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Sawlogs For A Clinton Sawmill

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In the second half of the nineteenth century, sawmills located in the middle and lower districts of the Mississippi Valley did not have adequate forest resources near them, yet some of the firms such as the W. J. Young Lumber Company of Clinton, Iowa, were the largest producers in the world. Established in 1858, the capital of W. J. Young's firm totaled a little over \$1,000,000 by 1882.¹ This article describes the competitive aspects of log purchasing which Young experienced, primarily in the 1860's, before the sawmill men established the Mississippi River Logging Company which took much of the competition out of log purchasing.

The downriver sawmill firms were dependent upon the northern pineries which were located on the rivers St. Croix, Chippewa, Black, Wisconsin, and their tributaries. Loggers cut, hauled, banked, and marked the timbers. Rivermen drove the logs down the streams to booms,² brailed them together in large rafts, and sent them on the last stage of the journey from forest to mill, a run on the super-highway of the rafting business—the Mississippi River.

In the winter the highway froze; in summer low water hindered the drives. Millmen discussed the rise and fall of the rivers as often as other people mentioned the weather. Proud of their humming machinery, they were distressed if forced to curtail production. Not only was it troublesome to disrupt the labor force, but to keep the mills running was apparently a matter of business honor on the part of the millowners. When

¹ N. Y. Court of Appeals. *In the Matter of the Estate of John McGraw, Deceased, and also in the Matter of the Estate of Jennie McGraw-Fiske, Deceased. Return to the Court of Appeals.* (5 vols.), v. 3, *Testimony*, p.p. 1478-88.

² Booms were floating timbers connected to form barriers which kept sawlogs from floating away. Logs were "brailed" or bound into rafts, and "run" or transported down the rivers.

a millman shut down, he felt that he was a sort of nonentity in the business world.³ His fortune depended upon an adequate log supply. Stored near the mills, sound logs were a pleasant sight to a sawmill man; more than that, they were symbols of security.

In order to be certain of future log supplies, some down-river millmen purchased pinelands or stumpage rights. Because of low water and "hung-up" drives, however, most millowners who owned pinelands still had occasion to purchase logs in the open market from independent logging contractors or dealers located on the rivers in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Dealers rafted logs down the Mississippi all the way to St. Louis, selling them along the way to any willing buyer. Rather than risk an uncertain market on the river, however, log dealers usually made contracts with millmen by correspondence, or sold to millowners who made special trips north to examine logs.

Millmen competed heartily to purchase the best quality logs at the most favorable prices. Young corresponded constantly to inquire about logging prospects, the success of drives, and the prices and quality of sawlogs. Contacting dealers, not only on the rivers of Wisconsin and Minnesota, but also at Saginaw, Muskegon, and other places in the lake country tributary to the great Chicago lumber market, Young tried to anticipate the condition of the midwestern lumber trade as a whole before he decided how many feet of logs he should purchase, and the price he should offer per "M" or thousand feet.⁴

In the 1860's Young bought most of his logs from dealers located on the St. Croix River, but he made purchases on other rivers as well. Local competitors Chancy Lamb, and Messrs. Hosford & Miller concentrated on the Black River for their stock. The Black River men generally offered logs earlier in the spring, and later in the fall than dealers on the

³ *Northwestern Lumberman*, Feb. 15, 1896, p. 7.

⁴ W. J. Young to E. Eldred, Milwaukee, Wis., May 13, 1865, LPB 7, p. 273. Except for one reference to the Minnesota Historical Society, all manuscript sources are from the special collection of W. J. Young & Co. papers at the State University of Iowa, Iowa City. Young wrote most all of his correspondence from Clinton. The notes designate the particular record, letter-press-book (LPB), or box where information is found.

St. Croix.⁵ Young did not look for many logs from the Wisconsin River, one of the most difficult and dangerous for log transportation. Local mills in the Wisconsin River valley sawed much of the district's timber themselves, and logs stopped coming out around 1876.⁶ In the 1860's the Chippewa River was unreliable because it lacked improvements, but the stream became one of the most important log outlets in the 1870's.⁷

Occasionally a millman quietly left town and went north to bargain for logs before his competitors had an opportunity. He might go only as far as La Crosse, or to Chippewa Falls, or further north to Taylors Falls on the St. Croix. Young described a log buying trip to one of his partners in 1863. Before he left Clinton, Young explained, he had received a report from the St. Croix stating that conditions were unfavorable and that it was doubtful that even one raft would be available. There were, however, some Black River rafts for sale at La Crosse. Also, a neighboring millowner offered to sell Young a Black River raft for \$14 per M, but hoping to buy cheaper, he refused. Young knew that his main Clinton competitor, Chancy Lamb, was already at La Crosse, and he decided to go there himself without letting any others know.⁸

Arriving at La Crosse at night, the Clinton lumberman inquired of the steamboat men who came down the river during the day how the water was above. One reported a big rise on the St. Croix with logs coming into the booms fast. Young spread this news the next morning, and intimated that he would take the next boat north. Not positive, however, that the new report of favorable conditions on the St. Croix was accurate, he decided to sound out the dealers where he was.

⁵ W. J. Young to J. D. McComb, Stillwater, Minn., Jan. 10, 1865, LPB 6, p. 524, and Sept. 6, 1865, LPB 8, p. 321. To James McKinley, Salem, Wis., June 25, 1863, LPB 4, p. 399. To F. S. Baker, Chicago, Ill., Apr. 2, 1864, LPB 5, p. 339. To C. G. Hanscome, La Crosse, Wis., July 30, 1863, LPB 4, p. 469.

⁶ W. J. Young to Jesse Spalding, Chicago, Ill., May 15, 1872, LPB 31, p. 840. Agnes M. Larson, *History of the White Pine Industry in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1949, p. 277.

⁷ W. J. Young to Samuel Tompson, Boston, Mass., Apr. 21, 1869, LPB 17, p. 476.

⁸ W. J. Young to J. N. Kinney, Cincinnati, Ohio, Sept. 2, 1863, LPB 8, pp. 4-5.

For the first hour he was quite disappointed. He could get nothing at less than \$14 per M, although Chancy Lamb had made some substantial purchases for \$12.⁹

Young finally discovered an opportunity, which he had helped create, to purchase logs. The day before Young had arrived, a customer from Burlington had purchased a raft from Messrs. Crosby & Hixon at \$13.50. When he heard Young's report of the rise on the St. Croix, he backed out of the trade. Young acted indifferent, but in less than an hour he purchased the raft, which contained most of the long logs available from Black River.¹⁰

Young failed in an attempt to get Crosby & Hixon to reserve the balance of their logs until he could go to the St. Croix and return. He had made his purchase about 10 o'clock in the morning. At noon the steamboat *General Grant* came down the river and Young learned from the captain that the rise reported previously was exaggerated and that there was no sign of more logs. He kept this to himself and bargained with Crosby & Hixon. Showing no anxiety about the rest of the logs, he tried to "beat them down" to \$11, but without success. That night, unable to sleep, Young arose, went to Mr. Hixon's house, and bought the balance of the logs at \$12.10 while the man stood "naked in his door."¹¹

Young returned to Clinton where he received a letter describing the disappointment of millmen who came to La Crosse from as far as St. Louis to find nothing to buy. Young was elated with his purchase. He was indeed a shrewd buyer. By comparison, he was astonished at the course set by captain Cyrus G. Bradley whom he once authorized to purchase logs at Stillwater. Young heard that Bradley arrived there, proclaimed that he wanted to buy four million feet of logs, and that the price immediately advanced one dollar per thousand feet!¹²

Young occasionally employed an agent to purchase logs for him at Stillwater. He instructed agent James D. McComb to

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* "Long logs" generally meant those longer than 26 feet.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

secure only the best logs, even if the price was higher than usual.¹³ Young purchased by telegraph at times when millmen rushed the market and compelled hasty decisions. Ordinarily he made a trip or negotiated by mail. Usually he would not make an offer before the log dealer set a price.¹⁴ He also requested the seller to describe the logs in terms of how many taken together averaged 1,000 feet—usually two and one-half to four and one-half. In order to fulfill contracts for large timbers, Young often made special purchases of logs 26 feet and longer. The trees were almost without exception either white or Norway pine. If there was a mixture, the proportion of each might be stated.

Young was quick to inform dealers of their competition, hoping he could obtain lower prices. Once he offered to buy some logs from Hersey & Bean on the St. Croix at a low price. Informing them that he had just received a telegram saying that everybody was driving on Black River, and that there was a big rise on the Chippewa, Young probably smiled to himself as he added: "Do not let this influence you."¹⁵

The Clinton lumberman wrote lectures to dealers, explaining that lumber sold so low in Chicago that Mississippi millmen could not compete unless log prices came down. It would be cheaper to buy lumber in Chicago and retail it in the West. Until the pineries which fed Chicago were exhausted, their competition governed the trade. "The contest is not between millmen & logmen," Young maintained, "but between the Mississippi & the lakes." He might end his letter with a threat: "So unless the price of logs comes down, we will be obliged to stop our mills . . . One thing is sure. We can purchase [sawed lumber] in Chicago as cheap as others can."¹⁶

Prices of logs varied according to soundness and length, long logs being more valuable than short ones. The price also

¹³ W. J. Young to J. D. McComb, Stillwater, Minn., May 21, 1866, LPB 10, p. 54.

¹⁴ W. J. Young & Co. to William F. Price, n.p., Jan. 9, 1863, LPB 3, p. 535.

¹⁵ W. J. Young to Hersey & Bean, Stillwater, Minn., June 18, 1877, LPB 51, p. 912.

¹⁶ W. J. Young to Hersey, Staples & Bean, Stillwater, Minn., July 1, 1869, LPB 18, p. 336; and July 8, 1869, LPB 18, p. 425; and July 27, 1869, LPB 18, p. 570.

reflected the location where the buyer received his purchase, and whether or not the logs were already brailed. Dealers sold logs on the bank, ready to drive; loose in booms, ready to brail; brailed, ready to run; or delivered at the mill. The party handling the transportation usually had the logs at his risk until they reached their destination. Rafting late in the fall involved the risk of being caught in ice and "froze-up," or run aground. Prices also depended, of course, on supply and demand, and periods of high and low water affected them.

Young made most of his purchases at definite prices, but logs purchased far in advance of the time set for delivery might have a price adjustable to that of sawed lumber at the time the logs were received. In 1875, for example, A. & D. D. McMillan agreed to sell to W. J. Young & Company all their logs that season at \$10.50 per M. The contract provided, however, that if the price of common lumber advanced \$1.00 the logs would sell for \$11.00; if lumber advanced \$2.00, the logs would be \$11.50. But if common lumber depreciated in value, the logs would be sold for \$10.¹⁷

Similarly, dealers might make log prices adjustable to those prevailing in the log market at the time of delivery. Young was willing to buy under such terms provided that both parties took their chances on the condition of the market. The dealer had to send the logs along as fast as they became available; not hold them back in anticipation of rising prices. If the millman counted on receiving the logs, holding them back could upset his calculations in keeping an adequate stock on hand.¹⁸ In order to prevent disputes over the market value of logs, contracts provided that "neutrals" should decide.¹⁹

Large contracts usually called for several payments within a stipulated length of time. Young frequently paid in three installments at 30, 60, and 90 days. The largest contracts could call for a dozen or more payments, the last one being

¹⁷ Agreement of April 22, 1875 in Box 173; and W. J. Young to A. & D. D. McMillan, La Crosse, Wis., Apr. 24, 1875, LPB 43. p. 335.

¹⁸ W. J. Young to C. C. Washburn, La Crosse, Wis., Apr. 22, 1867, LPB 12, p. 37.

¹⁹ Agreement between W. J. Young & Co. and J. H. Ross, La Crosse, Wis., Feb. 22, 1869, Box 91-A.

more than a year from the date of the sale. Contracts might provide that payments could extend beyond the stipulated period of time, but require about ten per cent interest on the balance due. Payments might be once a month in a series extending through the winter and into the following spring. The winter months of December, January, and February might be excluded, probably because lumber sales were light during those months, and at such times millmen were often short of cash.²⁰

Sales agreements sometimes called for payments prior to receiving the logs. This was particularly true if one bargained for logs which were not yet cut. The dealer or contractor needed cash to purchase supplies for loggers in the woods. Young was cautious about making too many contracts ahead if they required advance payments. If logs were available, cash bought them at the market price. If low water prevented logs from coming out, he still had his money. When drives failed, logs accumulated in the streams. They eventually came out in a rush, and the price fell. Cash still bought logs, and there was a choice of rivers.²¹

Problems occasionally arose after logs were delivered. Logs that looked good on the outside could have rotten centers. If a large portion of the logs he received contained decayed areas, or were badly bored by brailing, Young might protest and delete from his payment an amount in proportion to the defective timber. In order to dispel all doubts as to the justice of his claim, Young invited dealers to come, watch the logs being sawed, and see for themselves how much sound lumber materialized.²² The dealers, too busy to visit the forceful Clinton business man, tended to accept his incomplete payments and drop the matter.

²⁰ Information on the terms of log purchases is compiled from approximately 150 of Young's agreements as found in his correspondence and records of the company.

²¹ W. J. Young to Luther Wyckoff, Taylors Falls, Minn., Aug. 3, 1863, LPB 4, p. 478. To C. H. Whiting, Taylors Falls, Minn., Aug. 22, 1863, LPB 4, p. 531. To J. D. McComb, Stillwater, Minn., Feb. 9, 1865, LPB 6, p. 605. To G. C. Hixon, La Crosse, Wis., June 25, 1865, LPB 6, p. 560.

²² W. J. Young to Bronson & Folsom, Stillwater, Minn., Nov. 11, 1873, LPB 33, p. 179.

Disputes sometimes arose over discrepancies in scaling. Scalers estimated the number of board feet in logs by measuring them with a scale rule calibrated to allow for the tapering of the trunks. The two instruments most commonly used were Scribner's rule and Doyle's rule.²³ Both rules were originally used by loggers in the northeastern states. The Scribner rule tended to read less board feet in logs of large diameters than did the Doyle scale. The State of Minnesota made the Scribner rule the standard in 1854, and Wisconsin adopted it in 1871.²⁴ According to the *Northwestern Lumberman* trade journal, the Doyle scale eventually replaced the Scribner rule, and beginning in 1872; *Scribner's Lumber and Log Book* actually contained the Doyle scale.²⁵ Altogether there were at least forty-four other scales which were used at various times at the discretion of each owner. Some of them called for more skill on the part of the scaler than others, but no method was absolutely accurate, and tests showed significant discrepancies in the measurements of different scalers using Scribner's rule on the same logs.²⁶

After scalers measured the logs, the dealers sent the scale bill, or measurements, to the buyers. Young had incoming logs scaled over again, and if he was dissatisfied with the accuracy of the scale bill, he negotiated for an adjustment in price. In 1875, for example, the millman purchased nineteen rafts of logs from Hersey, Staples and Bean of Stillwater, leading dealers on the St. Croix. Jerry E. McKusick, the Surveyor General of Stillwater,²⁷ filled out scale bills which showed the rafts to contain 13,015,141 feet. Young had the logs scaled by W. A. Thayer, who had 20 years of experience. Thayer

²³ Robert F. Fries, *Empire in Pine, the Story of Lumbering in Wisconsin 1830-1900* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1951), p. 38.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; William G. Rector, *Log Transportation in the Lake States Lumber Industry 1840-1918* (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1953), pp. 81-82.

²⁵ *Northwestern Lumberman*, Aug. 21, 1886, p. 3.

²⁶ Rector, *Log Transportation*, p. 82.

²⁷ The states of Wisconsin and Minnesota were divided into logging districts, each with a chief log inspector or Surveyor General, who could subdivide his district and appoint deputies to assist him. See Fries, *Empire in Pine*, p. 39; and Rector, *Log Transportation*, p. 84.

did not view the original scale bill, but set to work, and announced that the logs amounted to 12,105,315 feet, a difference of 909,826 feet (or more than a good sized raft) as compared to the St. Croix scale.²⁸

Young suggested that the dealers and the Surveyor General come and examine the logs with Thayer, or that they agree upon a neutral scaler.²⁹ McKusick replied that there could be no mistake in the scaling at Stillwater. Young answered, "Your remarks relative to scale of logs shows a very large amt [sic] of self confidence, bordering on a doctrine I do not believe in, viz infalability [sic]." Again he invited the official to come and witness his work being checked by a first-class scaler from either Black River or the Chippewa, but the Surveyor General never made the trip.³⁰

Of a different transaction, Young stated to Hersey, Staples and Bean that he did not insinuate that Mr. McKusick intended to "beat us in scale," but that a difference in measurements made it necessary for him to ask a reduction in his bill, or for someone to visit his mills.³¹ Hersey, Staples and Bean offered no concessions, although Young told them that along the Mississippi River there was a general complaint about scaling on the St. Croix, and unless a radical change took place, he would have to buy in other markets.³²

The Clinton lumberman was probably justified in his complaints. In 1886 the *Northwestern Lumberman* commented that the St. Croix logs were notorious along the Mississippi River because they did not saw their scale. David Joyce, Young's competitor from nearby Lyons, Iowa, once offered to pay double for any raft already measured if it did not fall short when sawed at a good mill. If it sawed short, he would get the raft free. There were no takers.³³

²⁸ LPB 44, pp. 670-71.

²⁹ W. J. Young to J. E. McKusick, Stillwater, Minn., Aug 21, 1875, LPB 44, p. 592.

³⁰ W. J. Young to J. E. McKusick, Stillwater, Minn., Aug 21, 1875, LPB 44, p. 592.

³¹ W. J. Young to Hersey, Staples and Bean, Stillwater, Minn., Sept. 21, 1875, LPB 44, p. 973.

³² W. J. Young to Hersey, Staples and Bean, Stillwater, Minn., Sept. 29, 1875, LPB 45, p. 97.

³³ *Northwestern Lumberman*, July 17, 1886, p. 2.

In the 1860's Young occasionally made log purchases by means of agreements or contracts whereby he provided loggers with supplies and cash payments which enabled them to operate in the woods. Young did not own the pine to be cut; he merely furnished assistance and shared the profits of logging and rafting. The logger agreed to cut, haul, bank, and mark a stipulated number of feet of logs, and to register the mark at the office of the Surveyor General. He also arranged to have the logs rafted to Clinton, and kept a detailed account of the costs. The parties put no fixed value on the logs, but Young agreed to pay the average market price asked at Clinton at the time of delivery, minus the amount of his previous expenses. The logger then divided the resulting profit evenly with Young.³⁴

In 1863 W. J. Young & Company invested \$6,309.55 in a logger named William Gillmore, who had cut 1,700,000 to 1,800,000 feet of timber. The table which follows shows the expenses and resulting profit.

LOGGING EXPENSES AND THE RESULTING PROFIT

Value of logs where they lay	\$3.71 per M feet
Driving into boom	.40
Boomage	.60
Fitting, or making up raft, and scaling	.63
	—
Cost ready to run from Stillwater	5.34
Running to Clinton	2.25
	—
Cost of logs at Clinton to Gillmore	7.59
Estimated market value at Clinton	11.00
Minus actual expenses	7.59
	—
Resulting profit to be divided	3.41

Source: W. J. Young to J. N. Kinney, Cincinnati, Ohio, July 30, 1863, LPB 8, p. 2.

³⁴ Articles of Agreement between William Gillmore, Taylors Falls, Minn., and W. J. Young & Co., Nov. 14, 1862, Box 162; and between Cyrus G. Bradley, Polk County, Wis., and W. J. Young & Co., Oct. 10, 1863, Box 162.

The profits from this type of contract were sometimes lucrative, but they were never certain. The logger might fail to haul the logs out of the woods, or a flood might scatter them so that they would never get to a mill. Even if they did eventually reach the saw, stranded logs depreciated greatly from rot and attacks by worms, and the expenses of retrieving them were often prohibitive.³⁵ Contracts partially fulfilled, and overdue logs led to disputes. In 1864 Young wrote to the logging partnership, Gillmore & Smith, asking what had happened to the one million feet called for in a contract of 1860.³⁶ Young doubted Gillmore's honesty, and apparently was apprehensive lest the logger cheat him by disposing of some of his logs to other parties who might be willing to bid up the price.³⁷ Logs were scarce and expensive in 1864 because the wartime shortage of labor curtailed the amount cut, while extreme drought and low water prevented successful drives.³⁸

Young had friends watch closely so that no "sharp games" were played in 1864, and in 1865 he was present himself when the Gillmore-Smith logs came into the boom at Stillwater. A dispute promptly developed. Gillmore wanted to receive the market price for all available logs, but to postpone dividing the profits. Some logs had been delayed, and he did not wish to list his expenses before they came into the boom. But Young, unwilling to wait, demanded a settlement on the spot. As he later explained, ". . . I was confident that if the two thieves figured up the cost of the adventure that there would be no profits for us."³⁹

Rather than turn the matter into a lawsuit, the men agreed to allow others to arbitrate. The upshot was that Young purchased the logs from Gillmore at a price low enough to allow the Clinton lumberman a share of the profits, and he

³⁵ Rector, *Log Transportation*, p. 184.

³⁶ W. J. Young to William Gillmore, Stillwater, Minn., July 14, 1864, LPB 6, p. 31.

³⁷ W. J. Young to J. N. Kinney, Cincinnati, Ohio, July 30, 1863, LPB 8, p. 1.

³⁸ Rector, *Log Transportation*, p. 192.

³⁹ W. J. Young to J. N. Kinney, Cincinnati, Ohio, June 16, 1865, LPB 7, p. 460.

also received interest on his advance payments. Thus matters were closed between them, and Young triumphantly wrote: "The scoundrels got beat at last, and will come out behind because the logs yet back may not come out for years."⁴⁰ He also explained that he had arranged to have other parties advise Gillmore to settle out of court, and to suggest who the arbiters should be: "all my friends," Mr. Staples, Mr. Cover, and Mr. Clark.⁴¹ Gillmore apparently offered no objection to the choice of arbiters, and while there is no reason to doubt their integrity, it is also improbable that Mr. Young took any untoward chances as to whether or not justice would prevail.

In conclusion, the 1860's saw millmen competing heartily to obtain logs at low prices. They made secret trips to purchase, bargained vigorously, and tried to "beat down" the sellers in price. Young tried to save money by withholding payments on defective logs, and argued over the accuracy of scaling. In the 1860's log purchasing was a highly competitive activity. In the 1870's, however, many millmen invested in pine lands and established the Mississippi River Logging Company and affiliated organizations. W. J. Young was the first vice president, and before 1910 the home of the company was in Clinton.⁴² Organized to furnish raw material cheaply and efficiently, the articles of incorporation stated that the members associated for the purpose of "logging, driving, buying, and selling logs . . ." ⁴³ Since the company carried on operations of a magnitude beyond the capacity of any single millman, most of them participated in the "pool," and most of the old competition in log purchasing disappeared.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² George W. Hotchkiss, *History of the Lumber and Forest Industry of the Northwest* (Chicago: George W. Hotchkiss Co., 1898), p. 635. Matthew G. Norton, *The Mississippi River Logging Company, An Historical Sketch* (n. p., 1912), p. 90.

⁴³ The large "Manifest Book" in the W. J. Young & Co. collection contains an imprint of the original articles in handwriting, dated Jan. 2, 1871. The purpose expressed by one of the members is found in the Mississippi River Logging Co. papers, Minute Book, Volume 1, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minn.

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