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Comment

John Ely Briggs

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Comment by the Editor

WHENCE CAME THE RAFTS

Not all of the covered wagons of the Fathers of the West jolted on across the plains to golden California or halted near a pleasant stream or on a fertile prairie homestead. Some of the immigrants who came to the Middle Border in search of broad and level acres found their anticipated destination too remote and the constantly receding bounds of unclaimed domain always just beyond the pale of civil living. To satisfy their dauntless energy and hasten the day of owning a farm, they sought employment wherever they could find it. Many spent the winter months in the logging camps of the Wisconsin pineries.

Such was the experience of Richard Graham, chief of Hamlin Garland's "Trail-makers of the Middle Border". The promised land proved none too hospitable toward the hope-laden boy and his transplanted parents. First stricken with the scourge of smallpox, he later hardened his muscles in the harvest field, and when winter approached he responded to the lure of the great, dark forests to the north on the upper waters of the Wisconsin River. Besides an opportunity to explore the country, logging offered good pay.

Life in a logging camp was rough and the work was hard; but the air was pure, the climate invigorating, and the food wholesome. "The click-clock of the axes, the ringing chant of the cross-cut saw, the crash of falling trees, the jingle of sleigh-bells, the shouts of teamsters, and the snap of long whips, united to form a cheerful, day-long chorus, while on all sides, and diminishing these sounds till they seemed the voices of insects, the roar of the forest was like the sound of ocean's majestic anthem. Sometimes at night, the stillness of the snowy outside world was a stern menace to which the hearty comradeship around the fire presented a joyous contrast."

"Healthy as bears," Mr. Garland describes the wood choppers. "What skill, what endurance, what courage the smallest of them displayed! Up at break of day, eating their buckwheat cakes by candlelight, they were at work at dawn. Wallowing mid-leg deep in snow, they attacked towering trees with confident air, whistling, singing, and shouting. Their action was titanic, their cheer superb. A day's labor reached from dawn to dusk, and no man thought of shirking his duty, or if he did he was shamed into action by his fellows who took a savage pride in long hours and fatigue."

With the spring freshets came the opportunity, and the dangerous job, of floating the logs to mill and market. So the wood choppers became log drivers for the nonce. To leap upon a floating log and

tread it required amazing strength, agility, and courage — quite in keeping with a lumber-jack's accomplishments. The logs, by drifting into boiling eddies or forming jams at the bends of the stream, were forever presenting sportive occasions for rivalry in skilful driving.

But "log driving" was mere play compared with the work of rafting logs or piloting cribs of lumber through rapids and over falls to the quiet waters of the lower rivers. That demanded precise knowledge, instant decision, and "the hardihood of a Viking". Tossed about by the swirling waters like bugs on a chip, dragged under as they clung to the "sucker rope" while the raft plunged over falls, the reckless raftsmen thus risked their lives a hundred times a day, yet few were drowned. No sooner had they moored a raft in safety than back they ran over the rough trail to the head of the rapids for another trip, wet to the skin and exposed to a March wind. Was there ever a more savage test of manhood? Not until the rafts and cribs of lumber floated out upon the broad Mississippi was the desperate voyage at an end.

J. E. B.