

# Back in the day

## When trees met rivers, battles ensued.

Tony Welch

When my great-grandfather was the editor and publisher of the Eau Claire Telegram in the early 1920s, his newspaper featured dozens of first-person accounts from Wisconsin lumberjacks dating back to the mid-1800s. It was a time of spectacular “traffic jams,” when countless thousands of harvested virgin white pine logs raced down swollen rivers and loggers found themselves right in the middle. What follows are stories from two of those daring lumberjacks; we invite readers to come aboard for the ride.

### Charles M. Kirkham

I was born in St. Lawrence County, New York. After the Civil War ended, my brother T.A. Kirkham traveled to Eau Claire. He sent back such favorable reports that I decided to follow him. I was 16 years old. That first winter I joined a crew of 15 men as a sawyer. Come spring, I helped drive the logs down to the mill. I continued this routine for several years.

I’ve been asked many times to describe the breaking up of a log jam. The principal implement used, and with which all the log drivers were supplied, is the “peavey.” It has a wooden handle about 5 feet long, hard maple. Attached to the tip is a hook, used to roll logs. A heavy steel pike projects at an angle at the end of the hook, for prying purposes.

No two log jams are alike, though they appear to roughly imitate one another. A jam in a stream where there is not much current is fairly breakable. Rolling or swinging a few of the center logs — called “keys” — will usually do the trick. In places like Big Falls on the Eau Claire River, however, the breaking of a jam is a far different proposition.

In such places the lighter logs stay on top. The “shaky” (rotting) logs soon become water-soaked, and along with a number of sap-heavy logs, they are sucked under. As the submerged logs continue to multiply, the lighter logs on top are forced upward — often well above the water level. As the pressure increases, the jam grows tighter and taller. It is now a “damn jam,” as some call it.

A crew generally unloads the front by rolling off the top logs and then sluicing them downstream. Each man then forces the point of his peavey between the cracks that separate the chosen key logs. When the foreman hollers, “Ho! Ho!” the crew instantly starts rotating and tugging until the water begins flowing freely again.

I once helped to break up a 2-mile-long jam at South Fork Falls. When it went out, the crash was heard at the upper dam on Hay Creek — 4 miles away. Some of the green logs were peeled free of all their bark. Logs 12 inches in diameter were snapped in two like toothpicks. Some power!

One spring, on a drive to the boom (sawmill), I had an experience which nearly cost me my life. We were breaking a log jam at Hamilton Falls. I decided to make my way to the other side of the river. I jumped for a nearby log just as another man jumped for the same log. We collided head-on. My opponent fell onto the log, but I ended up in the water.

James Hardin, of Diamond Valley, saw me fall in. He ran out on a stationary log that hung over the falls a short distance below me. The upstream end of this log was stuck fast in some rocks. Jim locked on to the log with his peavey and braced it firmly as I swept on by. I grabbed at the extended peavey handle with my right hand, but the current was so strong my legs went over the falls. Only a part of my torso swung against the log — just enough for

**A peavey tool was essential for breaking up log jams.**



**An 1886 log jam at St. Croix Falls on the Wisconsin-Minnesota border drew large crowds of spellbound visitors. Some 200 lumberjacks spent six weeks untangling 120 million feet of logs extending 2 miles downriver.**

Hardin to grasp. Without a doubt, I owe my life to Jim.

### Ivory Livermore

I am one of the earliest settlers now living in this vicinity. I came to Wisconsin with my parents in 1856, from Broome County, New York. I first went to work for Russ Hackett, skidding logs with a team of oxen. Over the next 12 years, beginning in 1865, I went from riding logs to driving them. In plain English, I fought them tooth and nail to do what they didn’t want to do.

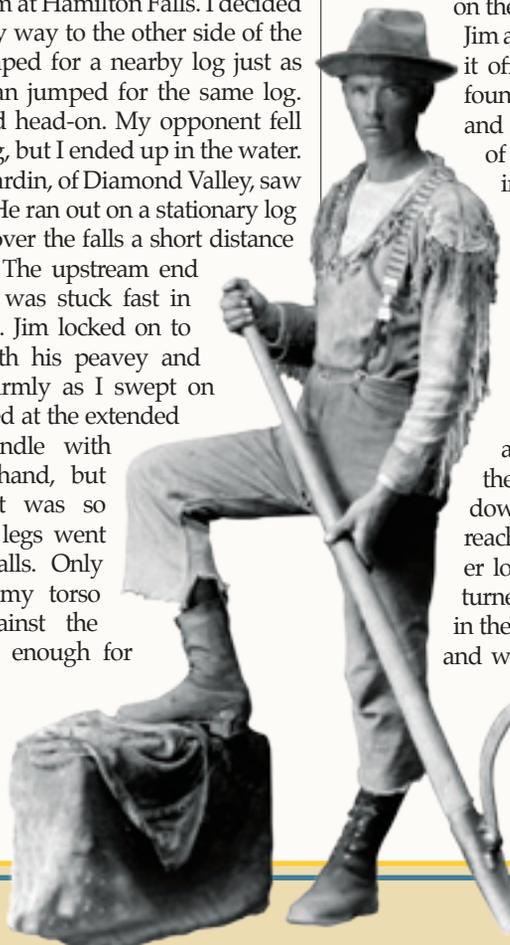
Jim Terry and I usually worked together. One time, while driving on the North Fork, a large log became saddle-backed on the rocks at Hamilton Falls.

Jim and I were sent out to ease it off. We took our peaveys, found a suitable log to ride, and went out to the middle of the river. We were easing the big log off — one holding while the other created a twisting grip — when my peavey near the end of the log suddenly tore off a rotting slab and I was knocked into the river.

I shot over the falls and finally struggled to the surface about 100 feet downstream. Jim quickly reached me by riding another log. He said my lips were turned purple. When I went in the river I was fully dressed, and when I came out all I had

left were my torn shirt and trousers. Gone were my boots. ❧

*Tony Welch writes from his woodland retreat outside Portland, Oregon.*



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