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Portage Lived "On The River" In The Days When Jerry Hannifan Ran The Wisconsin On Great Lumber Rafts

Many a Thrilling Experience Is Recalled by Local Man Who Brought
Lumber For His Home on West Mullett Strete Down The River
In a Crib Raft

On display at the City Library is a raft in miniature which was built by Jerry Hannifan of 213 Mullett Street. Its 4-inch cribs represent 16 feet square of lumber. It is a memento of a nearly forgotten past when Portage was a lusty lumber town that hugged the banks of the Wisconsin river. A memento of a period that produced men of great physical strength and courage who sang as they worked at hazardous tasks. It is, indeed, most worth while to see this raft which is a small replica of those that made the drive down the river, and later down the Mississippi. The present home of Mr. Hannifan is made from the timber that he, himself brought down the river 50 years ago.

As a boy Mr. Hannifan had watched the drives down the river, and heard exciting tales of the north woods and river from his father and an older brother who were working as raftsmen. Opportunity came to him at the age of 14. On the day of departure for the north, one of the men was taken ill, and Jerry Hannifan took his place. The men started northward in March. They made this trip by stage, and the teams were changed at what were called half-way houses.

The first step in the drive down the river was the building of rafts which was done on the ice. When completed they lay there until the ice broke, and were carried out into the river. The rafts were 7 cribs square, or 16 feet square of crossed lumber, and 24 inches of lumber deep. These large rafts were 112 feet in length, 48 feet in width. There were 21 cribs to a raft, 7 cribs to a raft string, and 3 rapid strings to a raft. The strings were not coupled together until the rapids and dams in the upper Wisconsin had been passed, but were run strictly with below the Whitney Rapids at Nekoosa. From there to the Mississippi 3 strings were put in one raft, and two men handled it. There were string poles at the head of the raft to strengthen it, and for the men to hold to as they went over the dams. There were 12 rafts to a fleet, one was the cook raft.

At Wisconsin Rapids the rapids were one mile long, and at Port Edwards was a dam which was 35 feet high. To keep the rafts from over-turning, a slide and fingers somewhat restrained the downward plunge, but the approach to the dam had to be made with accuracy. To guide these rafts,

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—Regitser Photo
Mr. Hannifan, who still makes daily trips up and down the Wisconsin river which is shown in the background of the above picture, thinks nothing of rowing from 10 to 20 miles on the stream where he spent many years of his life; although his round trips used to be more than twice as long. He is shown here holding a model crib raft which he whittled from rough lumber recently. The model, which is a reproduction of the rafts he used to pilot down the Wisconsin from the north is now on display at the Portage public library. The picture was taken on the levee in front of Mr. Hannifan's home at 213 Mullett street

oars were used. These oars were made of young trees, and were 50 feet long. The oars were raised over the head in a great circle. It is easy to understand why men were chosen who possessed great strength, and remained cool in the face of danger. The upsetting of a raft usually meant death for someone. I learned that Mr. Hannifin's older brother had drowned when a raft upset as it approached the city of Portage.

On each raft was a small shelter, called a hut, and at night the men slept there. There were six meals a day, and though the food was simple it was excellent and plenty of it. The cooking of the meals was all done on the cook raft, and carriers were sent out to the attached rafts with food for the men. At dusk, on the Wisconsin River, the rafts were brought into the bank, and tied with a snubbing line. There could be no night travel until the Mississippi was reached where there were government crossing lights. That much skill was demanded from these men was due to the fact that a short turn, and the raft would over-turn.

Mr. Hannifin was born in 1851. The house in which he grew to boyhood stood where the middle of the Wisconsin River now flows. During a great flood, the river cut into the north bank, and those with homes along this bank were forced to leave quickly. Many did not even have time to save their household furnishings. After Jerry Hannifin retired as raftsman, he piloted the government boat, Texas. To Mr. and Mrs. Hannifin, eleven children were born, two of whom are dead. Those residing in Portage are: John and Helen, who are at home; Jim and Ed, who is an alderman from the fifth ward. Living in Madison are: Mrs. Walter Martin, Mrs. Jacob Koellen, Mrs. Harry Rowin, Clifford and Agnes, who is employed in the state automobile license department. Mrs. Jerry Hannifin died April 17th, 1931.

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