



Photo: Public Archives

Log drive on the Bonnechere

by Harry Hinchley

At one time great log drives used to come down the Bonnechere every year. At Renfrew there were slides to take these drives past the rapids and falls. Some of the town's citizens still remember how the drive gangs used to camp along the river while the logs were being put through the slides.

Alexander Murray, Provincial Geologist, who explored up the Bonnechere in 1853 reported that at that time the country was still generally devoted to lumbering. But even then he found that a great part of the timber was gone. Besides that which had been taken out by lumbermen great quantities had been destroyed by fire.

Nevertheless there was still much remaining. He wrote in his report: "On our way up the stream we repeatedly found it almost entirely blocked up with squared timber, sometimes for miles together."

The Bonnechere was known as a "quiet river" because unlike so many others that flowed into the Ottawa it had few dangerous rapids or falls. For this reason it was more suitable for bringing squared timber. Some huge "sticks" were cut as much as 3 feet square and over 40 feet long.

The last big drive of logs came down the Bonnechere about 1907. The story is told that when this drive came down it jammed near the pumphouse of the Renfrew waterworks. To get the logs moving again the foreman of the drive wanted to use dynamite to blast them free.

The town authorities would not agree to this because there was risk of damage to the intake of the waterworks. But during the night for some reason the jam broke. The logs began moving again and early next morning they were going through the slides and on down the river.

By W.J. Smith

as told to Harry Hinchley

To find out about this operation it was only necessary to turn over the print and read the information off the back. Some time when memory was fresh some person had written the details on the back. And to make matters even better, this had been so noted on the front.

The photograph was taken in 1915. The sawmill stood on the Bonnechere River inside the town of Renfrew. It was at the river not far from where the dressing rooms for the swimming beach are now located.

The late W.A. Smith was the owner and operator of the sawmill. He is shown standing toward the right near the saw but unfortunately

he is almost hidden behind the big log. At the other end of the log, standing beside the stake, is the late Harry Wainman.

The log came from a huge pine tree that grew on the farm of J.M. McMahon on the banks of the Bonnechere downstream from the Sugar Loaf. This tree yielded six saw logs of which the third measured 32 inches inside the bark. We do not know how much bigger the first one was but certainly the tree could properly be called a "Big Pine".

Smith's sawmill must have been the last to operate on the Bonnechere at Renfrew. Further down, below the Highway Bridge, Martin Russell for many years ran a sawmill but in 1910 it was torn down to make room for the municipal power house which was built at the same place and which still stands.