

# JOHN O'KEEFE SR.. RECALLS DAYS ON THE WISCONSIN RIVER WHEN RAFTS WERE TIED AT PROSPECT HILL POINT

Local Man Former Postmaster, Tells Many Thrilling Experiences Of  
"The Old Days When Rafts Plied The River"

The Wisconsin. A treacherous river whose mysterious depth and shallows are given to swift change; ever changing sand bars altered with the whims of current and sleek eddies. And in the upper river rapids break the dark water into a confusion of breakers, foam and flying spray. It was wild riding for raftsmen who brought lumber down the "Wiscons." That a pilot of a fleet of lumber must possess great skill was essential. He had to know his ever changing river; his judgment had to be unerring; his courage a part of him. John O'Keefe was one of these men. Mr. O'Keefe can tell many interesting happenings of lumber drives of early Portage.

Near Merrill on the Pine River the felled and trimmed trees were taken and shot down into the river. If the lumber clogged in the bayous, the men went into the freezing water to stand waist deep where with hand spikes they would loosen the jam, and git it on its way. It was here that logs were cut into lumber, and put into rafts which were floated over a 200-foot toboggan into the Wisconsin River. Every week, during the season at Germantown, a million feet of lumber came out of the Yellow River into the Wisconsin. In the spring the main river would be free of ice, but the bayous were still frozen. Again the hand spikes came into action. The lumber was hand spiked from the ice into the water.

The rafts when running the falls required six men on one piece,

though two good men could run the damns. Big Bull Falls was located at Wausau; Little Bull at Mosinee, and at Nekoosa were the Whitney Rapids. When the rafts had passed Conant Rapids, a stretch five miles long, they were again coupled. Grandfather Falls was above Merrill, but no rafting was done above that town. During very high water, Mr. O'Keefe said that the rafts were tied up above the rapids to wait until the water subsided. To run the rapids at this time would be to break up the rafts. The pilot was always on the head raft. It was up to him to determine the course the rafts were to take. From the north, over the rapids and damns and through the shifting sand bars this raft held the lead at all times. Portage was one of the stopping places. Rafts were tied up from Prospect Hill Point to the Park in the first ward, and one could walk on a floor of lumber between these points. Five hundred men were with them. With each fleet of lumber was a cook raft. The fireplaces which were later supplanted by stoves were 8 feet square with a bed of sand 6 inches deep to keep the fire from burning through. Bread was cooked by tin reflectors that caught the rays of blaze. Breakfast was served at daylight. The men who carried the food to the raftsmen were called skiftsmen. The meals consisted of eggs, fried ham and vegetables, if any were available. Eggs at that time were selling in Portage for \$1 a bushel.

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Lumber driving paid from \$1 to \$15 a day. The amount being determined by the number of days it took to make the drive. The men on the Wisconsin River were paid for the whole trip, and not by the day. On the Yellow River they were paid by the day. A tailsman was paid \$1.50 a day though the scale of wage reached \$4 a day. Pilots received for the trip from \$200 to \$700. Lumber which at that time was called waste would now be second grade. A man was paid \$50 a month to burn it.

In 1869 Mr. O'Keefe made his first trip down the Mississippi River. Upon entering the great river all the rafts were coupled together. One trip Mr. O'Keefe remembers particularly. For two days the men had been without food. Arriving at Rock Island the rafts were tied at the head of the island although this point was a dangerous place to land as the current was very swift. When the rafts had been tied up the men started to walk to Moline in search of food. They had not gone far when they were stopped by one of the soldiers who were stationed at the arsenal. They were taken to the guard house where they were locked up on suspicion. For a hungry half hour they stayed before the Colonel appeared and heard the tale the guard told. "Suspicious characters who were hanging around the arsenal. "It was a different story the raftsmen told. They had been walking into Moline for food which they had been without for two days. Accompanied by them the officer went to the river, and saw the rafts. He escorted them into Moline, and to the hotel where he instructed the management to provide them with food until he communicated with Washington. For three days they were his guests. On another trip down the Mississippi, Mr. O'Keefe told of the building the Eades Bridge, the first bridge to be constructed across the river at St. Louis. \$5 an hour was being offered to the men to work on the foundation. The workers were not allowed to work longer than an hour at a time as they would smother from lack of air and dampness. Hun-

dreds of men died during the building of this bridge, and were buried there away from all kin. One of the men who did the hiring was Mr. Dawson from Briggsville.

Many bits of interesting information Mr. O'Keefe briefly sketched. When he was a boy the only shade in Portage was the shade from houses with the exception of a few groves of oak trees. One of these groves was located around the N. H. Wood house, and it extended to the present site of the depot. Another was around the Lewis home. Judge Guppy, who was superintendent at that time, advocated the planting of shade trees. All the soft wood trees which now provide shade and beauty for Portage were planted at that time. These trees were brought from the other side of the river. Each tree had to be carefully dug with plentiful roots or they were not acceptable. The boys who did this work, dug the tree, carried them into town and to the location where they were to be planted. For this they received ten cents a tree. Three trees a day were a good day's work. Other facts he mentioned were: on the north side of Cook Street was a brick sidewalk, but most of the sidewalks, and there were not many, were made from planks that had been salvaged from old rafts. These 16 foot planks were cut into four pieces. In time the pedestrian had to walk with care, or he would catch his heel in the holes. He spoke of the old high school building which was a structure of five rooms, of the gardens and potato patches that practically each home maker had at the edge of town. Mr. O'Keefe had watched the struggling town of his youth become in fact the town that was visioned so many years ago.

June 3rd, 1885 Mr. O'Keefe was married to Mary Downey. Their children are Mary C., who teaches in the Bessemer, Michigan schools; John J., former city attorney; Mrs. William P. Mulligan, Columbus; Angela P., who is employed in the County Superintendent's office.



JOHN O'KEEFE, Sr.

Register Photo