

THE CLEARWATER RIVER LOG DRIVES

A PHOTO ESSAY

The Clearwater River Log Drive began in North Central Idaho in 1928 and continued, with a few interruptions, until 1971. During that period of time there were 40 log drives. Early in the 1900s, Frederick Weyerhaeuser and his associates purchased standing timber in a remote area of Clearwater

County, Idaho. In 1927, at Lewiston, they built a mill that was billed as the largest white pine mill in the world. What started out as Clearwater Timber Company was later named Potlatch Forest Incorporated following a series of mergers. More recently, the name was changed to Potlatch Corporation.

Over the years the Log Drive became a ninety-mile river trek from the upper reaches of the North Fork of the Clearwater River to the Potlatch Forest Incorporated saw mill at the confluence of the Clearwater and the Snake River at Lewiston, Idaho. Approximately half of the timber that went to the sawmill was transported on railroad lines and half was transported on the river. The Clearwater River Log Drive of 1971 was described as the last major white-water sawlog river drive in the United States. In 1971 the completion of Dworshak Dam contributed to the demise of the Log Drive and inundated the stretch of the North Fork of the Clearwater from Ahsahka to several miles beyond Camp T.

In the latter years of the drive, the logs were decked at landings along the upper North Fork and then released to float to the mill during the spring runoff. Most drives started about May 10th and lasted about 21 days from the time the crew actually went to work until they finished the drive in Lewiston. The weather was a major factor.

In the spring the loggers prepared for the snow melt and rising water. The floating cookhouse with two bunkhouses was assembled. Work-boat motors were tuned, tools were prepared, first aid and safety equipment was checked, and the supplies and food for the kitchen were inventoried. Melting snow waters provided the power to transport the logs and produced a harsh, chilly environment for the river men. The men's job was to recover any logs which were hung up on river banks, sand bars, or islands and return the logs to the main channel of the river.

BY CHARLES "RED" MCCOLLISTER AND SANDRA MCCOLLISTER

LAST WHITEWATER LOG DRIVE

- Major Log Landings
- Major Towns & Landmarks

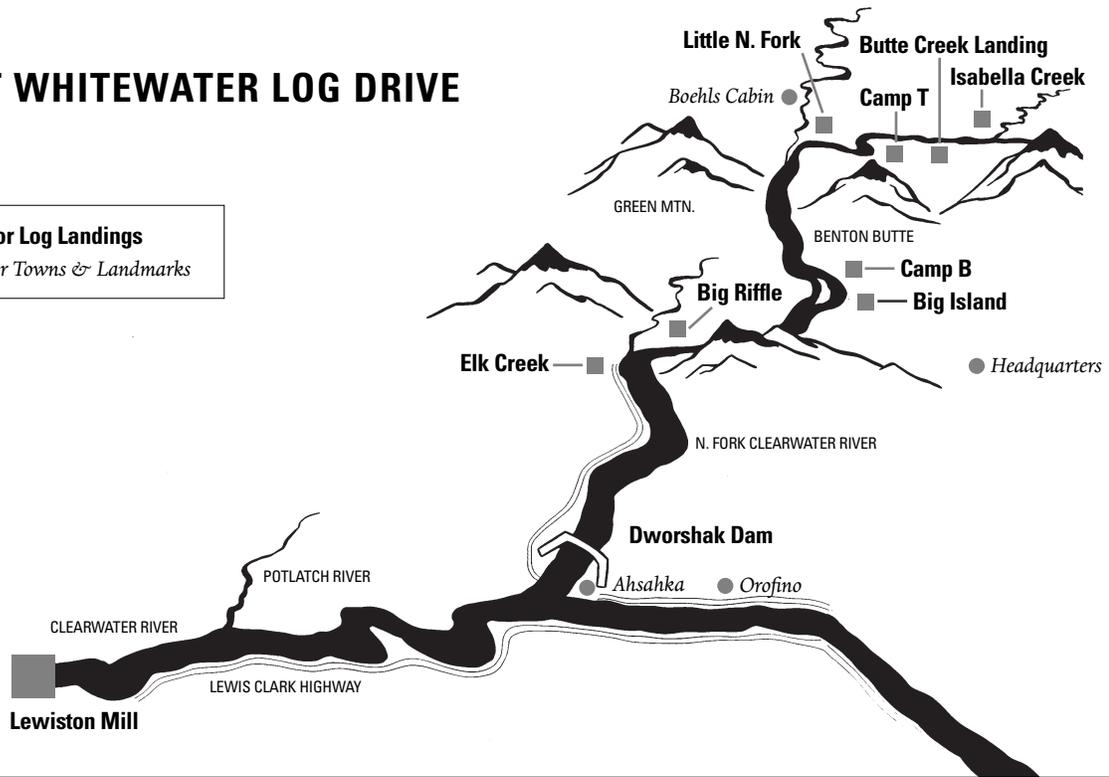


PHOTO BY CHARLES MCCOLLISTER

Many early log jams were much higher and much longer than this one during the days when logs were flumed. These logs are on a rock bar at a place called Big Riffle. The river drivers called it "Big Dirty." The water level had dropped, leaving hundreds of logs stranded. During the last twenty years of the drive, millions of board feet of logs would be decked at landings alongside the river during the logging season and held until the spring run off. By breaking the decks at a time when the ice had left the river, there was plenty of water to carry the logs down. This method eliminated many of the large log jams of the fluming days.



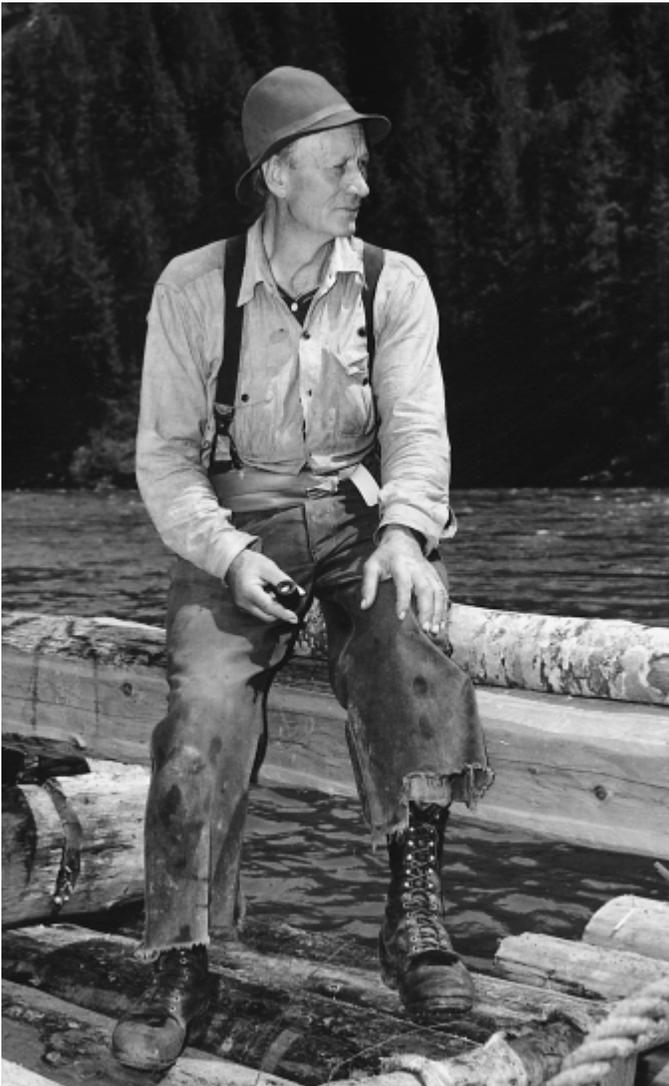
PHOTO BY CHARLES MCCOLLISTER

In the early years of the drive, flumes transported logs from the woods to the bank of the river throughout the logging season. Tree lengths were skidded to this flume landing and then "bucked" by sawyers into saw logs about sixteen and a half feet in length. Peavy men then rolled the logs into the flume. Water would be released from flume dams as needed to float the logs to the river. There would be several log landings along a flume depending on different logging sites and available water sources. Each flume design was unique to particular terrain and water sources. The original length of this particular flume was about eight miles. It entered the river below the Little North Fork, on the opposite side, fed by the waters of Elkberry Creek.

From the late 1920s to the mid-1950s, flumes were the cheapest and the most efficient way to handle the logs. Heavy machinery was not yet available to build the roads, handle the logs, or haul them great distances. Water did the work. Flumes varied from one mile to several miles in length and created a capillary system that fed logs into the river. Over two dozen flumes and fluming camps were constructed along the North Fork.



“Head’s Up, she’s a pullin’.” The bateaux crew pulling a small center jam in the North Fork of the Clearwater River. The men in the picture are leaping to the safety of the bateaux as everything is moving and the jam is breaking up.



Bill Aiken, Veteran pilot of the wanigans on the log drives.



Bull O’ The Woods! Potlatch log drive foreman Charles “Red” McCollister sizes up the river before sending his rearing crews onto the frigid Clearwater River.



A deck on the Butte Creek Landing with Smith Ridge in the background.

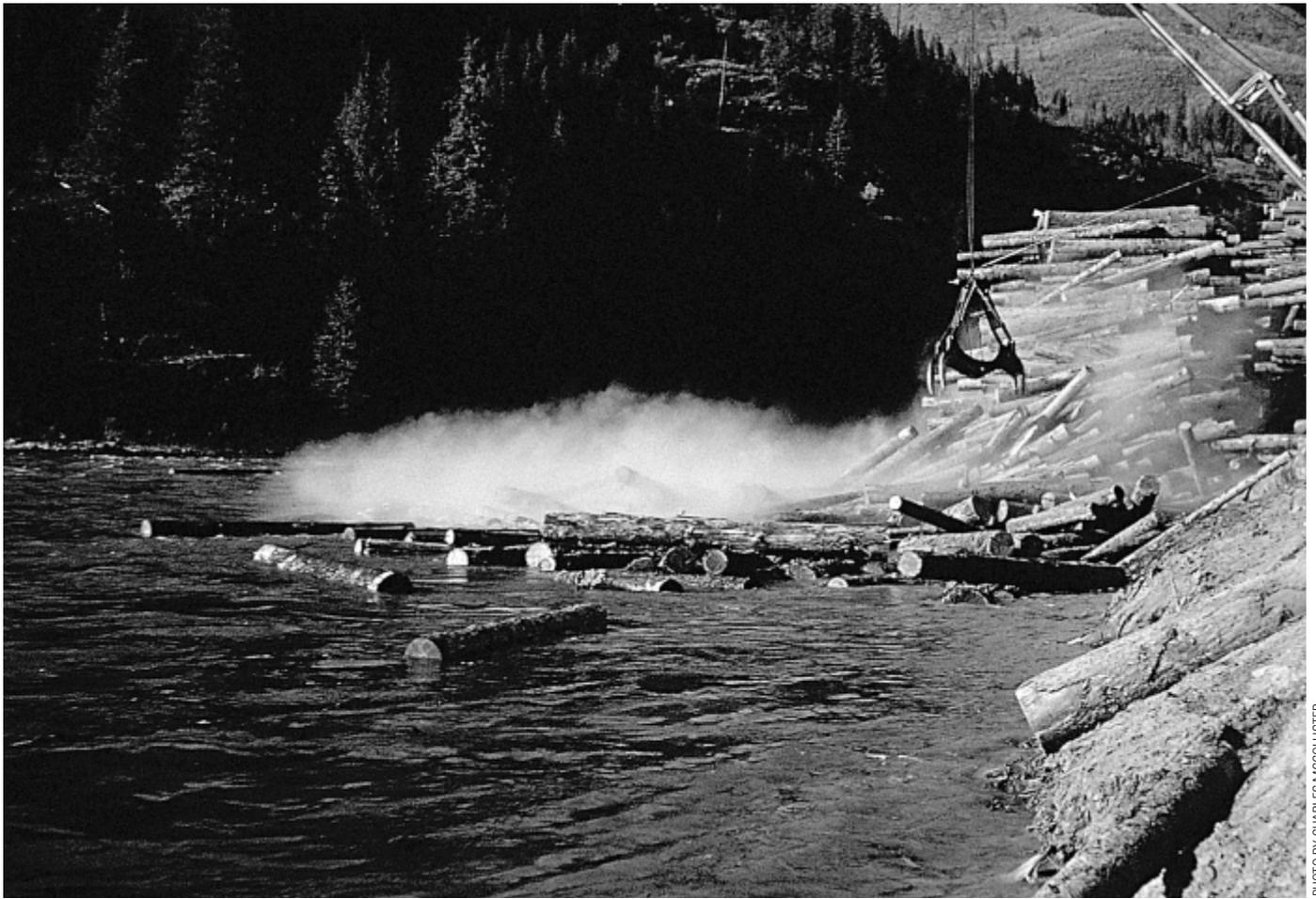


PHOTO BY CHARLES MCCOLLISTER

There is quite a bit of splash at Butte Creek landing as a loader put logs in the river. This indicates that the water wasn't quite high enough yet to float the logs away from the deck. The decks were higher on the bank, and they would not self-feed. A deck would self-feed when the water was deep enough and the deck was good enough. A good deck had to be tied down in front with cable until the loggers were ready to release the logs. The logs needed to be stacked evenly and set in place so that when they broke (began to roll out), they broke toward the river instead of toward the bank.



FOREST HISTORY SOCIETY COLLECTION

The loggers' floating camp was called the wanigan. On the first drive in 1928, the crew did not have a floating camp. The men built drive camps about seven miles apart on the river, and they moved the kitchen crew and the camp with pack horses and mules while the peavey crews worked their way down the river. The crew got to work by camping along the river.

Later, they had two rafts made out of cedar poles, and one would be a dining room and one would be a cookhouse. After the crew had moved one raft, they had to walk back up the river and get the other one and move it down. The old log rafts were heavy with only sweeps to guide them in an unpredictable spring run off. The sweeps were at least 16 feet long with pole handles and 2"x 12" boards for blades. There was nothing to slow the rafts down in the current or to maneuver them except a long sweep on each end. The two rafts didn't always land at the same place. In that case, one crew had plenty to eat and the other had a good place to sleep.

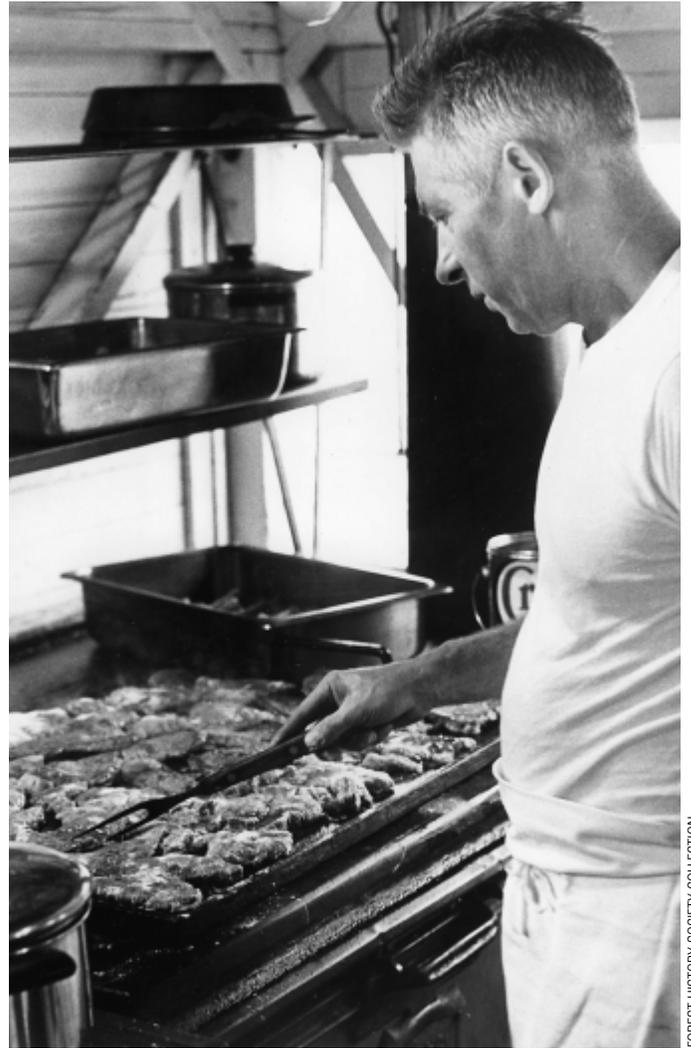
This wanigan boasted double sweeps on both ends. This was an improvement over the 50-foot single sweeps on the older cedar rafts. Bill Akin, veteran pilot of the wanigans, stated that these were much easier to handle and rode the white water much easier. This type of wanigan was the brain-child of L.K. "Boots" Edleblute, an assistant logging superintendent for the Clearwater woods.



In the early 1950s, the wanigan was fitted with full swing motor mounts and outboard motors instead of just the sweeps. It progressed from log rafts to three sections of Army engineered bridge pontoons made out of synthetic rubber with air in numerous air compartments. This wanigan would house the 34-man crew along with a cook, cookhouse, and two bunkhouses, one on each end of the cookhouse. The wanigan was over 115 feet long and 26 feet wide. This photo was taken in 1951 about 3 miles north of Ahsahka.



The number one priority on the drive was a good cook. The company furnished the best cook and the best food that they could get. Hearty meals were very attractive to the men. Working in cold water and doing hard work developed a real good appetite. The drive flunky, Frank Moran, and that excellent cook, Harvey Spears, are “dishing up” one of the three hot meals a day that were served on the wanigan.



Working in a space smaller than the average home kitchen, chief cook Harvey Spears prepares more than 100 hot meals daily to satisfy the hearty appetites of the Potlatch rearing crews.



The dining room floated right along with the crew.



The men would return to the bunkhouse and a warm stove at the end of the work day. Steel-framed double bunks lined the bunkhouse section on the bow end of the wanigan. An Arctic heater burned presto-logs and wool blankets warmed the loggers at night. The flooring was short 1" boards, so it could be pulled up to get to the air plugs in the pontoons and add air as needed. Some Presto-logs were stored under the floor boards. This scene was at the beginning of the drive, and the wrappers on the beds contain fresh bedding sent from the laundry at Lewiston. The long white box on the left was the commissary with gloves, cigarettes, Copenhagen, boot caulks, gimps (round headed tacks), and socks. The clerk would sell items as needed. The darker box held tools and parts for any smaller motors used on the drive.



This peavey crew is working to roll out a large log. The man with a long pike pole helps guide the log into the current. Each crew member was carefully hand selected. In his article for *The Idaho Forester* in 1964, Charles "Red" McCollister stated, "New recruits were chosen carefully from young men with as much consideration given to their safety attitude and individual judgment as to their physical ability."



This boat crew is "brailing" logs out of an eddy. A brail is a cluster of logs held close to a boat. The boatman would pull the boat up to the logs. The pole men would gather the logs with pike poles, pulling them tight against the boat. The boatman would ease out into the current and turn down river with the logs on the outside to force them into the current. The logs would then be able to float away from the eddy.



The peavey crews had systems for working log jams. The system usually was to "unload the logs." Logs were rolled off the top of the jam, one log at a time, until the lower logs would either float or could be rolled into the water.



Spiked boots and the agility of a cat were critical in a business where one misstep could lead to an icy, if not fatal, dunking in the Clearwater River.



The men wore caulk boots with heavy leather soles and steel caulks (numerous short spikes) for traction on the logs. The caulks could wear off from walking along the river and on rocks. When the caulks wore off, they could be pulled out and wooden pegs put in to tighten up the holes, before new caulks were driven into the leather.

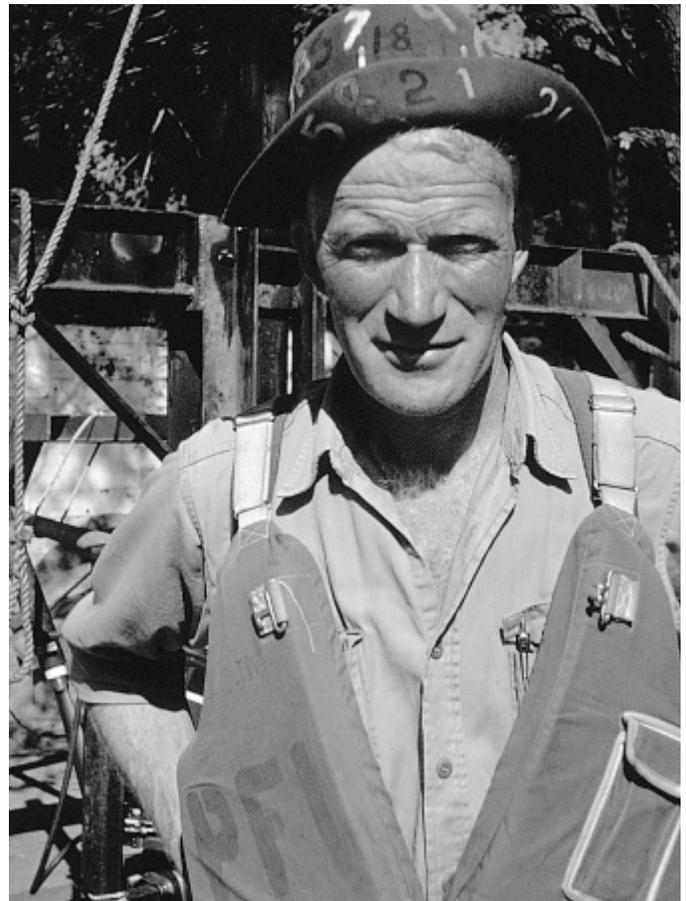
The men would start with a block of white pine about 8–10 inches in length and split it like fine kindling wood into long slender rectangular sticks, about the size of a pencil. Then they'd smooth the wood and form a series of connected, yet slightly sharpened pegs in desired lengths. That way, he could break a peg off from his stick at whatever length he chose and drive it into the old caulk hole before he drove the new caulk. At times, scraps of fabric from Frisco jeans, the heavy black cotton work pants, would be used to stuff the caulk holes instead of the wooden pegs.



There had been many changes in the work boats over the years. Originally the bateaux were equipped with oars, and the men could not go back up river without towing the boats manually and pushing them with a pike pole. As outboard motors became available, new equipment and methods were developed. The outboards became more efficient, and they didn't die every time a little water was splashed on them. With technological progress, aluminum jet boats were designed with not just one jet and one engine, but two jets and two engines. These powerful jet boats could haul a crew right back up the river and also pull logs out of jams.



Boat crews are working the slack water at the lower end of the Clearwater River, close to the Lewiston mill.



Charles "Red" McCollister, worked the drive from 1950 to 1971 and was foreman for its last 17 years. Red is wearing his "safety hat." In order to maintain a high level of awareness about safe work practices, Red painted a number on this hat for each day on the drive in which there were no lost-time accidents. □

Charlie McCollister and Sandra McCollister are writing a book about the Clearwater River Log Drive. Former crew-members, reporters, and photographers of the time, or forest historians who are interested in this research may contact Sandra McCollister at Baylor University at 254-710-6390. Sandra_McCollister@baylor.edu