

How timber rafts ran the Long Sault rapids

By Ian Bowering

The huge pine timber rafts that ran the 'waterslides' of the Ottawa River throughout the 19th century have become part of Canadian folklore.

Less known, but just as colorful, were the rafts that sailed the St. Lawrence. Timber traffic on the St. Lawrence ended in 1914 after a century. The faster current and heavier oak logs, as opposed to the lighter pine used on the Ottawa, called for the construction of sturdier log drams.

Usually referred to as cribs, a dram was made up of 600 to 700 pieces of wood (sticks), lashed together to make a 20-metre wide vessel, that measured anywhere from 80 to 120 metre in length.

Several drams were then attached to make a raft. Barely above water when ready to sail, due to the weight of the oak, the rafts started their journey, described by American poet Will Carleton as "the funeral march of trees" attached to the end of a steamer's towline.

If conditions were perfect, the trip from Kingston to Montreal would take three days, if not much longer.

Sometimes carrying adventurous passengers, each raft had a dram with a cabin, four sleeping bunks and a cookstove, while a second dram had either a wooden or canvas cabin containing eight bunks.

Equipped with 10-metre long oars for steering in the rapids, sails, an anchor, rowboat and pikepoles, the rafts were provisioned with salt pork, bread, hardtack, potatoes, dried beans and peas, dried fruit, tea and lots of ready cash to pay for casual labor through the rapids.

Negotiating Galops and Rapide Plat without being separated, pilots and their men began to come aboard the raft, near Aultsville to run the Long Sault Rapids.

Unable to pass these rapids through slides as was done on the Ottawa River, the timber drams were separated out in a long line above Cat Island.

Taking the southern channel rather than the North Sault favored by thrillseeking passenger steamers, the drams were now ready to be steered through the channel. Unlike the steamers that were said to go over the rapids, the drams went through them.

And even though the South channel presented less turbulence than the North, as many as 50 men would be secured to footholds at the end of their long oars, steering with all their strength.

T.R. Glover wrote, "It took expert use of the long oars at bow and stern to make the drams take the turns. At the foot of Long Sault Island...the drams went through the only sharp pitch of the South Sault."

Through the Sault, the rafts were reassembled at Cornwall, where they would let off their crews under the direction of such men as Cornwall police chief and partime lumberman Allan Cameron. The rafts would now continue on their way to Lake St. Francis, Montreal and finally Wolfe's Cove at Quebec City.