



A river driver holds a peavey.

# "Bringin' in the Drive"

By Mary Morton Cowan

Snow is melting. White water swells rivers into raging torrents. The log drive is on!

For more than one hundred years along Maine's navigable rivers, spring meant one thing—the river drive. Men herded millions of long logs downriver on the spring runoff—racing toward sawmills. America wanted wood, and Maine had it.

In the mid-1800s, Bangor, Maine, was one of the world's busiest shipping ports for lumber. Almost two million logs came down the Penobscot River in 1872—more than ever before! And

all those logs were driven downriver by a few hundred daring, skillful men.

Log driving was one of the most dangerous jobs in America at that time. Rushing water forced huge logs, 16 feet and longer, to twist and bob violently in the river. Men drove those long logs from dawn to dark, seven days a week. Local farmers, Irish immigrants, French Canadians, and Penobscot Indians worked together to force those stubborn "sticks" over rapids and falls, through narrow channels, and around bends. Some rivers were more than 150 miles long.

All winter, woodsmen cut trees and stacked huge piles of logs along the banks of streams. Since logs from many tributaries would be mixed together on the main river, loggers "branded" their logs by notching them with identifying symbols or letters. At the end of the drive, just upriver from sawmills, logs would be separated by those marks at places called *sorting booms*.

It took a lot of water to move logs. Men built dams to trap the melted snow that rushed down mountain streams every spring. At the right moment, the men opened the gates to flush logs down over miles of rocky and shallow riverbeds.

When the drive boss hollered "Roll 'em!" river drivers donned their "calked" boots, grabbed their cant dogs, and started rolling those logs into the water.

Steel spikes, or *calks*, in the soles of their boots kept drivers from slipping on logs. A *cant dog*

was a pole with a spike and a hook on the end for prying and rolling logs. It was often called a *peavey*, after Joseph Peavey, the Maine blacksmith who invented it. To prod logs along, 16-foot-long pike poles were used. A *pike pole* was longer than a peavey, with a tip and a small pick on the end.

Once logs were headed downstream, rivermen were stationed along the shore, poking and pushing any logs that got caught on boulders or sandbars.

All day they worked in numbing cold, icy water up over their boot tops. If they slacked off for even a moment, the drive boss would yell, "Keep those sticks movin'!" Logs had to reach the sawmills while there was enough water, or the drive would be "hung" until the next spring.

Once the logs reached the main river, drivers were transported downriver in French-style boats, called *bateaux* (baa-TOES). Expert boatmen maneuvered these long riverboats among logs and around boulders. They put men ashore wherever logs needed prodding.

A few bateaux carried the "wangan" (food, tents, and other supplies). The crew camped along the riverbank, moving downriver every few days. The cook and his helper, the *cookee*, prepared huge amounts of food—biscuits, ham, potatoes, hard-boiled eggs, and always baked beans. River drivers ate breakfast at 4 A.M., a "first" and "second" lunch, and supper when the day's work was done. After supper, the men flopped onto beds of spruce boughs, which kept them off the frozen ground. One riverman remembered, "Many times I slept with my drivin' boots on, because if you took them off, they would freeze

and you couldn't get them on the next mornin'."

The river crew's most grueling chore was "sackin' the rear," their term for retrieving logs stuck on rocks and riverbanks when the main drive passed. They had to shove all those logs back into the flowing water.

*Oh, Listen to me, River boys,  
Oh, Listen while I sing  
About the drive of '95,  
And of that fateful spring.  
The wind was wailing up a gale,  
The clouds hung blue and low,  
When we blew the jam at  
Grand Pitch.  
Boys, how those logs did blow!  
—a song about a log jam*

Log jams were the most dangerous. Sometimes jams blocked the entire river for half a mile. Men had to walk out onto the tangled mass and pick at logs for days, sometimes weeks, to free a jam. The drive boss warned, "When she goes, she'll go tearin'."

When the log jam finally let loose, men scrambled for shore. Some didn't make it.

The most daring drivers rode logs down through the rapids. They came to be known as Bangor Tigers.

If all else failed to break a log jam, the drive boss blasted it with dynamite. Logs went flying into the air, and water spurted up to the treetops.

Death on the river was quick. Some rivermen were caught between logs or swept downriver by the current. Others drowned when bateaux capsized in rough rapids. They were buried onshore, or their boots were hung on a tree at the river's edge.

Finally, by late summer, logs reached the sorting booms. The drive was in.

Long-log drives began to give way to pulpwood drives of 4-foot logs in the early twentieth century. By 1950, long-log drives had all but disappeared. Maine's white-water men had played an important part in the history of our country. They "drove" the lumber that helped build America.



A crew of Maine rivermen break up a log jam with peaveys and pike poles.



A bateau waits for the crew at a log jam.