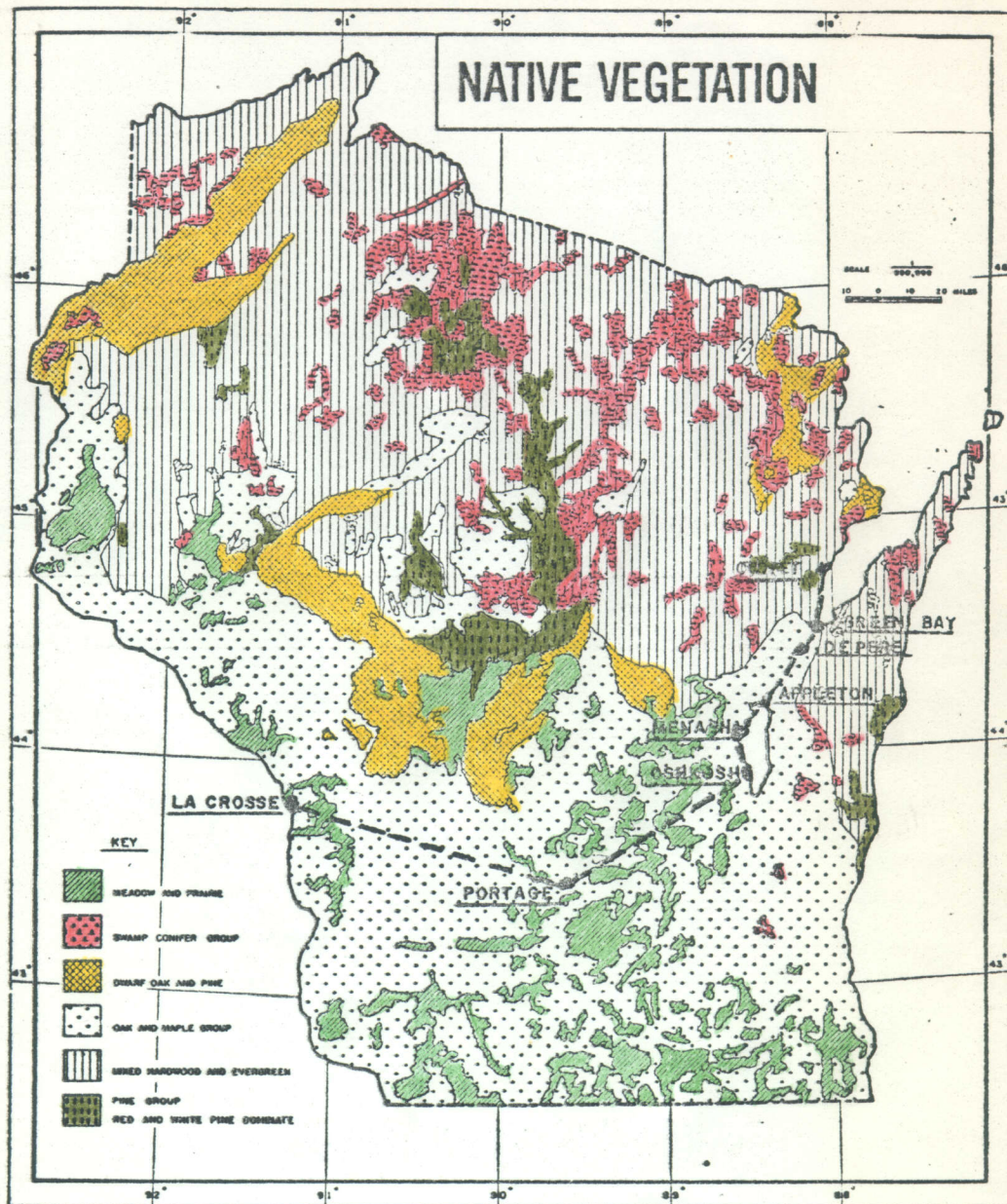
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NATURAL RESOURCES DREW SETTLERS TO WISCONSIN

The development of Wisconsin's resources had a definite relationship to the manner in which the state was settled. The earliest settlement was the somewhat haphazard occupancy of the Fox and lower Wisconsin valleys, Green Bay, and a fringe along the southern shore of Lake Superior. The abundance of wild game and furs was the attraction. The era of the fur trader was not past when mineral deposits of the lead regions of Grant, Lafayette, and Iowa counties brought thousands more settlers into the territory. The rich soil of Southern Wisconsin was the main attraction to over 700,000 people who had settled there before the Civil War. The fourth great natural resource was to prove the greatest asset in drawing people to fully three-fifths of the state's area. This great resource was the forests.¹

According to a map of Wisconsin in 1867² there were conventional symbols of occupation and development along the shores of Green Bay, down the Fox River to Oshkosh, southwest from Oshkosh to Portage, and then westward along railroad lines to La Crosse, situated on the Mississippi River. This railway line virtually coincided with the agricultural frontier of the state at that time. Approximately two-thirds of the state's territory lies north of this line. This was the region which contained the forests, or "the big woods" which for half a century were the bases for Wisconsin's giant lumber industry. This area was covered with mixed hardwoods such as ash, basswood, black cherry, elm, poplar, hickory, maple, walnut, and the various oaks. But, because of its durability, the most prized and sought after lumber





of the nineteenth century was that of the white and Norway pines.

Wisconsin produced some of the finest stands of white and Norway pines on the American continent, due primarily to the proper combination of soil and latitude. The sandy soils north of the forty-fourth parallel, a line which runs from La Crosse to Sheboygan, were most hospitable to these pines. Hemlock, spruce and cedar held their place in these evergreen regions, but lumbermen despised them as long as the pines were available.³ Since pine is more buoyant than the hardwoods, the lumbermen saw that it would be relatively simple to transport logs downstream on three of the rivers which flowed through the northern pineries. The Chippewa, the Wisconsin, and the Black Rivers were thusly destined to become the highways of the lumber industry of Wisconsin. It is the last of these, the Black, with which this paper is concerned.

Government foresters estimated the stand of pine timber in the twenty-seven northern counties before the beginning of lumbering operations in Wisconsin as 129,400,000 feet. The densest stand of pine at that time was on the Black River--225,000,000 feet to the township; a township being approximately six miles square.⁴

EARLY ACTIVITY ON BLACK RIVER AND THE SETTLEMENT AT ONALASKA

The Wisconsin pineries supplied building material before the Indian title passed from the lands. On one of his trips up the Mississippi, Major Stephen H. Long wrote in his Journal that the region along the Black River was the source of much of the lumber used in St. Louis, and a contemporary diary states that lumbering was carried on in this area as early as 1818.⁵ According to published letters of Henry Hastings Sibley, S. T. Smith, and others, trading posts were established on the site of La Crosse in the 1830's, but none remained as permanent settlements.⁶ In 1841, four years after the Winnebagoes ceded their lands east of the Mississippi River to the government,⁷ Nathan Myrick came up the river from Prairie du Chien and established the first permanent white settlement in La Crosse County. In a letter written years later, Nathan Myrick related that the Mormons were already carrying on lumbering operations along the lower Black River.⁸

Land in what is now La Crosse County came into the market in 1848, after the government survey made in 1845-1846,⁹ but settlement was slow until 1850.¹⁰ During the 1850's, with increased river traffic and the new railroad lines, and an increased awareness of the pineries to the North, west central Wisconsin began to attract attention.

During the summer of 1851, a young New Yorker by the name of Thomas G. Rowe arrived in La Crosse,¹¹ He came to La Crosse by way of a great lakes steamer which put him ashore at Sheboygan, 196 miles from La Crosse. Here he employed a team which took him to Portage and the

Wisconsin River. At Portage he took passage on a small river steamer Onaota, and eleven days after leaving Sheboygan, reached La Crosse. When he arrived in La Crosse, he struck up an acquaintance with another adventuresome young man named Harvey E. Hubbard. In various articles, he relates that Rowe loved physical activity, his favorite pastimes being to take a walk on the Black River bottoms or a hike in the bluffs.¹² The walk along the Black River particularly intrigued him; he was much taken with the beauty of the region where the city of Onalaska now stands. Also, in the 1850's the lumber business was about to generate much activity on the Black River. Therefore, without further reservation, Mr. Rowe headed for the government land office at Mineral Point, and in 1851 had the site of Onalaska recorded as a town in his name.¹³ With the help of a registered surveyor by the name of William Hood, he had the site surveyed by November 10, 1851.¹⁴

According to Hubbard, who roomed with Rowe while he was laying out his new town, Rowe was well read, his greatest enjoyment being in the discussion of literature, especially the poetry of Thomas Campbell. Sitting on the front porch of "The Western Enterprise", a hotel in La Crosse, Rowe could often be heard quoting from the "The Pleasures of Hope", his favorite poem by Campbell:

Now far he sweeps, where scarce a summer smiles,
 Oh Behrings rocks, or Greenland's naked isles;
 Cold on his midnight watch the breezes blow;
 From wastes that slumber in eternal snow;
 And waft, across the waves' tumultuous roar,
 The wolf's long howl from Onalaska's shore.

But hope can here her moonlight vigils keep,
 And sing to the spirit of the deep;

One evening during a discussion of this poem, Rowe suddenly said, "by golly that's the name for our new town, let's call it Onalaska for

Mr. Campbell".¹⁵ Hubbard commented that the second "o" made it sound too portentous, so it was dropped when Rowe officially entered the name at Mineral Point.

The energetic Rowe purchased a frame building from John M. Levy of La Crosse, and after loading it on a raft, towed it up river to the site of his settlement. His building, after it was moved to a spot between I and J streets, and enclosed for winter, became a stopping point for Black River lumbermen. 1851 had indeed been a busy year for the young man from New York.¹⁶

Since a local newspaper did not appear until 1885, when the La Crosse County Record was established at Onalaska by Alex Moran and a Mr. Ball, an accurate picture of the first years of the town is not available. It is known that soon after Rowe established his tavern, a number of other persons settled near his place, but their names have been forgotten in the rush of events.¹⁷ Freeborn Welch, who died in Onalaska a few years ago, claimed his father built the first house in the town in 1852, and that he, himself, made the first wagon track. A. N. Moore related that James Rand came to Onalaska from Dane County, Wisconsin in 1852, and he said that there were many houses at that time. John Dalton, one of the oldest settlers, came in 1858, then being fourteen. He remembered Onalaska as a busy little town.¹⁸ At any rate, Onalaska was growing, and a delighted Thomas Rowe hoped that river steamships would make his beautiful town, and not the sandy Prairie La Crosse to the south, the ultimate river city. At one time it was hoped by residents of Onalaska that their town would become the county seat, but it was not to be. When La Crosse County was organized, the city of La Crosse was designated as the temporary county seat for three years

on condition that necessary public buildings be furnished free of charge to the county. If this condition were not met, an election was to be held within a year to determine the location of the county seat.¹⁹ As a result of this stipulation, the first courthouse was hurriedly built in 1851, by private subscription, on land set aside by the county board in anticipation of the legislature's action.²⁰ Protests from the settlements of Onalaska and Lewis Valley went unheeded. Lewis Valley residents issued a manifesto which reflected Onalaska's sentiments as to the board's disposal of competition for construction of the courthouse.²¹

By the summer of 1856, there were three sawmills in operation and two more were in the process of erection. During the same season, Onalaskans built a sash blind factory, a brewery, a bakery, two blacksmith shops, a cooper shop, eight stores, and forty dwellings. The following spring, a post office was established and two hundred lots were sold for erection of buildings.²² After the La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad received its charter, the future prosperity and growth of La Crosse was assured. Rowe realized that although his town was growing, it could no longer keep up with La Crosse.²³

The story of Onalaska in the early years is the story of lumbering and the lumber industry. The early settlers came largely from Canada and the New England states where they had been accustomed to lumbering activities. Norwegians began to come soon after 1858, drawn by the chance to work in the mills and lumber camps, and enticed by the natural beauty of the "Coulee Region" which offered a setting similar to their native Norway.²⁴ By the census of 1860, the town (township) of Onalaska had a population of 840.²⁵

LUMBERING IN THE 1850'S AND THE 1860'S

Lumbering gave Onalaska its early economic base. Lumbermen floated the white pine logs down the Black River each spring from the pineries in the Black River Basin. With the lumber came loggers with money to spend and the opportunity for jobs at the local mills. As has been stated, by 1856 Onalaska had three operating sawmills and two more under construction. Why was there such a sudden growth of mills?

Lumbermen who had been sawing lumber at or near Black River Falls and floating it to La Crosse found this to be a hazardous business. The rough country through which the Black River and its tributaries ran created many rapids and sudden turns in the streams. Moreover, there were few pools where the river could spread, except near its mouth; consequently, sudden rains and melting snow were followed by floods which destroyed mills and broke up rafts. It soon became evident, therefore, that a more economical means of handling the lumber was to float the logs downstream about thirty miles and there construct mills and rafts.²⁶ Some thirty miles south of the southern edge of the pinery were three towns: Onalaska, North La Crosse, and La Crosse.²⁷

On the 24th of February, 1856, Isaac L. Usher wrote as follows from his camp in the Black River Pinery to a relative in the East:

Black River is very rapid till within about twenty or twenty-five miles of its mouth. Its name is derived from the dark color of the water, which looks as if it were mixed with molasses. The country is very little settled for thirty miles below where we are, and very cleared. It is almost unbroken wilderness for distance below, and there is not a habitation above the logging camps. There will

be about 50,000,000 feet of pine logs put in this winter, worth at the mouth about \$12.00 per 1,000 and delivered below on the Mississippi at \$14.00 to \$16.00.²⁸

None of the logging went further back than a mile from the stream. That was the limit that the traffic could bear. It was dragged entirely with oxen, no horses being used except to haul supplies. The logs were run to Onalaska where they were rafted, and then floated to market. As the idea of floating logs downstream to mills and buyers began to become prevalent, many local mill owners on the northern Black River became angry over the intrusion of "outsiders" into their pineries. The friction between local mill men and the organizations which were systematizing the lumber industry so as to control all its branches from logging, milling, transportation, and the final distribution, extended even to the retail yards of the mills. Along the Black River it was the practice of the mill owners to construct "booms" across the stream, thus stopping logs which floated with the current.

In 1856 and for some years later nearly every sawmill owner put a boom entirely across the stream and held up every log that came down from above his mill-site, no matter to whom it belonged. In some cases this was for the deliberate purpose of appropriating and sawing the logs of other people, and in all cases it was high-handed and an attempt to subvert the rights of others. The result of this policy was war, all along the river, every time there was a drive of logs. The loggers would cut these booms, which would leave the mill men with no logs to saw, and their own stock, if they had any, gone nobody could predict where, onto the sandbars below and into the Mississippi River. One of the highest contemporary compliments paid to several of the early loggers was that they 'could steal a log out of the bark, with a man a-straddle of it'.²⁹

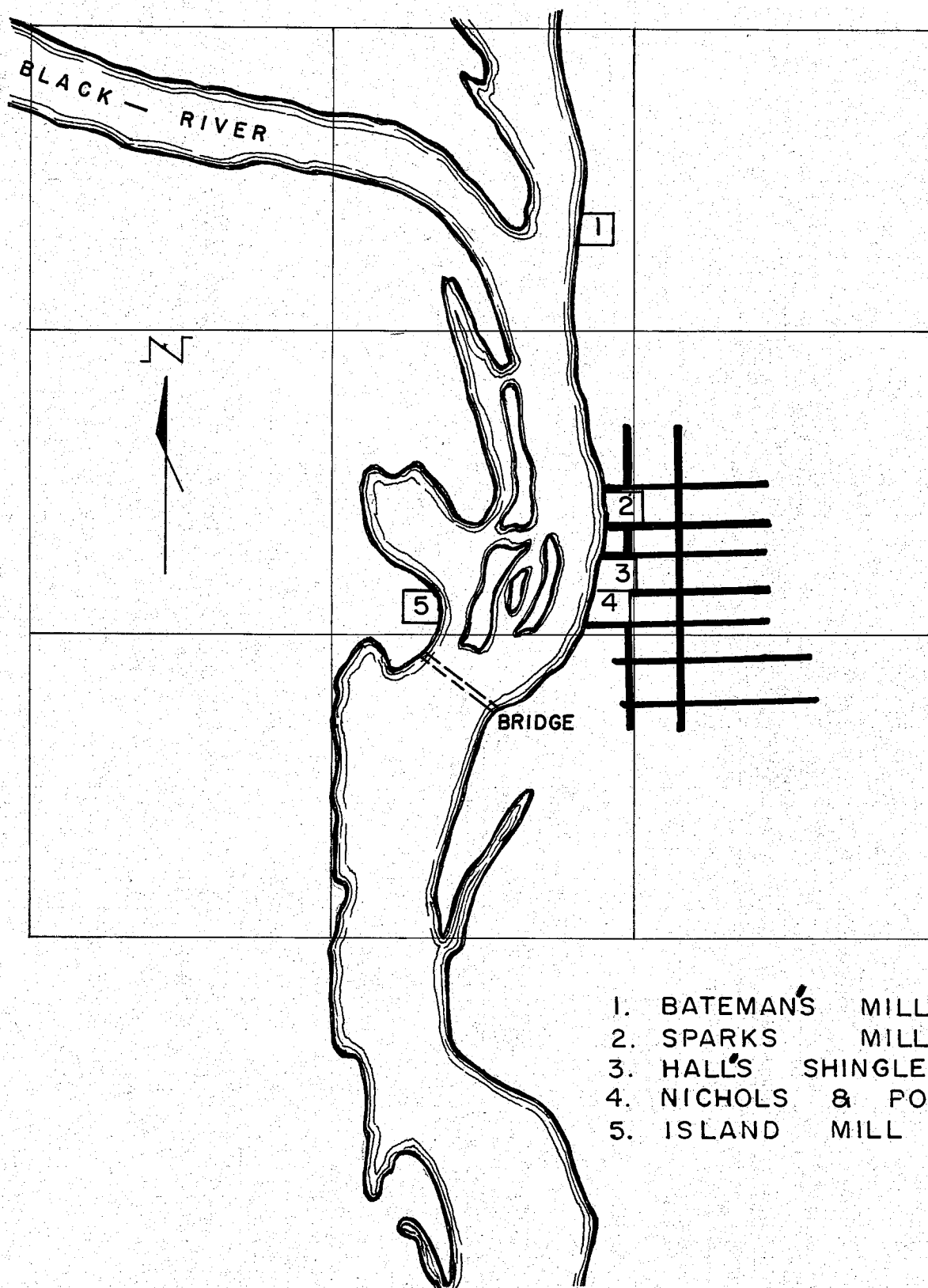
As early as 1857, attempts were made by loggers on the upper Black River to perfect an organization which would have legal sanction from the legislature to construct dams, booms, and a sorting works as a solution to these problems. The conditions of lawlessness and conflict

worried some of the more experienced lumbermen, but the men of the upper river near Black River Falls held strong to their belief that the logs should be sawed where they were cut, and not taken elsewhere for others to do the work.³⁰ One of the early organizations which worked to solve this problem was "The Black River Lumber, Driving, and Booming Company", which was founded by Isaac L. Usher and W. W. Crosby, and which was headquartered in Onalaska.³¹ Charles H. Nichols, whose father started the first sawmill in Onalaska, and who himself was later to become one of Onalaska's most influential lumbermen, began work as a clerk for this booming company in 1853.³² In 1857, Isaac L. Usher went to Madison to try to get a charter for a stock company for driving and booming Black River. He did not get the charter, but some important amendments to the existing boom company were granted.³³

The concessions made to the Onalaska company proved helpful, and as the improvements for holding logs at the mouth of the Black River were carried out, the opportunity for sawmills at once attracted attention, and what was destined to be a great factor in the making of La Crosse, North La Crosse, and Onalaska -- the large rafting works and the sawmill industry -- sprang at once into being and activity. The building of the mills continued in the face of hard times occasioned by the Panic of 1857. Eight mills were built in the La Crosse system in 1856; three of them closed in 1857. None of the Onalaska mills were affected.³⁴

In the summer of 1856, existing mills in Onalaska were the Bateman, established in 1850, traditional; the Nichols and Tompkins, established 1852-1853; and that of Dr. Sparks, a mulay mill erected in 1854. The two mills under construction were the Charles Hall shingle mill,

MAP SHOWING THE LOCATIONS OF SAW
MILLS AT ONALASKA
1850 — 1910



completed in 1857, and the Royce, Boice, Melville, and Company (J. S. Nichols) mill which was completed in the summer of 1856.³⁵

The mills of the 1850's and 1860's had a very small capacity, as shown both by the number of their employees and the board feet of lumber which they could handle. The largest mill in the La Crosse system had eighteen employees during this period, while the average was eight to fifteen.³⁶ The output of lumber varied from 10,000 to 20,000 board feet as can be seen by the following chart:³⁷

MILL CAPACITIES IN 1850'S AND 1860'S

NAME OF MILL	PRODUCTION YEARS	FEET DAILY
BURNS, RUBLEE, SIMONTON, & SMITH	(1852--STEAM)	15,000 feet
GOLDTHWAITE & BROWN	(1855-66)	5,000 feet
SHERMAN & GRISWOLD	(1856-57)	20,000 feet
DENTON & HURD	(1855-58)	20,000 feet
OHIO MILL	(ran one month only--1856)	40,000 feet
GILLETTE	(1856-60)	10,000 feet
CROSBY, HANSCOME, & COMPANY	(1856-63)	12,000 feet
SHEPPARD AND VALENTINE	(1856-63)	15,000 feet
ROYCE, BOICE, AND MILVILLE & CO.	(1856-59)	16,000 feet
C L. COLMAN MILL OF 1866		30,000 feet
INCREASED IN 1869 TO		50,000 feet
JOHN PAUL	(1860 - 24 hours)	12,000 feet

The Royce, Boice, Melville, and Company (J. S. Nichols was the "and Company") mill was constructed in the spring of 1856, and completed in June of that year, J. S. Nichols doing the work. The first sawyer

was a man by the name of Peter Sardin, and the first engineer was a Mr. Mitchell. J. S. Nichols performed the duties of superintendent and manager.³⁸ Capable of cutting 16,000 feet, this mill produced 2,500,000 feet of lumber in its first year of production, all of which was rafted except for 900,000 feet which was sold at home.³⁹

During this same period, the first sawmill built in Onalaska, that of Colonel C. M. Nichols and N. J. Tompkins, was still active. Not much data is available on the early activities of this mill. It is known that Nichols and Tompkins processed 2,000,000 feet of lumber purchased from George Farnham and Samuel Weston in the winter of 1853. In 1856 Colonel Nichols bought out the interest of Tompkins, and became sole proprietor of the mill.⁴⁰ By the end of 1856, however, he was again in partnership, this time with N. B. Holway, who purchased one-half interest in the mill. This partnership lasted until 1859 when the mill burned. The loss nearly bankrupted Holway.⁴¹ In 1859 Nichols purchased the Royce, Boice, Melville and Company mill, keeping it idle until 1860 while he made some repairs.⁴² It was then operated steadily until 1864, when the unusually low water caused a scarcity of logs along the Black River. At this time the average price of lumber increased from \$13 and \$15 per thousand, to an average of \$22 per thousand board feet.⁴³ 1865 - 1868 was a period of plentiful currency and good times, and the lumbermen received the prices they demanded for their products.

The men who built the industry in the early years were not the experienced and successful lumbermen one would think, but rather they were young men with confidence and faith in the future of the business. Often they came to the area with little or no capital, securing credit and using their small profits to enlarge the scope of their operations.

In the beginning the mills were owned by individuals or were partnerships. Often a mill owner faced financial disaster; the period of 1855-1859, for example, was one of constant ups and downs. During this period there were never two good years in a row because of variations in snow-fall and the characters of the winters.⁴⁴ Another great enemy was fire, a problem so recurrent that insurance companies often refused to insure the mills for the full amount of value. If they did do so, they charged exorbitant fees which the mill owners often refused to pay. The depth of the water in the streams was also an important factor, since the mills could not run unless the logs were readily available.

With all these circumstance, the industry proved to be a risky business, with a higher proportion of failure than any other business at that time. It took many things -- fortitude, courage, a willingness to take a risk, and a measure of luck, among other things -- to rise above the pitfalls and remain successful. There were profits to be had, but only for those who could manage in this unpredictable business of lumbering.

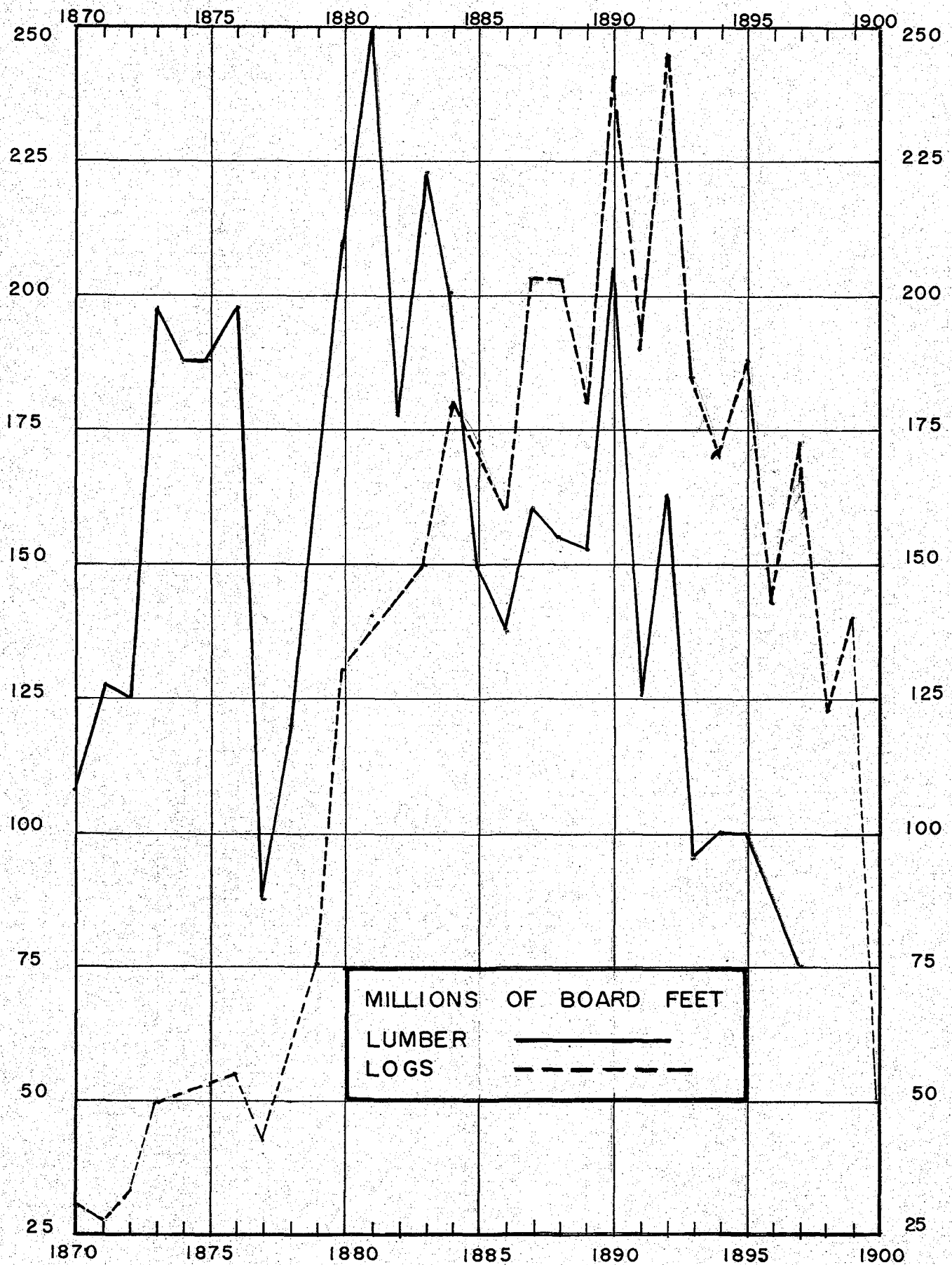
LUMBERING GROWS IN IMPORTANCE AFTER 1870

The early 1860's were years of tension and antagonism between the lumbermen along the Black River. Such associations as "The Black River Log Driving Association" and "The Black River Lumber, Driving, and Booming Company" did not ease this antagonism. Finally, in 1864, the legislature gave its approval for the construction of booms and regulating of logging to a group which called itself "The Black River Improvement Company".⁴⁵ This company was incorporated under state law on March 1, 1864, with W. T. Price and D. J. Spaulding of Black River Falls, president and vice-president respectively, and John McMillan of La Crosse as treasurer. In 1864, the Black River Lumber, Driving, and Booming Company was placed on a mutual basis by the Black River Improvement Company with a capital of \$50,000. The loggers themselves took an active role in the running of this company and shared in the profits. Company profits meant individual profits, so the loggers worked to make the business successful.

The Black River Improvement Company, by uniting the log driving interests, increased the traffic at the mouth of the Black River by more than seven-fold in a single year.⁴⁶ Charles P. Crosby, whose father was the chief investor in the Black River Lumber, Booming, and Driving Company gives this account of the records of the Improvement Company: "... (they) reported the movement out of Black River of two billion logs during the first thirteen years of operation, and in the next fifteen years probably four to five billion more".⁴⁷

OUTPUT OF LOGS & LUMBER FROM BLACK RIVER 1870 — 1890

17



Wisconsin was producing record amounts of pine, and lumbermen from the East began to pour into the state to make their fortune in pine. The small mills of the 1850's and 1860's were a thing of the past. Many men joined together to form corporations which became large and powerful enough to control their own operations. They owned the land where the logs were cut, and they processed and delivered the final products down river with their own boats.

The Onalaska mills were no exception to this pattern. G. M. Nichols had by 1873 added the former Hall Shingle Mill at Onalaska to his holdings, and was making plans to turn the business over to a corporation composed of his two sons, Charles H. and Frank E., and his son-in-law, Frank Pooler. He gave each man a one-third interest in the business, \$10,000 each, and a joint loan of \$20,000.⁴⁸ The name of the firm was changed to "The G. H. Nichols and Company" after the purchase. Its production in 1873 was 45,000 feet of lumber, 30,000 shingles, and 10,000 laths per day after various renovations. These materials were rafted south as soon as they were produced, with very little staying in the Onalaska area at this time. The valuation of the property, which included the sawmill proper, a fifty acre lot owned by the company, a planing mill, and various riparian rights along the Black River, was estimated at \$25,000. On October 5, 1880, the entire operation was consumed by fire. By October 15, ten days later, crews were busy laying the foundation of a new mill, and by May, 1881, it was completed. After running for a day and a half, the mill was closed down for minor repairs, reopening May 14, 1881, with a full crew which continued to find successful employment until the pineries were depleted. The value of the new mill was set at \$35,000, its capacity being 120,000 feet per

twenty-four hour production day.⁴⁹

The day after the C. H. Nichols Company resumed operations in the new mill, the Withee mill, "a model of perfection", was consumed by fire. This mill, having several buildings as necessary, all of which occupied six acres, was located on French Island, a short distance north of La Crosse and across the Black River from Onalaska. The mill was built by William Listman in the fall of 1872, and was valued at \$35,000 upon its completion in May of 1873. After the 1875 installation of a 100 horsepower engine, the mill boasted a daily cut of 60,000 feet, and a yearly shingle production of 2,500,000. This mill, regarded by some as a model of perfection, was insured for only \$9,000, and when it burned, Mr. Withee was faced with financial disaster in the sawmill business at Onalaska. G. C. Hixon was also heavily involved in the mill and had no desire to reinvest in a new mill.⁵⁰

Niran H. Withee, aware of the money to be made at the Onalaska location, found other investors who wished to join him in the venture. In 1882, he, along with Abner Gile, H. A. Bright, and Levi Withee, incorporated and began construction of a new mill in the name of the "Island Mill Lumber Company".⁵¹ This mill contained a rotary saw and two gang saws and had the capacity for the manufacture of 100,000 board feet of lumber, 75,000 shingles and 20,000 laths per day.⁵² The firm ran the mill until 1893 and eventually sold it in 1895.

The La Crosse Board of Trade Reports for the years 1879-1881, and the La Crosse Chronicle give the following statistics on the output of La Crosse and Onalaska mills from 1879 to 1899.

ANNUAL OUTPUT OF LA CROSSE SAW MILLS FOR TYPICAL YEARS, 1879-1899 ⁵³

NAME OF FIRM	1879	1881	1884	1888	1892	1897	1899
MILLIONS OF FEET							
DAVIDSON	9.	27.	25.	26.	22.	4.8	-----
SILL	2.	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
LA CROSSE LUMBER	15.	26.	23.13	20.	26.	17.5	8.7
HOLWAY	5.	16.5	19.8	21.	25.	9.	18.
GODDARD	3.	3.2	5.13	6.5	6.37	5.	2.25
ISLAND MILL	5.	1.14	13.36	12.78	12.	-----	-----
NICHOLS	2.5	13.5	9.	9.5	13.	14.78	17.2
MC DONALD	-----	-----	10.	26.	8.	3.25	8.4
POLLEYS	3.66	5.13	2.	-----	8.64	-----	-----
SAWYER & AUSTIN	-----	-----	13.5	23.96	27.39	38.5	34.23
TROW	-----	-----	-----	10.22	12.2	8.2	7.
COLMAN	16.	26.2	29.3	27.25	36.5	37.65	34.2
PAUL	13.	28.4	30.	30.25	43.	34.	8.

After a fire on April 6, 1886, which totally destroyed the Paul and Colman mills, the other mills of the area were given the opportunity to handle the logs belonging to these firms. These two firms handled one-third of the La Crosse output at that time, so their additional logs created quite a surplus of lumber. The other mills expanded their operations and handled this surplus effectively.

ELASTICITY OF THE MILL CAPACITY - 1886 ⁵⁴

MC DONALD BROTHERS	Doubled
LA CROSSE LUMBER COMPANY	Increased 35%
DAVIDSON (sawed less than $\frac{1}{2}$ the 1885 cut)	
HOLWAY (at North La Crosse)	Increased 35%
ISLAND MILL	Increased 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ %
NICHOLS	Increased 80%
SAWYER AND AUSTIN	Increased 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ %

The people of Onalaska and area were well aware of the importance of the mills, and the local paper, The La Crosse County Record,

kept the townspeople well posted as to the financial status and activities of the companies. Some excerpts from this newspaper serve as examples:

C. H. Nichols and Company have purchased of Paine Lumber Company, 4600 acres of pine land in Clark and Jackson Counties. The price paid was \$55,000. The company show their business capacity in this purchase.⁵⁵

The Mills on Black River have all shut down with the exception of Sawyer and Austin and Goddards. The Island Mill at Onalaska shut down last Tuesday, and Goddard's will probably run this week and next unless the cold weather sets in. Sawyer and Austin will not run longer than next month.⁵⁶

Nichols and Company averaging about 25 carloads of lumber and slates a week now, in the sales, besides a large local trade.⁵⁷

The Island Mill Lumber Company are assessed \$34,740 on personal property, and C. H. Nichols and Company are assessed \$29,650. Quite a sum for two firms in a 'one-horse town'.⁵⁸

Monday (11-18-87) was a fair business day in Onalaska. Buttles and Pierce shipped three carloads of hogs, C. H. Nichols and Company shipped three carloads of lumber to Dakota, and the Island Mill Company shipped three carloads to different points, all these were shipped on the Milwaukee Road.⁵⁹

Lumbering was important to Onalaska. It was Onalaska in the 1880's. Men were employed in all phases of the lumbering industry: in the woods, on the river, in the mills, and in the rafting and towing of finished products to market. A study such as this would not be complete without a closer examination of these various phases of lumbering.

THE VARIOUS PHASES OF LUMBERING

The first step in lumbering was to employ a "land-looker" or "cruiser" to go into the woods and estimate the amount of pine which was available on a section of land. These land-lookers were either employed by a company, or worked independently, later selling their report to a company for a share of the profits to be taken off of the land. This expert could tell the board feet in a tree by merely looking at it, and could estimate the board feet of a tract by stepping it off.

After the report was made, the land was purchased by a company from the government for approximately \$1.25 an acre. Sometimes companies bought the land first, and then had it cruised by an expert to be sure that the final count of board feet processed was close to accurate. When the lumber stripped from the acre tract was ready to be sold, the profit per acre was close to \$50.00.⁶⁰

Crews were sent north into the woods to prepare a camp in late fall and were soon followed by the loggers. The local paper kept the townspeople posted on their activities:

Mr. Joseph Boyle left last Tuesday for the woods with a crew of 12 men, to work in Poolers camp on the East Fork. Mr. Boyle began working in the woods in the winter of '47 and has been in the woods every winter since, with the exception of four years. Where is another man who can show 34 years in the pineries?⁶¹

Charles Moulton left for the woods Monday with 20 men for Nichols and Company.⁶²

H. A. Bright took a drove of 19 horses into the woods this week that he purchased in Dubuque for the firm of Bright and Withee and Niran Withee.⁶³

Since Onalaska was almost void of men in the winter months, the newspapers were filled with news of logging camp activities. Many of the loggers were men who farmed or worked in the mills during the rest of the year, but who went north to the woods in the winter. During the early days of lumbering, immigrants from Norway and Sweden, men who were bent on establishing farms and homesteads, could not afford to pass up the good money offered by the logging companies since the pioneer farm seldom produced an income of more than bare subsistence.

Hamlin Garland idealized the courage and physical hardihood of some of the pioneers in the Coulee country near La Crosse, men who were bent on establishing their independence as farmers and who left their homes in the early winter to go into the pineries and did not emerge until the conclusion of the spring drive, returning home to take up their tasks of plowing and planting.⁶⁴

IN THE WOODS

When the men arrived at the camp, they found a small community made up of a bunk house, a combination cook shanty and dining hall, a supply building, stables, a blacksmith shop and an office. It was nothing fancy to be sure, but it mattered little to the men since they were in the woods most of their waking hours anyway. Each had a job to do, and the others depended upon him to complete his assigned job as quickly and safely as possible.

There were "specialists" for each particular job. The first into the woods were the "swampers", those who cleared away the brush so that the "choppers" could get in and fell the trees.

In those days the chopper was a very important man at the camp. He had to fell trees, after which they were cut into lengths by the sawyers. It was as hard work as there was in the woods. These choppers had muscles of iron -- and endurance. It took muscle and willpower to stand up

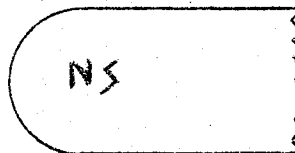
beside those big pines all day long, slashing into them with a double bladed axe.⁶⁵

In later years the sawyers replaced the choppers and the felling of trees with an axe became a thing of the past. Following the sawyers, the swamper cut the owner's "side mark" into the logs. The side marks were the only means of identifying the owners of the logs once they were floated downstream. Each company tried to use a different or unique marking to set their logs apart from the rest. The markings of Nichols and Pooler were an "n zigzag":

END MARKS



SIDE MARKS



After this the logs were skidded to the roadways and pulled or skidded to the river, where they were piled on the ice in anticipation of the spring thaw. With the spring thaw or "breaking", logging crews were dismissed: "The Greenbay brought 3 coaches of men from the pinery last Saturday evening. A large number of Onalaska boys were among them."⁶⁶

ON THE RIVER

New crews were assembled, and the logs were driven downstream.

One old timer reminisced about the logging drive:

Most of the drivers were well known to the boss, who would take pains in selecting his crew. 'White water' men, able to ride a log under any and all conditions, were useful, but the best of all was the steady, hard working fellow with a head on him, who could see where the jam could be attacked.⁶⁷

While the drive itself was in progress it was an interesting sight to see the men in their red and blue Mackinaws, their staffed-off trousers, high caulked shoes, loosening up wing jams and center jams, which gather on

tow heads, little islands or rocks in the center of the river. Logs would collect against such obstacles until they formed jams that would hold up the regular flow of logs. It was necessary to keep such places free, and drivers would work out upon them, and with their peavies attack some vulnerable spot and break a hole in the wing, till the water would get behind it and swing the logs off into the stream.⁶⁸

Something to look forward to after a hard day of work was the dinner hour. With its warm food, crackling fire, and genial hospitality, the encampment set up by the cooks was indeed a welcome sight.

A crew frequently made a running drive down the stream, part of the men working along each side of the river, or crossing back and forth with their bateaus. The cook and cookie followed in their boats, with the tent, camp utensils, supplies and extra tools. A halt for dinner was made at some point along the river, a fire built on the bank, and in a short time the tin baker would be stocked with the bread or biscuits, baking before it. The pot of bean hole beans, cooked during the previous night and still more or less warm, a kettle of eggs boiling, potatoes, fresh vegetables, if any were to be had, probably soup with crackers, a big five gallon can of hot tea, all ready for them when the cook called 'Grub Pile' for dinner. Men who had been in the woods all winter and confined to a steady diet and needing a change, would sometimes eat eight or ten eggs, boiled ham, beans, bread and butter, and potatoes. Then after a few minutes rest to take a smoke, back they would go to their work. The plan was to feed them well, give them fresh cabbage, onions, and other spring delicacies, while in sauce and pies the cook used raisins, currants, and prunes. The cook was a very important part of the crew, second only to the foremen.⁶⁹

Nature had her hand in causing problems for the men. Crosby relates some of the problems faced by the loggers:

The mosquitoes in the woods and along the river were bad, but it was nothing like the annoyance given us by the black flies, midges, and 'no-see-ums'. These were so small you simply couldn't see them unless they would light on your hand and you could see a trifling gray speck. They didn't confine themselves to singing; they went right to work immediately without a word, and not only bit us on exposed parts, but they went down our necks and up our sleeves, and if there was a tear in the clothing they went right in there. Heavens! how they did bite! More than once I knelt down on a log and dipped my head and shoulders in the water to give me relief.⁷⁰

But the loggers were tough men, and used to the unpleasantries of the job. Getting an unexpected dunking was all in a day's work:

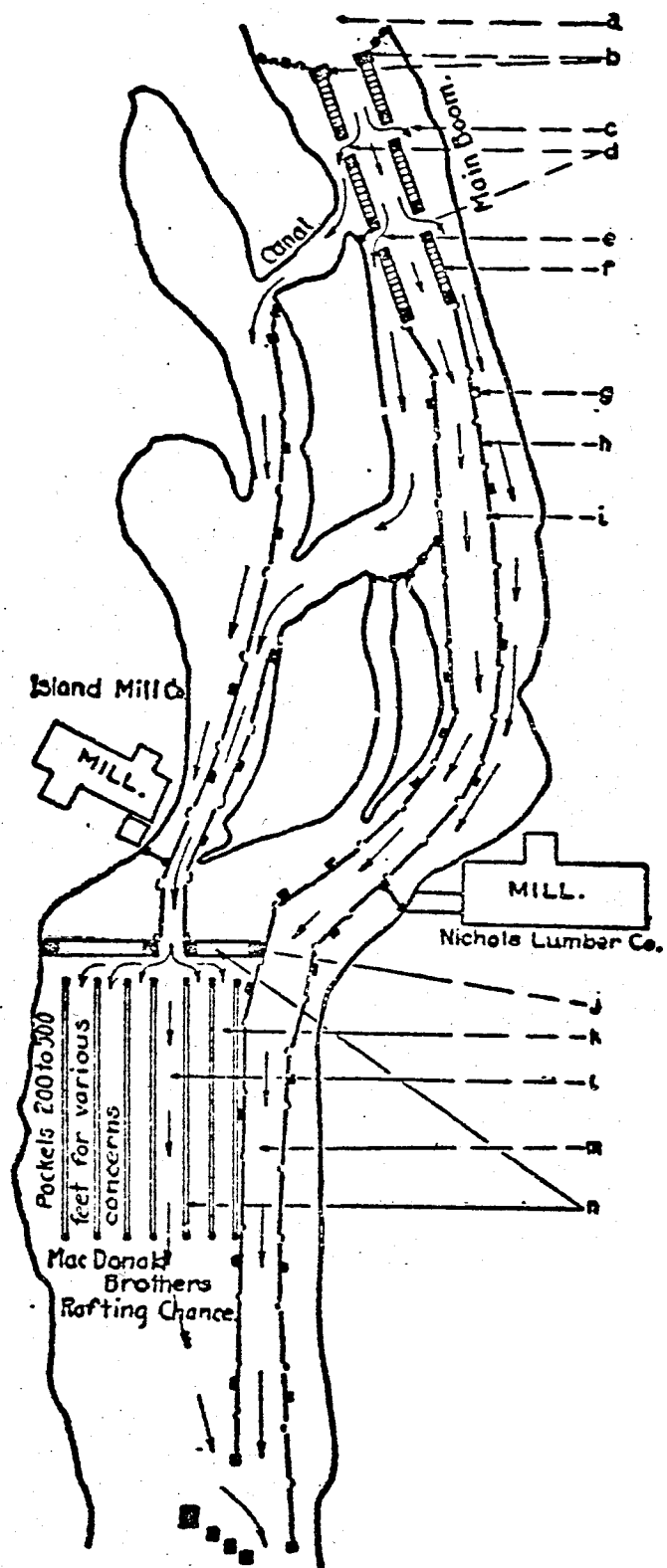
Sometimes it was necessary to get wet, but that was part of the day's work. A good driver mustn't be afraid of wetting his feet. He had to jump out on logs when they begin to loosen up, and keep them running, although he might sink down to his knees or waist and occasionally might have to swim.⁷¹

Sometimes the crew would remain in one spot for several days and establish camp. The Black River Improvement Company had several camps located at strategic points along the stream, and would maintain crews there as long as there were logs running. These camps were at New Amsterdam, White Oak Springs, Halfway Creek, and Fort Norway.

The drive down Black River was finished when the logs reached the boom of the Black River Improvement Company at Onalaska. Here the Company maintained a rafting works where the logs of the various companies were separated. On hand at the boom was a "scaler", a man employed by the state to check the footage of the lumber coming down, and assuring the loggers further downstream that all logs belonging to them would be sent on their way.⁷² The process of sorting logs at the rafting works will be explained with the help of the diagram entitled, "Rafting Works in the Black River at Onalaska", and the remembrances of Emil Heintz.⁷³

The logs coming down the stream struck the piers 'b', and thus were held in the river above 'a'. According to authentic reports, the timber reinforced and weighed down with stone. From the piers to the jam of logs at the 'head boom' sometimes extended as far up as Black River Falls. The piers were usually constructed of timber and held in place by heavy stones. From the shore extended a series of logs held together by chains forming a secure block for the further progress of the logs. This was at the upper end of the boom, which extended on both sides of the river for the entire length of the rafting works.

The main boom was constructed of piers connected by walks ('f'), made of timber. At intervals were gaps ('c') through which logs might be sent. At 'b' drivers were



stationed whose business it was to keep the logs going steadily down stream. Along the boom walk and riding the logs were sorters to push logs bearing the marks of certain concerns through the correct gaps. Thus logs belonging to the Island Mill Company were sent through 'd', those of Nichols Lumber Company were through gap 'c', and those bearing marks for which MacDonald Brothers did business went through gap 'e'. Logs belonging to mills not mentioned were allowed to go their way down the driveway to be dealt with at another boom further down stream.

Mills often contracted with concerns to supply them with logs. The MacDonald Brothers were just such contractors. They had what was called a 'rafting chance' just below the piles that can still be seen in the Black River (in an area commonly referred to as '22' today) near Onalaska. The rafting chance was nothing more than a sorting table. The manner in which the MacDonald Brothers obtained their logs is best explained by the diagram.

The rafting chance was an ingenious affair. The main piers, similar to the ones already mentioned, were connected by pieces of square timber held together by bolts. This walk was called the flatboom, and was used by the workers in the process of sorting. (See 'n' on the diagram). As the logs came down the driveway, a head sorter stood on the flatboom ('j'), or on a plank over the gap in this boom, and called out the mark upon the log; assistants immediately sent the log into its owner's pocket ('k' for example). Within these pockets were constructed the 'strings' or 'brails' that made up the rafts. (In the diagram, 'l' represents the driveway, and 'm' the river.)

At least 10% of the logs cut never reached the boom at Onalaska after they were set afloat. This was due to the fact that many were stranded on sandbars or "lost" along the way. The mill operators often had to wait three to five years to be sure all of a previous year's cut was accounted for. The story is told of how a man once cut 2,000,000 choice hardwood logs and placed them in the Black River intending to run them to Onalaska. He was astonished when only about 20,000 of them arrived at the main boom.⁷⁴ Not all losses were as drastic, but when one thinks of losing 10% of each year's cut, it is surprising that the lumbermen would not consider any other means of transporting their product. From 1855 to 1871 attempts were made to build a railroad up the Black River for the purpose of transporting the logs to the mills,

but the operators refused to consider any means other than the traditional drive down the river.⁷⁵

IN THE MILL

The next step in the working of the lumber was to guide the logs into a pool at the end of the mill where an endless chain carried them high above the floor of the mill. From here they were brought to the large rotary saw by a "carriage" which moved swiftly forward and back on a track. The saw cut the logs into boards, cutting slabs from its sides. The head sawyer decided how the logs should be cut and what the log was best suited for. In later years a band saw was used in the cutting of the logs. The main floor of the mill was covered with tables, conveyors, and chutes. As the lumber came past them on rollers, the workers selected the pieces and proceeded to trim and edge them. According to what the lumber was best suited for, the mill workers fashioned boards, beams, joists, "2x4's", laths, pickets, and shingles. Overseeing all of this activity was the "boss" of the mill, and next to him sat the scaler, as always, keeping the records of board feet produced.

H. A. "Hud" Riebe, a retired Professor of Education and Psychology, reminisced about the old Nichols mill, and contributed the following information regarding the employees of that mill in the busy day of the late 1800's.⁷⁶

Stationed at the base of the chain which elevated the logs from the river to the rotary and gang saws was Joe Boyle. Charles Moulton was head sawyer at the rotary; Oluf Otterson and Fred Wilhelm ran the carriage; Charlie Gartner secured the logs for the powerful gang saws and Richard Krogstad and Antone Swenson operated the powerful gang saws which changed one to four logs at a time

from solid timbers to boards or dimension lumber, according to current demand. August Riebe ran the edger, Louis Riebe operated the trimmer, and Charlie Riebe was in charge of the lath department. Frank Boyer cut the shingle blocks and Joe Milbright was in charge of the Shingle Mill. It was the responsibility of E. Gleason and S. L. Ricker to keep the saws in excellent condition with their musical files. J. A. Nichols was millwright, Gene Gleason was foreman and timekeeper, while August Sauer was in charge of the furnaces and A. Powers was head engineer. To be sure, there were some members of the fairer sex employed in the shingle mill as edgers, sorters, and packers. Edgers were Terris Spring, Lizzie Riebe, and Ella Boyle. Sorters were Sarah Boyle, Terris Konsell, Edie Johnson and Mary Felzer. Frank Pooler was general manager of the entire operation and knew by the hum of the machines when everything was going properly.

Once the logs had been converted to lumber, there followed a period of curing and drying in preparation for processing in the Planer Mill. After this the lumber was sent to its destination by river or, later, rail.

DELIVERING THE PRODUCTS TO MARKET

The final stage of the lumber industry has to do with the sale and delivery of the products to their market. Most of the products from the Black River pineries were sent to cities down river such as St. Louis or beyond the Gulf. In order to deliver either the raw logs or the finished lumber products, rafts were built.⁷⁷ Logs were rafted while they were in the water, but finished lumber was assembled into rafts in a rafting shed near the mill. Originally, both logs and lumber rafts were carried downstream by the current of the river, with men known as "sweeps" riding them to help avoid obstacles such as sandbars, islands, whirlpools, etc.

In 1864, the innovation of the steamboat pushing rafts was begun, and from that time on became the most common way of transporting the

lumber products. Onalaska was port-of-call to several riverboats. For example, the "Benton" called Onalaska home port in the 1860's. This steamboat was built in Onalaska by Mr. T. P. Benton and his father. The "Henry Posse" also berthed here in the early 1900's.

After the early 1870's, the railroads began to compete for the transporting of logs and lumber to areas further west. During the peak of the lumbering industry Onalaska was served by four steam railways and one interurban which was first horse-drawn and later converted to electricity. The Chicago North Western, the Green Bay and Western, the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul, and the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy all served the industry. The C. H. Nichols Company used the railroad for almost all of its distribution after the 1880's.⁷⁸

During the month of September the C. H. Nichols Lumber Company shipped 93 carloads of lumber on the Northwestern road and the freight paid at this station amounted to \$1,565.39. This was on lumber this corporation had shipped to three points and fully as much was shipped to parties who paid their own freight.⁷⁹

VARYING CLASSIFICATIONS AND PAY

The men who were employed in the lumber industry can be grouped according to the nature of the work done. There were those who worked on logging and driving on the river; those engaged in building log and lumber rafts; those working in the mills; and those involved in the movement of the lumber to its final destination. In each branch of the industry the work was seasonal and workmen passed from one branch to another as they desired. About half of the men in the sawmills and rafting end of the industry were also the men who went to the pineries.⁸⁰ A large number of men who worked in the pineries in the winter thought

of themselves as farmers who were supplementing their incomes during the slow winter months.

Wages varied from job to job, with the more demanding and skillful jobs paying more money. In the woods, the average work day was eleven hours, for which the men received the following compensations: cutters and "common laborers"---a little better than a dollar a day; loaders--\$16 to \$20 per month; swampers, \$16 to \$20 a month; horse teamsters, \$30 a month; and the choppers at \$35 per month.⁸¹ The foreman made much more than this, often sharing in the profits of the venture. The highest paid men in the camp were the foreman and the cook, the latter making a little less than the foreman at \$50 to \$60 per month.⁸²

On the river the wages were about the same, with the auger men receiving about \$1.25 per day. Sorters were paid \$2.50 per day or as the owner of the rafting chance saw fit to pay. Scalers were paid \$2.50 to \$3.00 per day by the district scaler who was paid $3\frac{1}{2}$ cents per thousand feet of lumber accounted for by the State. The owner of the "rafting chance" was bid 85 cents per thousand feet by the owners of the logs he rafted.⁸³

Common labor in the sawmills received \$1.25 a day for an eleven hour work day. Sawyers received \$4.00 per day, gang sawyers, \$2.50; edgemen, \$2.75; filers \$5.00 to \$10.00. Wages were paid according to responsibility and skill.⁸⁴

The average cost of rafting lumber to down river points was \$1.00 per thousand, and men engaged in this work received from \$2 to \$3 per day in 1873.⁸⁵

The estimated total wages for Onalaska are not available, but for the La Crosse System (of which Onalaska was a part, it varied from \$955,000 in 1885 to \$1,158,000 in 1892 and \$813,000 in 1899.⁸⁶

ONALASKA WAS A "BOOM TOWN"

In 1922 Hamlin Garland won the Pulitzer Prize for his book, A Daughter of the Middle Border. In this book and two previous accounts, A Son of the Middle Border and Trail-Makers of the Middle Border, the author reflects on his boyhood, a part of which he spent in Onalaska. Writing of his boyhood recollections of Onalaska he says in part:

Our postoffice was in the village of Onalaska, situated at the mouth of the Black River, which came down out of the wide forest lands of the north. It was called a 'boom town' for the reason that 'booms' or yards for holding pine logs laced the quiet bayou and supplied several large mills with timber. Busy saws clamored from the islands and great rafts of planks and lath and shingles were made up and floated down into the Mississippi and on to southern markets.

It was a rude, rough little camp filled with raftsmen, loggers, mill-hands and boomsmen. Saloons abounded and deeds of violence were common, but to me it was a poem. From its position on a high plateau it commanded a lovely southern expanse of shimmering water bounded by purple bluffs. The spires from La Crosse rose from the smoky distance, and the steam ships hoarsely giving voice to suggestions of illimitable reaches of travel.⁸⁷

Another writer who was much impressed with Onalaska during this era of lumbering was Hannibal Plain. In an article entitled, "The Black River Boom" which was published in The American Magazine for March, 1888, Mr. Plain says the following:

La Crosse, Winona and Onalaska are built up and sustained wholly by the business in lumber, and all of these places stand at the mouth of a tributary to the Mississippi, whose course is through the lumber regions. La Crosse is a remarkably handsome town of thirty thousand inhabitants, growing in a very rapid manner. Onalaska is a village, a sort of suburb, and is supported mainly by the large sawmills and the 'boom' situated there. The word 'boom', I may explain right here, which has gone into general use,

undoubtedly had its origin in the technical term 'boom' (boom, Dutch for tree, beam, etc.), which means a floating fence made of logs fastened end to end, being thus constructed to hold others in place, either as they go down the channel, or when they are held for sorting.

When the boom is full of logs, the river is full of men, the mills run night and day, business is brisk, the whole town wakes up; and therefore the term boom, meaning a sudden business activity in a lumber town, took on a wider significance, until its use as a substantive and a verb became general throughout the whole country. We hear of booming a candidate, of a booming enterprise and the like; but the original signification is as applied to Onalaska -- a boom town. The boom town is always at the mouth of a lumbering river, or at a point where the logs must be sorted for mills or to be drawn off into other channels. Onalaska is at the mouth of the Black River.⁸⁸

Whether the citizens of Onalaska were happy with Mr. Plain's labeling of their village as a "sort of suburb to La Crosse", is highly doubtful. In a newspaper account of the day, this observation was made:

There was a row between a man and his wife in the eastern part of the village Sunday night and a little fracas on Front Street Tuesday night. Keep right on and we will be entitled to be annexed as a ward of La Crosse.⁸⁹

The people of Onalaska were highly independent, and a constant rivalry with their neighbor to the south had existed from the earliest days of settlement. In several newspaper articles of the late 1880's, the merchants expressed their pride in Onalaska:

There is a general impression in some of the villages which are round about us, that Onalaska is a one-horse village, in which dwell all the roughs who seek to gain a decent living, that can be found in the Northwest. Even some of the citizens of our village think they have to go to La Crosse for every five-cents worth of anything to be purchased. Onalaska has many things that the other villages of La Crosse County do not possess. You can go into any of the small villages and find men out of employment; here all are at work who are willing to work. Onalaska has two as good country stores, as can be found in the Northwest. These are general stores, and we have one devoted entirely to the grocery trade. We have livery stables, hotels and railroads; two mills that furnish labor for hundreds of men, and as

good a grain and stock market as La Crosse. We have a school second to none of its grade in the country. We have churches and a newspaper. We have a population of eleven hundred, and can show more new buildings than any other village in the county. We have houses lit with gas, and last but not least, we have lots of "SAND".⁹⁰

Two of our merchants took in \$372 last Monday, and yet perhaps people have an idea that times are dull. This is but an average Onalaska Trade.⁹¹

Onalaska can boast of her business men in every particular. Unlike most country towns, the livery stables here are stocked with good horses, and not with the ring-boned and spavined. They will average with the city stables and are a credit to the place.⁹²

As Onalaska was about to become a city, the Record published the following verse in its January 8, 1886 edition:

ONALASKA HAS

No liars, worthy of the name.
 7,000 dogs, without masters.
 One compounder of pills.
 One doctor and one graveyard.
 One Methodist preacher.
 A democratic postmaster.
 An insurance fiend and one editor.
 Two churches with slim congregations.
 No lawyers and other luxuries.
 One dealer in pumps and farm machinery.
 One brewery and six saloons.
 Two depots and four telegraph operators.
 Several pretty girls and some bachelors.
 Four hotels and one boarding house.
 A Masonic Lodge where Morgan rites are practiced.
 Two sawmills and two planing mills.
 One school house and children enough for two.
 A regiment of gum chewers.
 One dealer in small fruit plants.
 An auctioneer, with leather lungs.
 A skating rink with two proprietors.
 Two justices of the peace.
 Three Notaries.
 Enough black guards to stock three towns.
 Two livery stables and two horse doctors.
 More horse traders than there ought to be
 in the county.
 One jeweler.
 Two shoemakers.
 Two barbers.

Two blacksmiths.
 Four school teachers.
 An ex-sheriff and ex-member of the assembly.
 Two confectioners.
 A democratic postmaster.
 Several miles of sidewalk.
 House with gas fixtures in them,
 and gas fixtures that are not in houses.
 The only country newspaper in La Crosse County.
 A park which will be a shady one in time.
 A brass band with brassy members.
 Men that won't pay their debts.
 More improvements in 1885 than any other
 town in the county.
 Six carpenters and several ordinary wood butchers.
 A town full of grass widows and nary an old maid.
 One wheat buyer.
 Five widows and plenty of women that wish they were.
 One tailor and one butcher.
 A dealer in buckskin goods.
 One genuine, first-class dude.
 Six million feet of lumber.
 An Odd Fellows Lodge.
 A stage driver, very sedate.
 Several dancers and seventy-five
 who wish to become such.
 A red headed joker whose honesty is questioned.
 More men that can talk dog and gun
 Than any other town in the west.
 A defunct library organization.
 Several subscribers to the New York Weekly.⁹³

Onalaska in the 1880's was bustling with the activity brought about
 by the lumber industry. One old-timer claims the village did more
 business in one day when the men were just in from the woods than it
 did for a month in the 50 years since the "boom". Not many thought
 ahead to what was inevitable, the depletion of the north woods. Times
 were good and the forests were considered inexhaustible.

THE DECLINE OF THE LUMBER INDUSTRY

In the early years of the lumber industry, when its various operations were on a small scale, a myth came to be accepted that was expressed in years to come: the pine of the Wisconsin forests is inexhaustible. Some men were foresighted enough to observe what was happening, and predicted depletion of the forests if conservation practices were not begun. A mature tree was a crop harvested only once in a lifetime, and with the forest practices being what they were, the cutting of a mature tree usually involved the destruction of many smaller trees, and an area once logged over, had to await the slow reproductive process of nature's cycle.

In preparing some literature for the State Board of Immigration, pioneer Wisconsin conservationist I. A. Lapham inserted a paragraph which was at once a plea and a warning:

A due proportion of forest land is essential to the proper development and for the preservation of the productiveness of the country. Forests also have a very perceptible effect upon the climate. . . . It is found best when clearing a farm, to preserve a belt of trees around the border, not only for a future supply of wood but to secure these climate benefits.... At least one-tenth of every county should remain permanently in forests, to secure an adequate supply of wood for the purposes of civilized life.⁹⁴

Pleas like this were seldom heeded as the lumbermen eagerly bought the government lands in the pinery and cleared the forests.

In the Black River pinery the end came with dramatic suddenness. In 1899, only three mills were operating in La Crosse, the Colman, the

the Trow, and the Holway; in Onalaska only the Nichols. The statistics of the La Crosse (system) lumber industry in its final years are evidence of the swift and complete collapse.⁹⁵

STATISTICS OF LA CROSSE LUMBER INDUSTRY

DATE	EMPLOYEES	PAY ROLLS
1899	1,785	\$431,000
1900	480	\$178,855
1903	445	-----
1904	40	\$ 16,150
1905	34	-----

Similar losses were evident in the other branches of the industry, as indicated in the following chart.⁹⁶

NUMBER EMPLOYED IN LUMBER INDUSTRIES

YEAR	BOAT YARDS	LOGGING	SAW MILLS	RAFTING	TOWING
1881	75	-----	1225	118	500
1882	88	-----	1301	120	480
1883	32	-----	1654	120	480
1884	62	-----	1504	100	525
1885	64	1955	1135	100	525
1886	65	2000	1711	100	285
1887	60	2000	1839	115	290
1888	65	2000	1935	110	300
1889	10	2000	1930	125	300
1890	10	2000	2075	125	300
1891	10	2500	1890	275	400
1892	10	3000	1925	300	400
1893	12	3000	2048	300	450
1894	15	2400	1798	300	360
1895	18	2400	1930	300	396
1896	18	2160	1786	300	360
1897	18	2268	1928	300	378
1898	18	2042	1680	270	301
1899	16	1838	1785	243	307
1900	14	1379	480	172	256
1901	--	1035	429	86	128
1902	--	776	545	43	64
1903	--	388	445	21	32
1904	--	194	40	10	20
1905	--	-----	34	---	---

The obituary for the lumber industry at Onalaska, North La Crosse, and La Crosse reads as follows:

Island Mill closed in 1893. In 1899, the closing year, Paul, La Crosse Lumber Company and Goddard sawed only part of the season -- their clean up. While Sawyer and Austin had a good cut 1899 was their last year. In 1900, only Trow, Holway, and Nichols were sawing. Colman had purchased a lot of Chippewa logs, and this kept them running until September 1903. Nichols finished in 1902. The Holway mill burned in the fall of 1903. Trow ran through 1905 and 1906. They cleaned up (sawed) all the booms, piles and stray logs left in Black River.⁹⁷

Many of the settlements along the Black River were ruined by the sudden change in the economy. Larger towns suffered the loss of retail trade, taxable property, and population because of the loss of jobs that came with the decline of the industry.

THE EFFECT OF THE DECLINE ON ONALASKA

The decline of the lumber industry had its affect on Onalaska, but not the devastating affect one might think. Although Onalaska had been established as a stopping place for lumbermen and had grown as a boom town, the city had much to offer and had drawn a variety of interests to its confines by the 1900's. By the time the pineries were being depleted in 1902, local newspapers hardly paid much attention. Searching through the local newspaper for the year 1902, one gets the impression that the city had resigned itself to the loss of the mills, and was, instead of withering into a ghost town, busily attracting new industries to replace the old. In the Record for April 10, 1902 the following bit of information seemed to reflect the local attitude of acceptance:

Mr. and Mrs. Earl Pooler shipped their household goods to Seattle, Washington, this week and have made arrangements to start for their new home next Saturday. They will be accompanied by R. E. Nichols who also goes to Seattle to assist Mr. Pooler in the management of the Company's business in the manufacture of red cedar shingles. Mr. and Mrs. Pooler and Mr. Nichols will be greatly missed among their circle of friends in this city and at La Crosse and all wish them a prosperous future at their new home.⁹⁸

All during the spring of 1902, the papers carried numerous references to the healthy manufacturing atmosphere in Onalaska. There were many articles on the J. S. Gedney Pickle Factory which was to locate there, with the September 18, 1902 edition of the Record announcing "The Grand Pickle Dance" which was to be held in celebration of the new factory's completion.⁹⁹ The Record also reported the expansion of the Onalaska Woolen Mills, and several other businesses which created

jobs for the local populace. All of this was being reported as the mills were closing their doors for the last time. A person unfamiliar with the status of the economy in Onalaska at this time would hardly find a clue to the near tragedy which could have befallen the city with the passing of the mills.

To be sure, the passing of the mills did have an effect on Onalaska's economy, what with the closing of several hotels and saloons, and the discontinuation of railroad service by two of the four railroads serving the city.¹⁰⁰ But somehow Onalaska managed to survive. Although the population dropped from 1,587 in 1890 to 1,368 in 1900 to 1,146 in 1910,¹⁰¹ the property valuations of the county census of 1902 show that Onalaska was in line with the other areas in the county, and in total value of merchants' and manufacturers' stock was far ahead of the other settlements.¹⁰² The two tables following will help to substantiate this premise.

TOTAL VALUATION OF PROPERTY IN LA CROSSE COUNTY - 1902

Table showing the total valuation, by towns, of farming lands, city and village property, also personal property, and the aggregate value of all property in La Crosse County, upon the foregoing basis.

TOWNS, CITIES AND VILLAGES	Farming Lands			City and Village Property	Total Real Estate	Personal Property	Total Real and Personal Property
	Number of Acres	Average per Acre	Total Value	Total Value	Aggreg'te Value	Total Value	
Bangor	21,960	\$ 30 00	\$ 657,480	-----	\$ 657,480	\$ 160,569	\$ 818,049
Bangor, Village of	492	100 00	49,200	\$ 207,052	256,252	138,230	394,482
Barre	13,322	37 00	492,914	-----	492,914	117,493	610,407
Burns	31,154	28 00	872,312	11,612	883,924	188,655	1,072,579
Campbell	20,606	34 00	700,604	16,050	716,654	123,112	839,766
Farmington	47,041	22 00	1,034,902	18,284	1,053,186	270,380	1,323,566
Greenfield	19,190	22 00	422,180	-----	422,180	107,388	529,568
Hamilton	33,335	37 00	1,233,395	668	1,234,063	292,362	1,526,425
Holland	28,610	20 00	572,200	14,375	586,575	145,871	732,446
La Crosse, City of	-----	-----	-----	12,405,354	12,405,354	5,609,905	18,015,259
Onalaska, City of	1,658	55 00	91,190	167,887	259,077	103,334	362,411
Onalaska	30,448	22 00	669,856	8,982	678,838	156,977	835,815
Shelby	20,074	34 00	682,516	21,951	704,467	133,202	837,669
Washington	23,003	20 00	460,060	-----	460,060	119,069	579,129
West Salem, Village of	503	200 00	100,600	218,427	319,027	220,763	539,790
			8,039,409	13,090,642	21,130,101	7,887,310	29,017,361

TOTAL VALUATION OF PROPERTY IN LA CROSSE COUNTY - 1902

TOWNS, CITIES AND VILLAGES	Horses Average Value	Neat Cattle Average Value	Sheep and Lambs Average Value	Swine Average Value	Mules and Asses Average Value	Wagons, Car- riages, Sleighs Average Value	Pianos and Melodeons Average Value	Total Value of Horses, Cattle, Etc.	Money and Securities	Total Value of Bank Stock	Total Value of Mfrs' and Merchants Stock	Total Value of all other Per- sonal Property
Bangor	\$60 00	\$20 00	\$2 50	\$3 50	\$60 00	\$20 00	\$35 00	\$ 110,319	\$ 40,000	-----	\$ 250	\$ 10,000
Bangor, Village of	65 00	25 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	20 00	40 00	12,230	70,000	\$ 10,000	45,000	1,000
Barre	60 00	20 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	22 00	35 00	72,493	35,000	-----	1,000	9,000
Burns	60 00	20 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	20 00	35 00	132,655	40,000	-----	6,000	10,000
Campbell	60 00	20 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	20 00	35 00	74,612	40,000	-----	2,500	6,000
Farmington	60 00	20 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	20 00	35 00	180,380	50,000	-----	30,000	10,000
Greenfield	60 00	20 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	20 00	35 00	69,388	30,000	-----	1,000	7,000
Hamilton	60 00	20 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	22 00	35 00	177,362	100,000	-----	1,000	14,000
Holland	60 00	18 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	20 00	35 00	84,871	40,000	-----	15,000	6,000
La Crosse, City of	65 00	25 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	30 00	50 00	224,450	2,500,000	710,455	2,000,000	175,000
Onalaska, City of	65 00	25 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	22 00	40 00	20,334	30,000	12,000	40,000	1,000
Onalaska	60 00	18 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	20 00	35 00	101,677	45,000	-----	300	10,000
Shelby	60 00	20 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	20 00	35 00	75,202	45,000	-----	7,000	6,000
Washington	60 00	18 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	18 00	35 00	81,069	30,000	-----	2,000	6,000
West Salem, Village of	65 00	25 00	2 50	3 50	60 00	22 00	40 00	21,663	110,000	38,100	50,000	1,000
								\$1,438,705	\$3,205,000	\$770,555	\$2,201,050	\$272,000

The general impression given this writer, then, was that the city of Onalaska, while definitely feeling the brunt of the decline of the lumber industry on the Black River, was able to convert to a new way of life and continue to live and gradually replace the loss caused by the fall of the lumber industry.

An era of growth and importance to Wisconsin had passed, and Onalaska was no longer to be a busy lumber town. It was, however, a city of industrious, proud citizens who accepted the situation and made the best of it.

Logging was finished, but memories and tales of Onalaska's days as a busy lumbering center were to live beyond the fifty year era which ended with the closing of the last mill in 1902.

FOOTNOTES

1. Fred L. Holmes, (ed.). Wisconsin, (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1946), p. 85.
2. Ibid. .
3. Ibid., p. 87.
4. John G. Gregory, (ed.). West Central Wisconsin: A History, (Indianapolis: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1933), p. 228.
5. Horace S. Merrill, An Early History of the Black River Falls Region, (Ph.M. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1933), pp. 10-18.
6. Western Historical Company, History of La Crosse County, (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1881), pp. 332-338.
7. Richard Paters, (ed.). United States Statutes at Large: Treaties Between the United States and the Indian Tribes, (Boston:, 1848), pp. 544-546.
8. Reminiscences in a letter by Nathan Myrick to F. A. Copeland, then mayor of La Crosse, dated January 28, 1892. A copy of the letter is in the possession of the Wisconsin State Historical Society at Madison.
9. La Crosse Weekly Chronicle, February 11, 1892.
10. Benjamin F. Bryant, (ed.). Memoirs of La Crosse County, (Madison:, 1907), pp. 32-34.
11. Harvey E. Hubbard, "The Name Onalaska," La Crosse Morning Chronicle, August 15, 1897.
12. Ibid. .
13. H. A. Riebe, Ph.D., "Onalaska," Civic Directory of Onalaska, (Chicago: Women's Clubs Publishing Company, n.d.), p. 1.
14. Transcript of original plat of Village of Onalaska lists Wm. Hood as the surveyor, with date of approval November 10, 1857.
15. La Crosse Weekly Chronicle, February 11, 1892.
16. Western Historical Company, op. cit., p. 715.
17. Ibid. .

18. Centennial Committee, Onalaska Centennial 1852-1952, p. 5.
19. Wisconsin Laws, 1851, c. 131 sec. 10.
20. Bryant, op. cit., p. 94.
21. Lewis Valley residents issued a manifesto entitled A Voice From The Land Of Freedom, objecting to high taxes and the board's disposal of competition for construction of the courthouse.
22. Historical sketches written during 1952 Centennial, taken from various accounts of growth during year 1856 as recorded in La Crosse County Record sometime later.
23. Ibid. .
24. This writer can remember having stories related as to how her grandmother's parents often remarked how much the Coulee Region resembled their home in Norway.
25. This population statistic for the town (township) of Onalaska was taken from The U. S. Bureau of Census volumes in the possession of the Wisconsin State Historical Society at Madison.
26. Albert H. Sanford and H. J. Hirshheimer. A History of La Crosse, Wisconsin 1841-1900, (La Crosse: La Crosse County Historical Society, 1951), pp. 154-155.
27. The mills in Onalaska, North La Crosse, and La Crosse were all considered part of the La Crosse Sawmill System, and therefore much data concerning the Onalaska mills is found within statistics for "the La Crosse mills".
28. Gregory, op. cit., p. 224.
29. Ibid. .
30. Ibid., p. 226.
31. Charles P. Crosby, "Memories of Lumbering on the Black River," La Crosse Tribune and Leader Press, August 29, 1926, p. 10.
32. Lewis Publishing Company. Biographical History of La Crosse, Trempealeau, and Buffalo Counties, Wisconsin, (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1892), p. 333.
33. Gregory, op. cit., p. 226.
34. La Crosse Board of Trade Reports for years cited.
35. La Crosse County Historical Society, "Sawmills of Onalaska, North La Crosse and La Crosse," La Crosse County Historical Sketches, 1937, p. 99.

36. La Crosse Democrat, December 20, 1861.
37. H. J. Hirshheimer, "The Passing of the Sawmills and the Growth of Manufactures In La Crosse, 1880-1905," La Crosse County Historical Sketches, 1937, P. 70.
38. Western Historical Company, History of Northern Wisconsin, (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1881), p. 507.
39. George W. Hotchkiss. History of Lumber and Forest Industry of the Northwest, (Chicago: Hotchkiss and Company, 1898), p. 504.
40. La Crosse County Historical Society, Sketches, op. cit., p. 99.
41. Gregory, op. cit., p. 228.
42. Sketches states that the mill was purchased in 1859 or 1860, while History of Northern Wisconsin says it was bought in 1856. This writer agrees with Sketches since its material was compiled by local authorities on the subject of mills on Black River at this time.
43. Hotchkiss, op. cit., p. 508.
44. Sanford, op. cit., p. 157.
45. Hotchkiss, op. cit., p. 501.
46. Holmes, op. cit., p. 105.
47. Crosby, op. cit., loc. cit. .
48. Lewis Publishing Company, op. cit., p. 234.
49. Western Historical Company, History of Northern Wisconsin, op. cit., p. 508.
50. Ibid., p. 509.
51. La Crosse County Historical Society, Sketches, op. cit., p. 99.
52. Hotchkiss, op. cit., p. 505.
53. Board of Trade Reports for 1881, and newspaper articles in the La Crosse Chronicle dating December 10, 1884, November 30, 1888, January 21, 1893, January 22, 1898, and January 14, 1900.
54. La Crosse County Historical Society, Sketches, op. cit., p. 72.
55. La Crosse County Record, November 13, 1885.
56. Ibid. .
57. Ibid., November 20, 1885.

58. Ibid., June 18, 1886.
59. Ibid., November 22, 1887.
60. Sanford, op. cit., p. 157.
61. La Crosse County Record, November 13, 1865.
62. Ibid., November 20, 1865.
63. Ibid., November 5, 1865.
64. Holmes, op. cit., p. 91.
65. Crosby, op. cit., loc. cit. .
66. La Crosse County Record, March 17, 1887.
67. Crosby, op. cit., August 15, 1926.
68. Ibid. .
69. Ibid. .
70. Ibid. .
71. Ibid. .
72. Albert H. Sanford, "Log Marking and Scaling," La Crosse County Historical Sketches, 1937, p. 32.
73. Emil Heintz, "Rafting On Black River," La Crosse County Historical Sketches, 1937, pp. 35-36.
74. Ibid., p. 41.
75. Sanford, History of La Crosse, p. 161.
76. Riebe, op. cit., pp. 2-3.
77. The subject of rafting is far more detailed than this author has taken space to describe. A full description is given in Heintz as mentioned above.
78. Riebe, op. cit., p. 4.
79. La Crosse County Record, November 6, 1887.
80. Sanford, History of La Crosse, op. cit., p. 171.
81. Robert Fries, "Some Economic Aspects of the Lumber Industry of La Crosse," La Crosse County Historical Sketches, 1937, p. 16.
82. Frank Hartman, "Life In a Lumber Camp," La Crosse County Historical Sketches, 1937, p. 21.

83. Sanford, Sketches, p. 33.
84. Fries, op. cit., loc. cit. .
85. Western Historical Company, History of Northern Wisconsin, op. cit., p. 509.
86. H. J. Hirshheimer, Sketches, op. cit., p. 94.
87. Hamlin, Garland. A Son Of The Middle Border, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1914), p. 27.
88. Hannibal Plain, "The Black River Boom," American Magazine, March, 1888, pp. 548-556.
89. La Crosse County Record, November 20, 1885.
90. Ibid., November 5, 1885.
91. Ibid., November 27, 1885.
92. Ibid., January 1, 1886.
93. Ibid., January 8, 1886.
94. Holmes, op. cit., p. 88.
95. Sanford, History of La Crosse, op. cit., p. 172.
96. Hirshheimer, Sketches, op. cit., p. 91.
97. Ibid. .
98. La Crosse County Record, April 10, 1902.
99. La Crosse County Record, September 18, 1902.
100. The railroads stopping service were the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul, the Green Bay and Western, and the interurban line from North La Crosse.
101. Population statistics from State Historical Society, op. cit. .
102. C. H. Rawlinson, County Clerk (compiler). Proceedings of County Board of Supervisors, La Crosse County, Wisconsin, 1902-1910, (La Crosse: Spicer and Buschman, n.d.), pp. 81-83.

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