

The Ocqueoc River

By Claire Mills Walter

The Ocqueoc River crosses Presque Isle County from south to north in a zigzag pattern and empties into Lake Huron. Boating on the Ocqueoc has always been a delight to folks who could do so. No other way is possible to explore the far reaches of this lovely and interesting stream, which holds wonderful and mysterious secrets in its bosom.

Truly the Ocqueoc beckons one to explore it. In its long journey from the spring that gave it birth to the blue-green waters of Lake Huron the river meanders through field and woodland, lonely now for the mill wheels that no longer creak or the log booms that no longer jam its waters. Wild grapevines grow rampant on the banks where once pine logs rolled down. Floating beds of pure white water lilies make a gorgeous setting in the quiet backwaters

The earliest settlers in the Ocqueoc valley were at the mouth of the river. These settlers were Indians who came from Indian settlements on the western side of Michigan. The lure that brought them here every summer was the huckleberry crop, which was abundant. Picking lasted for six weeks. Boats came into the harbor to buy the crop.

One family remained to settle permanently in this area. These are the Gilberts. They were fine folks and supported themselves not by farming but by the sales of baskets made from one kind of tree. The wood was made into strips for weaving, and dyed various colors.

No white settlers whatever were in the valley of the Ocqueoc before the 80s except at the mouth of the river. Indians from the Upper Peninsula and Cross Village came to the Ocqueoc. Several Indian cemeteries, one at Black Lake another at The Pines area, give evidence of the presence of early Indian settlers.

Commercial logging in the southern part of the Lower Peninsula was carried on with a zeal that indicated the operators thought there would be no end to the crop of pine trees. Later they knew better.

Saginaw, Oscoda, and Alpena as well as other places became centers for the industry and by the 70s lumbermen were casting their eyes on the stands of virgin white pine way up north in Montmorency, Presque Isle, and Cheboygan Counties.

Early settlers tell that before the 70s the Ocqueoc River was full of dead trees. In 1871 a young man named Ferdelinan was hired to clear the river of the trees when lumbering of white pine was beginning in this area. The Ocqueoc River and



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its lakes would be needed to get the logs floated out to Lake Huron where they would be fastened together in booms and later towed by a tug to mills in Cheboygan

The logs were dumped into the bay and herded by the rafting crews with pike poles into hollow squares, or booms, made of long timbers chained together. At the rafting area the logs were turned over to the expert raftmen, cat-footed, cork-booted men, who worked on the slippery bobbing pine logs as nimbly as if on dry land. They bored a hole through the end of each log with a hand auger, and then strung the logs together with



Some of the first rivermen to run the river.

chains made fast to the boom logs on the sides of the square. This was a crib, and forty-eight of these cribs, six feet wide and eight feet long, comprised a raft. The tugboat hooked a line to the raft, and the long slow journey down the lake began, the long narrow string of logs trailing the tugboat like a snake.

Dams were scattered along the Ocqueoc River to hold backwater and raise the level in the lakes. Jarvis Dam, Hemlock Dam, Spile Dam, Crow Dam, and Red Cross Dam were scattered along the river. All winter men working in the woods, cut down pine trees, sawed them into the right lengths and piled them on the banks of a lake ready for the spring drive. Both the Ocqueoc and Rainy Rivers were convenient outlets for the drives, which occurred during the spring and summer.

Just imagine, a lake piled full of white pine logs, being guided down the river on their way to Lake Huron. Often men rode the logs standing to keep them moving instead of piling up somewhere. If the river could talk to us, it would tell many tales of danger, hardships, fights, and fun.

After the new century came in, white pine was still being harvested but in a smaller quantity Fred Lester had a camp where 600,000 feet of pine logs were on skids and a small raft of 1,000,000 board feet was on the river. Forty good river drivers were busy keeping the logs moving down stream, to keep them from piling up. The task was not easy.

As the logs tumbled along in the rapid waters they dug round holes in the sides and bottom of the river. As the waters receded cliff swallows nested in these holes in the walls. The young folks always believed the round homes in the bottom of the river were the haunts of water snakes so they avoided them. According to a newspaper article Al Tonkey would have us know that it was he and Indian George Gilbert, who built the Ocqueoc Falls.

Al was one of our oldest citizens hereabouts and worked on the river in the early days when the pine was being taken out. He said that the falls as we know them did not exist when he came to this part of the county. At that time it was known as "The Rapids" and consisted of a series of rapids much like the ones immediately above the falls at the present time.

When the drive of pine began coming down the river, each one carried along by the torrents that had been loosed from the dams upstream, the logs that went over the rapids began to pound out holes in the limestone and in a short time the falls were created.

This caused another situation. The logs began to jam at the foot of the falls. So a sluiceway, as the river men called it, had to be built of heavy timbers to carry the water and the logs over this troublesome area.

Old-timers have said that it was a sight to behold, as the logs shot down that sluiceway almost too fast for human sight to follow. J.C. Brown sent over 43 million feet of logs down the Ocqueoc River during one summer alone. What a sight it must have been to see and to have lived and worked along the banks of the Ocqueoc River during the beginning of the last century.

The first railroad in Presque Isle County was not the D&M as many think but was brought by J.C. Brown, a superintendent for Ribley and Bearanger, a company from Saginaw, by boat to Rogers City. The job of moving the wood burning locomotive was a long tedious one. It was unloaded from the boat onto rails. It was then transported overland by rails laid down and moved ahead to Lake Nettie. The railroad was 10 miles long when completed.

Ward's Branch was headquarters. Six townships were lumbered and, millions and millions, of logs were carried over this railroad and dumped into Lake Nettie to voyage on down the river to Lake Huron.

An extension of the railroad beyond Posen into the forested areas to Valentine and Jackson Lakes, a spur built from LaRocque (Hawks) then the continuation of the main line on to Cheboygan brought a hustle and a bustle all along the line.

Camps were built to house the men. Barnhart had a camp of 60 or more men where he supervised the job of banking of many millions of feet of timber, which was floated down the river to Hammond's Bay. Barnhart also supervised a camp near Moltke, the timber of which was hauled to Mud Lake near the Big Cut. It too was floated down the Ocqueoc.

Six of the lakes along the river were given girl's names, Emma, Ann, Ruth, Ella, May, and Nettie. It probably is not just a coincidence that J.C. Brown had six daughters by the exact same names.

At one lake the local sheriff noticed the Drum-type of stove, which heated the camp. Whenever he referred to that lake afterwards he called it that drum place, henceforth the name, Drum Lake.

Sometimes there was trouble in a camp. In the camp on Lake May, two men named Evans, and Brown, (not J.C.) had a quarrel. Each hugged his grievance until the whole camp was taking sides. One night Brown's horse disappeared. It was found the next day so badly beaten that it died. Secretly Brown then led Evans horse out, tied it to a tree and shot it. Horses were a man's most valuable property. Soon after, Brown's dead body was found at the edge of the lake. He had been beaten to death with a slab. He was buried near the spot where he had been killed. Dark rumors circulated around for a while but nothing was proven and the affair finally was forgotten.

New towns mushroomed up over-night and men and their families came looking for work and a place to make a home. Usually the first building erected on a new site was a hotel and attached saloon. Next a livery stable, office, and a small store would be added close by.

And so we have the beginnings of many small towns, names like Ocqueoc, Providence, Case, Lake May Junction, Packs Siding, Hurst, Rainy Lake, Valentine, Millersburg, some long abandoned, that existed along the banks of the Ocqueoc River.