LOGRAFTING AN IMPORTANT MODE OF TRANSPORTATION,
MEANS OF MONEY AFTER WAR
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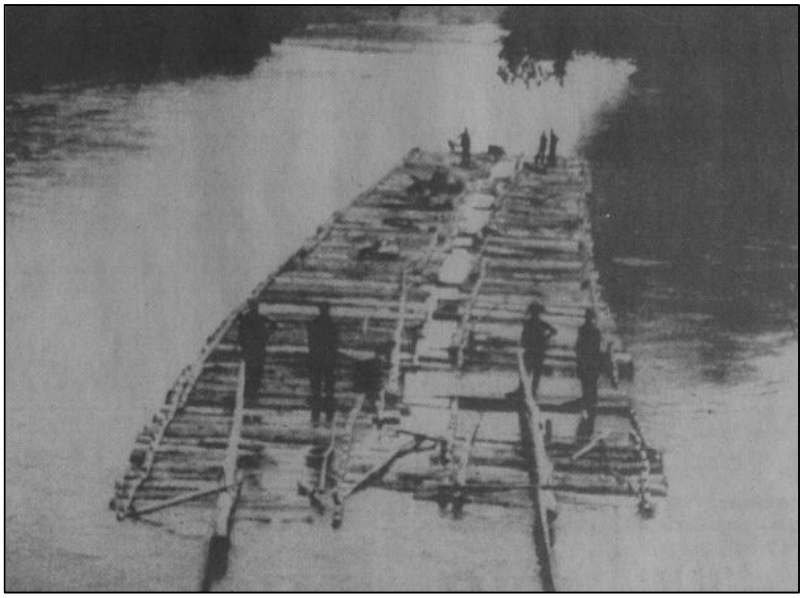
Cumberland Tales
Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN:
Sunday, 18 January 2009 – C-9

For many men in the Upper Cumberland, the aftermath of the Civil War actually created a financial opportunity for the first time in their lives. Tennessee, a state where 2, 931 battles, skirmishes and actions took place on its soil, had to go about the grim work of rebuilding after the war ended. Many courthouses fell to the torch during the war or were damaged and vital records lost. Soldiers on both sides plundered homes and businesses as they foraged to feed and equip themselves. Some destruction lingered on after the war. Combatants created man-made snags on the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers and their tributaries, and normal river traffic did not return to the Cumberland until 1872.



That year marked the beginning of a boom in the Upper Cumberland. Families who had eked out a meager existence of subsistence farming supplemented by hunting and bartering found an opportunity to make a real profit. For some it marked the first time in their lives that they held hard cash in their hands. Some families rose to prominence due to the boom and remain influential to this day.

Builders in Chattanooga, Knoxville, Nashville and beyond needed lumber but most of the state was logged out prior to the Civil War. Before the war, mature trees on the Cumberland Plateau and the Highland Rim were considered too remote and too difficult to harvest. Not so from 1872 until the early 20th century. Speculators entered the area and encouraged farmers to cut their timber and sent it to the market in return for cold, hard cash. The problem, however, in the era before the railroad penetrated the region in 1890, was how to get the timber to Carthage or Nashville, or anywhere for that matter. After the railroad came the lumber industry thrived as portable sawmills, known as peckerwood mills, made it possible to roughly dress timber in the field and then send it by rail to planning mills or other processing facilities. The railroad brought the market directly to the forest and large scale operations like Stearns Coal and Lumber from

Michigan harvested trees in what is now the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area and sold it all over the United States.

The men who chopped down trees with double-bitted axes or crosscut saws before the advent of the pecker-wood mills became legendary in the industry. Theirs was dangerous and back-braking work as they cut down trees and carved new trails into the forest. Among the most famous of these was Uncle Billy Hull who was luck to even be alive in 1872. During the war he was bushwhacked by Union guerrillas and shot through the right eye and across the bridge of his nose. Miraculously he survived thanks to the intervention of a woman named Lovell. He recuperated and eventually hunted down and killed his attackers. After the war, before he got into the lumber business, he supplemented his subsistence income by distilling moonshine in Buncomb Cave.

The timber business before the railroad was not only dangerous, it was seasonal. Uncle Billy and men of his ilk, had virtually no competition in the lumber trade's infancy. In the fall of the year, after the crops had been laid by, the sounds of axes and saws echoed through the woods. Some said it was easier to cut trees before the sap had risen. Autumn and winter months, when weather permitted, were dedicated to cutting down trees, trimming off limbs and branches and preparing logs for their final destination. Most of the logs were huge, averaging four feet in diameter. Once the logs were ready, lumbermen hitched teams of oxen of mules to the logs to snake them to the various river bottoms to wait for the spring rains.

Some considered snaking logs more dangerous than cutting timber. The common accidents associated with felling trees included being cut by an axe or a tree falling on someone. Snaking logs created more opportunities for serious injury. Logs could come unhitched and go bounding down the mountainside, destroying things in its wake. They could get stuck in any of a variety of ways and getting them loose again could often be fatal. Snaking logs could also kill or maim the draft animals tugging them through the forest to the river bottoms.

When the spring rains came, logging crews returned to the river bottoms and fashioned rafts to float their product to market. It took considerable skill and strength to build a raft. Logs 10 to 15 feet in length were sorted according to size and according to being "floaters or sinkers." Dense logs that sank beneath the water's surface were attached to more buoyant longs to force the sinkers into floating. Raftsmen joined logs together with chain dogs – pairs of spikes with links of logging chain welded to them – that they drove into the ends of logs. To secure the ribs of the raft, rafters bored holes into hickory waling, long strips of green hickory, and drove pegs through the holes into the log below. A completed raft ranged in size from 50 to 200 feet in length. To guide the raft at the waters rose, sawyers fashioned crude oar locks in which they secured long poles to steer the craft along. Before launching the raft, the crew built a makeshift cabin to provide some shelter and accommodations for sleeping. They shoveled a good amount of dirt on the logs near a cabin and damped it down so they could safely build a fire on the craft as made their way down river.

The treacherous journey to Nashville from Celina or Byrdstown normally took five days. Once the tributary the raft originated on (including the Obey, Roaring and Caney Fork) merged with the Cumberland, the dangers increased significantly. Unseen snags could cause a raft to capsize. The heavier the spring rains the more hazardous the current. Steering the raft proved cumbersome and exhausting through the meanders. Traveling at nigh could be deadly, though Uncle Billy successfully piloted dozens of rafts in the dark. Raftsmen told tales of running aground on sand bars at night or even running over cattle or crashing into other rafts in the dark. Steamboats created the biggest danger. Crossing the wake of a steamboat tore many rafts apart, and it took special skill and courage to do so.

Raftsmen who successfully piloted their crafts to the Nashville docks made a small fortune. Hardwoods brought top dollar and Uncle Billy became a giant in the industry. After completing the raft trip, he would ride the steamboat back home and build another raft and another and another until that season's lumber made it to market. Uncle Billy went on to be something of an entrepreneur. He invested some of that money in his son's education and Cordell Hull went on to be a lawyer, judge, congressman and the longest serving Secretary of State in U. S. history.

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Cumberland Tales is a service of the Cookeville Museum. The editors, Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell invite anyone to submit a story of 800 works concerning the history/folklore of the Upper Cumberland region.

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