"Booming" in Andy's Bay

by Gordon Laird
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When you work in the west coast woods of British Columbia you need to learn a specialized language - part logging and part Chinook Jargon.

"Booming" refers to log booms - usually "flat booms". This is the way freshly cut logs are transported to the sawmills located on fresh water on the Fraser River or one of its tributaries.

Time is of the essence with logs in salt water, which we called the "Saltchuck" (Chinook Jargon), because of a worm called a "Toredo" which attacks the underside of the logs and bores through the wood, filling it with small long running holes and ruining it for many purposes.

Our hand tools included:

a Pike Pole - which was an twelve-foot long aluminum pole with a two pronged rod and hook on the end. Pike poles were used to push logs in the desired direction.

a Peavey - which was a device, about the length of a shovel, but which had a heavy penetrating rod plus a movable piece which caught the logs in a racheting motion. With a Peavey you could roll a log over.

After the log booms are made up they are towed by small tugboats up the Fraser river, where they are tied up awaiting their production in the sawmill.

The process of booming involved taking logs which were felled, dragged or trucked into the water on the west coast of Vancouver Island, transporting them safely through the rough water of the west coast and into the inside passage to a booming ground such as Andy's Bay. There the logs were sorted them into species and made up into flat booms for further transport to the mills. The method of transporting them from the wild reaches of the west coast of Vancouver Island was interesting in itself. It was impossible to transport them that far in flat booms, because any rough water would insure the loss of many if not all of the logs. There were three methods we were familiar with: The Gibson

Raft, the Davis Raft and the log barge. We dealt with the first two of these system in our time, and they soon gave way to the more efficient log barges, which was self-unloading.

A Gibson raft, undoubtedly named after Gordon Gibson, one of the logging pioneers on the coast, was a large bundle of logs. Large? No, huge! Imagine a raft made up of logs bundled together in a bundle so huge that it floated 2/3 under the water and 20 feet or so above the water. It is also long, perhaps 50-100 feet long. In our first summer my friend Alan Herd and I worked behind Shelter Island, on Keats Island, in Howe Sound. Our task was to remove the lines which held the logs tightly bundled together. Our "boss" was a young fellow, Bill Pye, who came up with ingenious ways of untying the bundles. One way involved undoing the bolts fastening the metal lines which bound the raft together, leaving the final wire ropes bound only by light sisal rope. Bill then lit fires under the sisal ropes and finally the bundle of logs began to unfold into the water.

Problem was, the fires burned unevenly so that when the logs let go the result was more like a huge set of "pick-up-sticks" splayed in all different directions, some over and some under each other. It was a mess! With a boom boat and our Peaveys and Pike Poles we had to sort that mess down into areas of logs lying parallel to others of their own species.

Gradually, with the use of a boom boat, and a peavey each and our pike poles, we had to sort through the logs and get them all lying parallel in the water.

The next year we moved to jobs in Andy's Bay which was much more remote. Here we encountered Davis rafts, not Gibson Rafts. Davis rafts began with a bed of logs with lines intertwined and logs were loaded on top of this bed. Then it was fastened up with lines much as a Gibson raft.

In Andy's Bay the Davis rafts were dismantled using a giant "A-Frame" which hung off a cliff, and which had the strength to hold the Davis raft while it was being unfastened and to lift off the logs in an orderly fashion.

Log barges succeeded both these early inventions. At first the barges were the hulls of old ships with all the superstructure removed. One of them was being prepared in the Andy's Bay harbour while we worked there. A metal-worker was cutting the superstructure off the Lady Cynthia, leaving only the hull to serve as a log barge. Now self-unloading barges are constructed for just this purpose.

Our jobs as “Second Boommen” began with the logs when they were free of the Davis raft. With our Pike Poles we sorted logs into the various sections, based on their species. There was a tremendous difference in value depending on the species: Fir was the most valuable, then Cedar and finally Hemlock. Fir was great for all building project, strong and durable: for 2 by 4's which formed the main building block of frame buildings. Cedar was good for siding, shingles and shakes and fencing material. Softer and lighter, it floated high in the water. Hemlock was the lowest grade and was the heaviest and most awkward. In a flat boom if there were the slightest turbulence in the water when the boom of logs was under tow, it would be the hemlocks which would be lost. Sometimes they would sink or partially submerge. Mariners had to beware “Dead Heads”, which were logs semi-floating in the water, sometimes vertically. These were usually hemlock logs.

We wore “Cork boots”, which were called that, although that had nothing to do with cork. They were a heavy leather boot with soles surfaced with sharp caulks or studs, for gripping the logs.

We learned to judge logs carefully while walking on them, watching for loose bark, and came to know that we could make quick steps across small logs as long as we had enough momentum. There was a kind of ‘dance step’ involved, which was amazingly graceful.

Many of our Boommen could not swim and had very little safety gear. Some wore a little rubber device on their belt which could be gripped releasing a capsule of CO2 to inflate it. I almost never saw anyone wear one and never saw one used. Experienced boommen were very skilled on their feet and seldom anyone ever fell into the water unintentionally.

After we had sorted logs into pens by species we would begin making them up into flat booms. Pulling “Swifters” across the logs was a procedure that required great teamwork. I gravitated to the job of running the “Donkey”. In the logging of olden days perhaps there were real donkeys, but in our day every engine attached to a reel of metal line for pulling was called a “Donkey”. Sometimes those lines ran high over the pulley in an “A-Frame” and sometimes not. When I ran the donkey it was a straight pull, holding a swifter in place so that Al could insert the boomchain into the hole in the swifter and into the side boom log, pull it tight and secure it with a wooden wedge.

The two forms of entertainment in this life was eating, the cookhouse, and drinking beer on those occasions when we had arranged to get away from the booming camp.

The food in the cookhouse was very substantial and good, as it was the centrepiece of all the activities. If there were problems in the cookhouse the whole camp was affected, so the cook was treated with great care. Quite odd people chose to be cooks in logging camps. They operated on their own time, had quarters near the cookhouse and were completely separate from the "society" of the booming camp.

One day at the table our conversation turned to strawberries, for no particular reason. It was not because we were eating strawberries. It was one of the zany, meaningless conversation.

Outside the cookhouse, Mr. Morrison, our boss, stopped Al and me on the path and said, menacingly: "If you want strawberries so much you can just go down the road!" The meaning was made very clear. Shape up or ship out!

We soon learned that normal chitchat was not welcome in the cookhouse. You ate quickly and left and avoided any evaluative comments on the fare. Serving plates were never allowed to be empty. There was no measuring out. If you wanted 8 or 10 eggs for breakfast plus a pound of bacon, that was your business. Cook's business was to make sure the serving plate was never empty. If you were going to be away at lunch-time there were ample provisions left out for you to make yourself a lunch.

Dinner was well supplied: Roast beef, chicken or pork, Mountains of potatoes, lots of peas and beans, loafs of bread, jugs of coffee and milk, and huge pies for dessert. There was no reason to starve in the boom camp.

But when dinner was over there was nothing to do. We were miles from anywhere. Port Mellon was across the harbour but far enough that it would be a trip saved for a weekend. Al and I bought a used guitar in B. C. Collateral Loans, which ended up as mine, because a basketball injury to Al's wrist had mended badly and he couldn't get his fingers comfortably on the strings.

Weekends were reserved for fun. There was nothing drearier than spending the weekend in camp. Sometimes we would go the Port Mellon, the Pulp Mill town on the mainland across the bay from Gambier Island. We would be given a ride over on the “company boat”. The only entertainment in Port Mellon was the beer parlor. We would ask the waiter to fill the table with glasses of beer, and then gradually work our way through it! We came to understand what the lifestyle of the experienced logger was: to work hard in camp, come to town and blow all his pay on a weekend, perhaps being rolled for the balance of his money, get an advance to get him onto the plane or boat back to camp, only to repeat this pattern.

Most of what has been described would have changed fundamentally today. Also there was absolutely no care for the environment in those days. It was simply a case of clearcutting the trees from the slopes, getting them into water, transporting them near Vancouver, sorting them and getting them quickly to the sawmill. A different world, which has now passed into history!