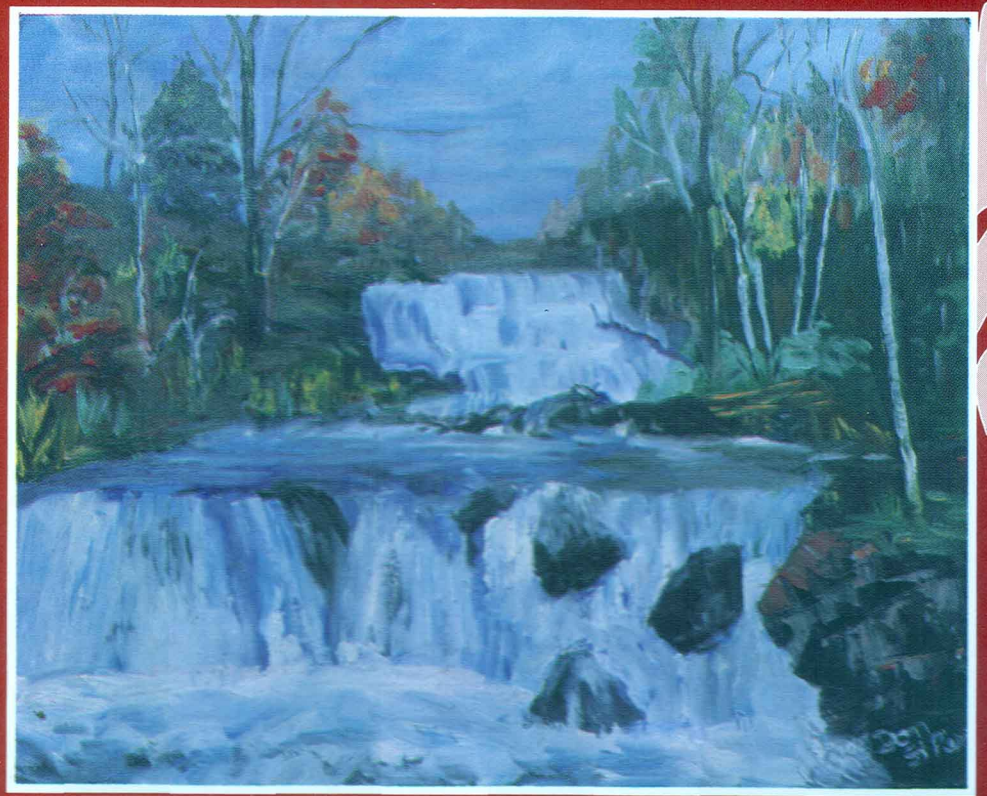


The Canadian Mississippi River

Hilda Geddes

BUTTERMILK FALLS AT SNOW ROAD, ON ANTOINE CREEK within sight of the Mississippi River. This picture must have been taken in the early part of the 20th century because of lack of vegetation.

FOREWARD

THE CANADIAN MISSISSIPPI RIVER

Yes, we Canadians have our own Mississippi River -- in fact, we have a little Mississippi and a big Mississippi.

By looking at the maps of north Addington County, it appears that the little Mississippi River flowed into its larger counterpart some distance above Mazinaw Lake. Upon investigation, it was learned that the little Mississippi has its headwaters just above Weslemkoon Lake, then flows northward through McArthur Mills and into the Madawaska River near Combermere. No further research was done on this river.

I have always had an affinity with the big Mississippi River and the K. & P. Railroad, having been born beside both. My parents, John A. and Blanche Geddes, lived at that time in the "red" house at the Mill just south of the Mississippi River and the now Highway 509. This mill was built and run by my grandfather, Jas. D. Allan and his brother, Isaac Allan, who ran the store at the village of Mississippi. This big red house was burned April 18, 1921 while it was occupied by the Hughes and Kirkham families.

Picture taken from behind my top cottage on Millar's Lake, looking down river (east). The house where I was born was just across the old township road from this cottage. Excavation for Highway 509 was done on the site of the house. In the background you can see Letts Landing, the Green Landing and the Molson Rock.

While I was growing up, I always had the feeling that the K. & P. Railway and the Mississippi River would go on forever, my home from 1912 being beside the Snow Road Station. However, the K. & P. is long gone, but our beautiful Mississippi River flows on and on. During the 27 years I worked for the Federal Government in Ottawa, I never lost my roots at Snow Road. I crossed the Mississippi five times between Snow Road and Ottawa, and on my weekly return journeys I always felt I was getting near home when I crossed it at Carleton Place.

LUMBERING ON THE MISSISSIPPI

Prior to the 1840s, each little settlement had its own sawmill which took care of the excess lumber.

In the 1840s, the big river Barons began leasing timber limits on the upper Mississippi and Clyde, the Clyde being a tributary of the Mississippi, and emptying into the Mississippi near the village of Lanark. These Barons all had extensive timber holdings and employed hundreds of lumberjacks, mostly Anglo-Saxon and French Canadian. These men went into the bush in autumn, to remote lumber camps, and spent the entire winter cutting and squaring timber which they drove down the rivers in the spring, either to big mills along the way (Carleton Place), or all the way to Quebec where it was shipped to Britain to be used in shipbuilding. These lumberjacks were splendid specimens of physical humanity. They had to be, as lumbering was a hard, rugged life. No doubt they enjoyed the excitement and adventure that went hand in hand with the hard work and dangerous drives down the river in the spring. They were all well versed in the use of the axe, the pike pole, the peavy, and the wearing of the calked boots which were necessary for rolling logs on the river, breaking up log jams, etc. etc. One has but to remember the saga of the Caldwells and McLarens to realize how loyal these men were to their employers, even to the point of going to jail when it was necessary.

These river Barons had shanties throughout their timber limits, all built of logs, the most important being the "camboose", derived from the french word "la Cambuse", where all the cooking was done. The walls were built of logs of whatever trees were at hand, and the roof was scooped -- the logs were hollowed out and laid with the "troughs" alternating. A central chimney supplied heat for warmth, and the cooking was done on the open fireplace below. This was a slightly raised section filled with sand where the cook baked the bread and beans. Overhead, an aperture was cut in the roof to let the smoke escape and for purposes of ventilation. The draft from the fire, which was started in November and burned continuously until April, maintained ventilation as the stale air was drawn up the chimney. The upward flow of air also prevented snow from drifting down. The shanty that did not smoke was most desirable. There are still a few people around who have heard of the big Oddfellows' picnic that was held on the grounds of the Canada Lumber Co. at Snow Road in June 1894, where a camboose was built and the cooking done the same as in the shanties, the water being brought to the site by gravity.

A typical lumber camp
Atlas 1880-81

For sleeping accommodation, these old lumber camps had bunks, filled with cedar boughs, ranged around the walls, which could accommodate anywhere from 20 to 40 men.

The cook was the most important person in the camp and "king" of the camboose. He told the men where to sleep, where to stow their bags, and where to hang their socks,

moccasins and clothes. His cooking was excellent. The bread and beans were baked in large pots, sealed, and buried in the hot sand, and covered over with hot ashes. When they were ready for eating, um, um! They were delicious. Pork, tea and bread were staples in those days, but in the shanties they could have pork, beef, dried apples, beans, potatoes, sugar, butter and fish as well. These men were better fed in the camps than at home -- with pay to boot.

At night when supper was over, these warriors of the woods lounged around the roaring fire -- no lack of wood in those days. There was usually a fiddler in the group, so there would be step-dancing to good old-time music. Who knows? Maybe they had some square dances with men taking the ladies role. Others played cards or checkers, while some would read books -- or try to. There was always the story teller who could spin yarns by the yard. A "camaraderie" pervaded the whole atmosphere, making the long winter nights pass quickly until it was time to "hit the hay". They never required any rocking to sleep.

In the mornings they were up early and away to the bush where they put the axe to the huge virgin trees in the primeval forests, mostly white and red pine. As these logs were cut and squared, they were hauled to the rivers by the teamsters and their powerful draft horses or oxen whose equal could hardly be found elsewhere -- not even the Budweiser Clydesdales.

In the spring "all hell broke loose" when the ice in the rivers melted and it was time to drive these logs down river. There was an eat, drink, and be merry attitude among these men, for tomorrow they might die in a tossing crib, or among the logs. Many a lumberjack lost his life in the dangerous drive down river through the many slides, dams, chutes, etc. Peter McLaren had built all these improvements on the Mississippi for his exclusive use in getting his logs to market. It was to be expected that there would be trouble when Boyd Caldwell's gangs began using this waterway to get his logs out. The Rivers and Streams Bill would be passed by the Provincial Government, but the Federal Government would turn it down. The long and the short of it was that these two lumber kings did battle in the courts for ten years. It finally got to the Privy Council in England where it was passed in 1894. During one of the periods when Caldwell was unable to use this waterway, his logs were held up river for three years - thousands of them. More about this further on.

During the drives down river, rival gangs could be tied up for weeks at the end of slides, rapids, chutes or rafting grounds. Then the taverns along the way would swarm with drinking, singing, swearing and brawling cleatshod men. No doubt there would be a few fights as well. When the strife was on between Caldwell and McLaren, the Mississippi saw real warfare, with some antagonists landing in jail. The worst episode happened at the High Falls when the Caldwell men slipped by the McLaren sentry, and Caldwell logs were found in Dalhousie Lake in the morning.

These river drives passed through Carleton Place, Appleton, Almonte, Blakeney, Pakenham, Galetta, and thence into the Ottawa River, the St. Lawrence River, and Quebec City, all these places enroute having their own sawmills, woollen mills, etc. Both McLaren and Caldwell had large sawmills at Carleton Place which utilized many of their logs. The ones that went through to Quebec City were shipped to England for the ship-building trade. This was the very best of square timber. At that point "Brittania ruled the waves" with the largest navy in the world. A strong navy was very necessary to protect her shores and her colonies in the new land.

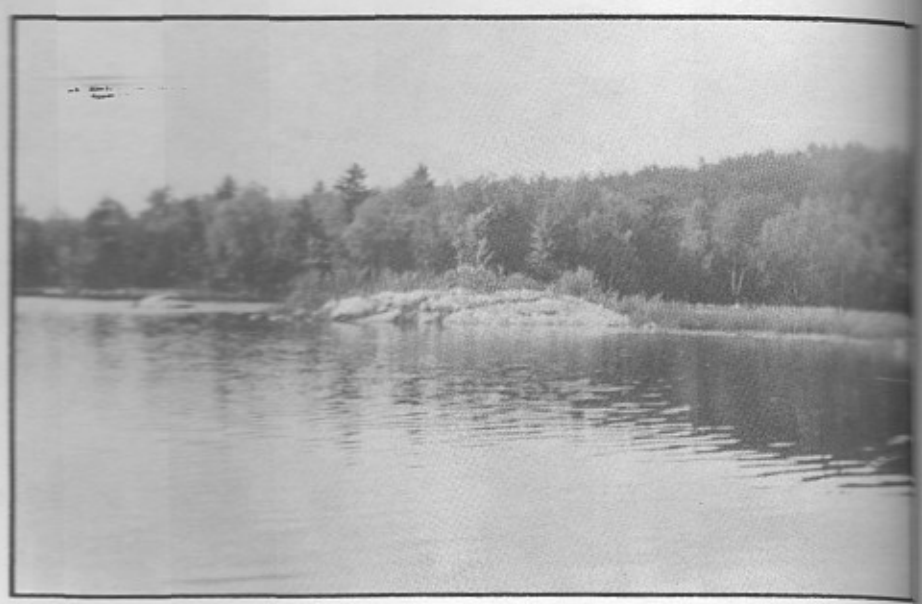
In the early 1900s, the forests were pretty well depleted, but small sawmills still dotted the river banks near most settlements. In the 1920s and 1930s, it turned to the pulpwood trade. The owners of the land cut their own pulpwood, hauled it by sleigh and horses to the railway stations where it was piled and later shipped by rail freight to Canadian and United States markets.

The Snow Road station served the McDonald's Corners, Elphin and Donaldson

areas. In winter it was common to see as many as 50-70 teams travelling through our little hamlet to the railway station hauling pulpwood, lumber or logs. Pulpwood was hauled from as far away as Watson's Corners, travelling up Dalhousie Lake on the ice, up the winter road on the river, to the Snow Road and thence to Snow Road station where it was piled along the right-of-way, alongside the road, or anywhere they could find a spot to pile it. I have seen the right-of-way at Snow Road full to over-flowing, also the shoulder of the road to as far away as Deb. Wood's. I have also seen the whole length of our siding full of box cars into which the pulpwood and lumber were later loaded for shipment. Men came in to measure the lumber before it was shipped. Large logs and ties were also shipped from Snow Road. Most logs were so large and heavy that it required block and tackle attached to the old elm tree for loading onto flat cars. Tom Palmer was a name that was very familiar in this area at one time. He bought and sold a lot of the pulpwood that came here. C.P.R. tie inspectors also came around periodically. Two names I remember were Lorne Peever and Bill McLaren. There would likely be others.

Lumbering today has lost all the excitement and adventure of 100 years ago. Today, transports go right to the bush, pick up the logs, and take them to market. When I meet these heavily loaded vehicles on the road, I say a little prayer that the chains will not break while I am going by.

The Mississippi River, taken near Albert Millar's.

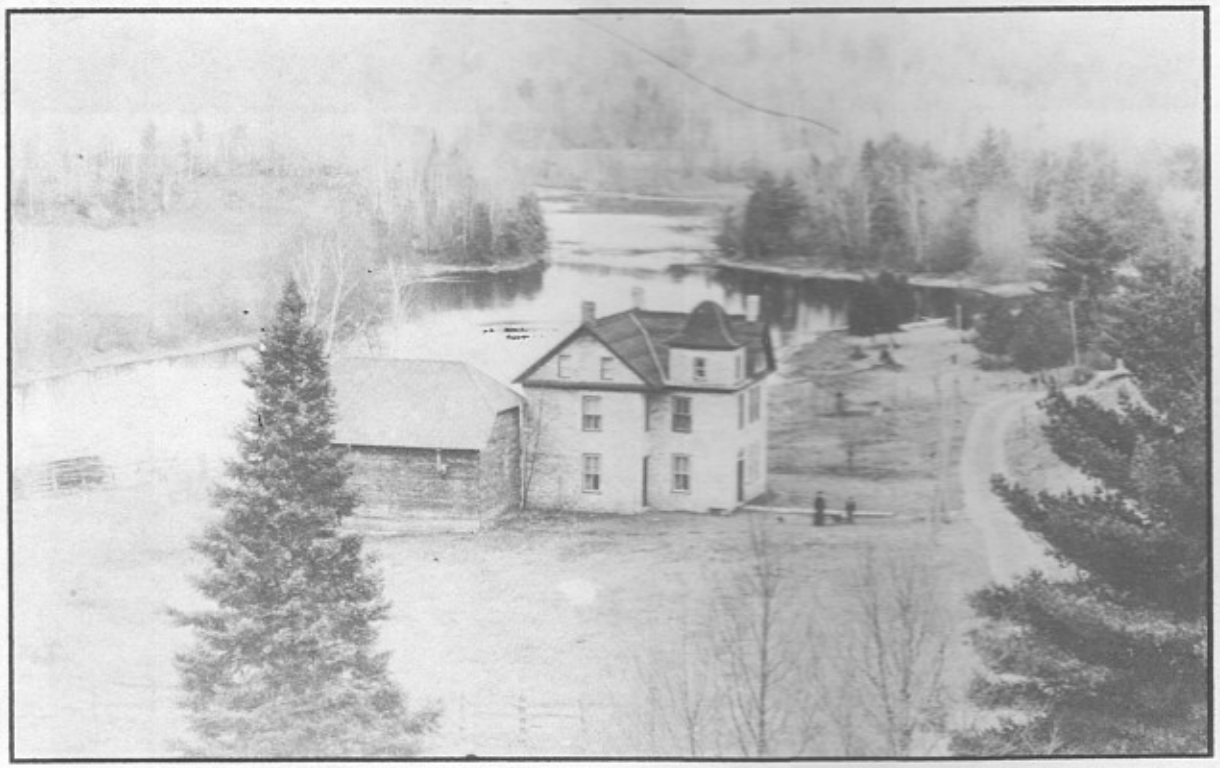


The Mississippi River, looking up-river from the Stone House.

THE STONE HOUSE, SNOW ROAD

Within the sight of Graham's dock one finds a lovely old stone house that was built by Wm. Richards. He and his family came from North Adam's, Mass. in 1883, and purchased this property from Robert Geddes who was in Manitoba at the time. The stone in this house was quarried on the opposite shore on the property also owned by Richards. These stones, as well as all the wood used in this house, were hauled across the river. This house is a unique landmark with its front turret, a beautiful curving staircase in the front hall, and beautiful wooden floors throughout. It was two years in the making and was occupied by this family in 1889. A granddaughter of Wm. Richards (Margaret Kinghorn) and her husband Tom still reside in this old family home. A bridge was built across the Mississippi behind this home in 1915, linking the two properties. This bridge has long since disappeared, even to the piers.

The Richard property on the south shore is now part of the Izatt-Forrester subdivision. There are quite a number of lovely summer cottages in this area which skirts the Mississippi from the Richard property to the Flat Rapids.



THE STONE HOUSE, in the days of the Richards.