



# LOG PIRATES OF PUGET SOUND

BY STEWART H. HOLBROOK

This nine-section boom carries 700,000 feet of Douglas fir—a rich haul for any pirate.

A HEAVY blanket of fog hangs over Tacoma harbor on Puget Sound. From out of a dimly-lighted office on the waterfront a man hurries to a part of the wharf where a powerful thirty-foot motor boat is rolling gently in the swell. He calls down and two men come on deck. There is a moment's conversation, then the lines are cast off and the slim boat chugs, churns and slides off into the black night. It is the Washington State Log Patrol, off on a hurry-up call.

The log stealing racket isn't a new one, although few know about it unless they lived on the Great Lakes in the 1880's and 1890's, or on the timbered shores of British Columbia, Washington and Oregon in more recent years.

The great hey-day of log pirates on Puget Sound was roughly from about 1917 to 1928. It was a great and noble hey-day, too. Until 1925 there was no adequate legislation to handle the situation, and the pirates were in clover. Once in a while they would make away with an entire boom, containing, say, a million feet of logs; but usually they were content to steal a section of a boom or raft, or roughly 80,000 feet. The little fellows who worked the racket as a part-time job were happy to snatch even one or two logs.

The classic theft of all time took place on the Fraser River, in British Columbia, in the summer of 1920. Theoretically on watch in a little floating

boom house near a big raft of Douglas fir was a good-natured Swede by the name of Halstrom. The raft, he knew, was destined for a Vancouver sawmill, and he also knew that a tug was due the next morning to take it away.

Along about sundown a strange tug put into the cove where Halstrom watched the logs. He noted that it was the *Daisy Ann* and that its home port was Seattle. The *Daisy Ann* hove to at the boom house. A pleasant fellow, obviously her captain, hailed Halstrom.

"Are we heading right to get to Mission?" he asked. Halstrom told him that Mission lay a few miles up the river. One thing led to another and the *Daisy Ann's* captain and crew of three men joined Halstrom on the deacon seat outside the boom house door. The captain finally asked Halstrom if he would like a snort.

Watching boom is a lonely sort of task, and Halstrom was really a gregarious soul and a notable drinker. He thought a snort would be pretty good. Halstrom drank. Then he drank some more. And when he was roused next morning by the Vancouver towing crew which had come for the boom of logs, he looked out upon a cove bare of so much as a stick. More than one million feet of fir had disappeared. Halstrom also disappeared without waiting for a pay check. Years later I was told by one who knew that that particular raft of logs was cut in a large Seattle sawmill.

Such gigantic thefts, of course, are rare and I

report it only to show what was possible in the days before the logging operators and millmen organized against the pirates.

Nowhere in timbered North America is there a place so happily designed for log pirates as Puget Sound. I don't know how many miles of shore line there are on the Sound, but there must be thousands. The innumerable sloughs, bays, rivers and islands lend themselves beautifully to log piracy; and before the formation of the State and other log patrols, the racket had grown into a business that cost legitimate loggers and sawmills no less than \$100,000 a year, and probably more. That's not a large racket, as rackets go in big eastern cities, but on Puget Sound it is considered important money.

Late in 1925, the Washington State legislature passed what is now known as Chapter 154—"An act to protect the title of the owners of floating logs, timber and lumber." It prescribes in detail the branding of forest products by owners, and the registration of brands with the State. It provides for penalties for dealing in "maverick" or unbranded logs, or in logs branded by another, much as did the cattle branding laws of an earlier day.

Next, the logging operators and mill owners incorporated log patrols—one on Grays Harbor and three on Puget Sound. There is a first-class story in any one of the patrols, but it would take a book to tell it, so I will deal briefly with one of them, the State Log Patrol which has its headquarters in Tacoma and whose boats patrol the busy Tacoma-Olympia-Shelton district of Puget Sound.

The State Log Patrol went into action on February 1, 1928, with W. E. Craw, a former captain in the Everett Police Department, as manager. Previous to announcement of the patrol's formation, Captain Craw spent three months investigating the ramification of log pirates. His findings were positive and somewhat startling. Working with operatives posing as boom-men and log-pod men, he uncovered a ring of log thieves that included the owner, general manager, superintendent and head boom-man of a respectable sawmill concern of Seattle. These fellows had been doing jobs on a large scale, stealing entire sections at a time and cutting them in their own mill. Prosecution followed and convictions were secured.

Captain Craw also found that the officials of one county on Puget Sound were in league with and getting a cut from the local log pirates. So he had himself commissioned as a deputy sheriff in five counties in order to make arrests without tipping his hand to local law officers.

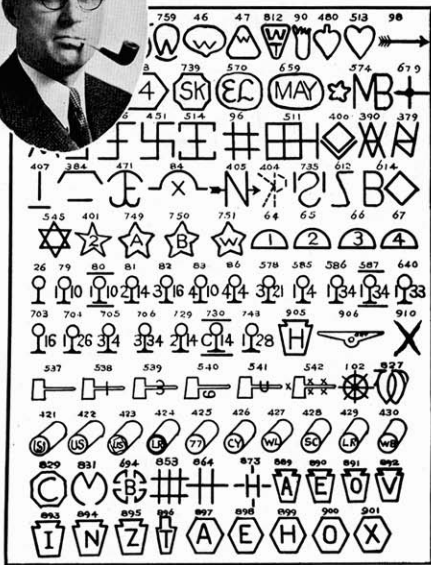
He obtained eight fast tug boats. On each of these he placed a powerful search-

light and two determined men armed with rifle and revolver and a deputy sheriff's badge. These men had to be—and apparently they were—a combination of navigator, mariner, policeman, detective and sea lawyer. Each boat had its particular district to patrol, and part of the business was to check up on sawmills and observe the appearance of the logs they were cutting. A number of small and medium-sized mills were notorious for operating with "hot" logs, for which they paid about a fifth or less of the current market price.

Captain Craw, dressed as a hunter or fisherman, usually operated alone in a little sixteen-foot speed boat which carried a thirty-two-horsepower outboard motor and could make twenty-five knots without trouble. He had the opinion, which proved a good one, that stealing could best be discouraged by "turning the heat" on mills he suspected of cutting stolen logs. He found twelve in his district of the Sound. When he could, he put operatives at work with the pirates. When he couldn't he took to dropping in at awkward times and catching them with logs for which they couldn't account. Then, there were the beachcombers, men who usually refer to themselves as stump-ranchers. They live in shacks on tidewater and their ways of living are many. Often



Captain W. E. Craw, who "put the heat" on organized log piracy, and a page from his book of registered log-brands.



they were content to pick up a stray log now and then which had jumped some raft being towed by. The more ambitious would sneak up on a raft tied up on shore when the tide was in. They would take out the boom-chains which held the corners of the last, or outer section of logs. When the tide turned, the section would open and anywhere from 10,000 to 80,000 feet of logs would be carried out where they could be corralled several at a time and taken to the beachcomber's favorite cove.

Once safely in his snug harbor, there were two things the pirate could do. He could laboriously saw off the branded end of every log and then brand them with his own registered and legal mark or with the brand of the bootleg mill with which he did business; or he could take a home-made branding ax and so mangle the original owner's brand that the devil himself couldn't have said what the mark had been. Then, of course, he would apply his own brand to the log ends.

Thus rebranded, the pirate could not be convicted in court, or at least not on any evidence supplied by the logs themselves. But in log piracy, as in almost all other forms of crime, there is always something to tell the tale, and in more than one case in the region of Puget Sound it has been a boom-chain.

A boom-chain is used to hold two logs together and thus form part of a raft, or boom. It is about four feet long, weighs some seventy pounds, and has a ring on one end, a toggle on the other. They are worth around six dollars apiece to the pirate and are consequently valuable secondary loot. And it's difficult to steal and move more than a few logs without boom-chains.

In 1929 Captain Crow was trying to get some evidence against a Puget Sound waterfront character known as "High-Pockets" Peterson. He knew that Peterson was stealing logs, but Peterson had managed to keep out of the hands of the patrolmen. Then, "High Pockets" made away with a big batch of boom-chains. The captain, after a good piece of detective work, trailed him to Seattle, where Peterson left the chains in a small blacksmith shop on the West Waterway.

The officer went to the King County courthouse to get a warrant for arrest of the blacksmith and Peterson. When it was served on the smithy a day later, it was discovered that not a single chain in

the shop carried an identification mark on it.

This was curious, because all boom-chains around Puget Sound are marked with the owner's brand stamped into the toggle, and the brand is registered with the State just as the log brand is. But all of the chains in the shop had toggles clean and smooth and free of any mark.

Fortunately, the log patrol captain knew something about iron. He took one of the unmarked chains to a convenient emery wheel and had an assistant hold the smooth toggle against the wheel a moment while the sparks flew. When he looked at the toggle again there appeared as though etched in black on silver the pattern of an eight-spoked steering wheel. This was all that he wanted to know. Referring to his book of registered brands, which he always carried handy in his coat pocket, the log patrol captain found that an eight-spoked wheel was Brand No. 102—and No. 102 was registered by the Cavano Logging Company, with headquarters in Seattle.

Whether or not the blacksmith knew it, it is a fact that merely heating a piece of iron and then pounding it smooth with a hammer on the anvil will not remove the brand from the grain of the iron. Invisible to the naked eye, an emery wheel will bring out the hidden mark in an instant—as the blacksmith and "High-Pockets" found out in King County court. The dramatic evidence uncovered by the whirling emery and the captain's ingenuity convicted them.

Getting back to the primary racket of the Puget Sound log pirates, there has been a revival, slight but marked, in the past twelve or fourteen months. As this is written, No. 1 peeler logs, which are the highest grade and are used in the manufacture of plywood, are selling for around twenty-six dollars in the open market. An average peeler log will contain about six thousand feet, log scale, and is worth, say, about one hundred and fifty dollars at the mill. A bootleg mill will pay possibly twenty dollars for it.

A few years ago, when log prices were as high as they are now, two men working out of a cove on Whidby Island, in the Sound, made eight thousand dollars one fall and winter. That's big money for two stump-ranchers just trying to get along in the world. But they were caught red-handed one night.



Another time, Captain Craw's men intercepted a delivery of no less than 200,000 feet of stolen logs, and good ones, too—the work of four men and a thirty-foot gas boat.

But even with peelers at twenty-six dollars, it is unlikely there will ever be any more big-time log piracy so long as the State of Washington and the other patrols are even partially active.

A dozen years ago it was difficult to go into court and prove ownership of a stick of timber, once it had become a log instead of a tree. All that is past now. On file at Olympia are no less than 1,095 registered log brands. Letters, numbers and combinations of the two are used. Then, there are squares, circles, diamonds and triangles.

Some of the character brands are as gaudy as anything ever conceived by imaginative writers of "western" cattle-range fiction. The Schafer Brothers Logging Company of Montesano has a six-pointed Jewish star. The Cascade Timber Company of Tacoma brands a bearsfoot mark on its products. Other brands depict an ax, a butterfly, a hat that looks for all the world like a brown derby, a wine glass, a circular saw, and several designs which could have been conceived, it would seem, only in the mind and eye of a wild modernistic artist on a ten-day spree.

Important, too, are the catch-brands. These are a secondary line of defense against the Puget Sound log pirates. For example, say that Brown, a logger, sold a boom of logs to Smith, a sawmill man. The logs, at Brown's camp, were branded with Brown's registered mark—that is, his letter, number, square, diamond or triangle, as the case may be. Before Smith's towing outfit starts to move the logs from Brown's camp to Smith's mill, they stamp Smith's catch-brand onto the log ends. Thus the subsequent ownership is made legally clear. Catch-brands differ from all other brands in that the dominant part of the mark is in the shape of a large letter "C."

The open cattle range is almost a thing of the past, even though cattle still are branded. A number of volumes could be written on the story of its passing, but the one definite factor that marked its end was the miles and miles of barbed-wire fence that spread over the grasslands and foothills. Barbed-wire fences are hardly practicable, however, on the broad open waters of Puget Sound, so the Sound will always be open range.

But the log patrols, backed by a law which has teeth in it as long and sharp as a pickaroon, and aided by an elaborate system of registered

brands, as well as a secondary system of catch-brands, which is all but unbeatable, have wiped log piracy, as an organized racket, pretty much out of existence in the region around Puget Sound. And this means the country at large, for as already stated, the day of log piracy in the region of the Great Lakes reached its peak in the 1880's and 1890's.

True, there are still those tidewater stump-ranchers who will undoubtedly continue to take a chance now and then, when the fog is low and heavy over Puget Sound, or when the night is dark, but they have to work fast to beat Captain Craw and the Washington State Log Patrol. And besides, there's the matter of boom-chains and their indelible and tell-tale brands set deep into the iron.

So, even if peeler logs are selling for twenty-six dollars a thousand feet, it is rather difficult to see anything unduly optimistic ahead in the log stealing racket along the timbered shores of Washington, Oregon and British Columbia. It might be good advice to the Paul Bunyan pirates, everything considered, to stick to the job of digging clams.

The boom-chain had been pounded smooth—but an emery wheel dramatically revealed the hidden brand.

