

LOG DRIVING IN FRANCE

R. D. Morris (ex-16)

On the entrance of America into the great war, following the example of England and at the instigation of the United States Forest Service our government immediately started the organization of lumbering units to supply the needs of her army.

The first of these units was the 10th Engineers which was mobilized at Washington, D. C., during July and August, 1917, and which was composed of lumber jacks, millmen, and foresters, enlisted from the lumbering regions of the U. S. As the plan at first was to attach this unit to the British army, it was transported to Europe on an English vessel, the *Carpathia*, which sailed the 10th of September and landed at Glasgow, Scotland, the 2nd of October. The men of the 10th were the first Americans to land there along with the 2nd Engineers. From there the 10th was immediately shipped to Southampton, England, to await transportation to France.

After four days' wait at Southampton they were taken to La Havre, France, and from there to Nevers, France, where they remained three weeks while their equipment was being assembled and distributed among the different companies and detachments.

During the passage from America to England, however, it was decided that the U. S. army needed the foresters for themselves so from Nevers they were sent by companies and detachments to different parts of France where the Americans had purchased timber.

Companies B, C and part of company A were sent to Pontenx Les Forges in the Landes district, where, at the request of her captain, Co. B. received a tract the farthest of any from the railroad. It was decided that the logs might be driven about four miles on the Courant River in case the timber was found to be buoyant enough. After an insufficient test the captain decided it was.

The timber was maritime pine (*Pinus maritima*) and closely resembled our Southern pines but was heavier, more brittle and more resinous. It had all been turpented heavily for many years. The middle cuts of the trees did float, but extremely low, while the tops which were cut to a top diameter of 4 feet, for the most part went to the bottom and had to be pulled out, peeled, and decked to dry. A large percentage of the butts which were scarred from constant turpentineing and were heavy with pitch, as a consequence also became deadheads and had to be pulled out and decked.

The low buoyancy of the timber made driving hard, as they jammed more easily in the shallow places and because so few of them would carry a man the drivers needed to be extremely nimble and quick on their feet and usually got soaked all over before the day was finished. The cheaper and more practical way would have been to railroad them.

The river itself was small and shallow with sandy bottoms and banks which shifted constantly, causing a continuous need of improvement to keep it driveable. It was also crooked which necessitated a large number of sheer booms to protect the banks. On the upper end of the driving part the water was faster, with several rocky riffles where wing dams were put in to deepen the water enough to permit the passage of the logs.

When the drive first started the river had alternating pools and shallows. After a few months' driving the sand had washed from the shallows into the pool so the river was practically the same depth everywhere and that depth was too shallow.

Every time the logs jammed, the water washed the sand from the banks, widening the river and throwing up a sand bar just below the jam. To remove this a couple of wing dams had to be built, which made the water run fast enough to clear the bar.

The logs were discharged from the river into a lake across which the logs had to be rafted for about one-half mile to the mill.

The river had built up a small delta at its mouth through which were three different channels. The logs were confined to one channel by a double row of sheer booms on each side of the river, which were held in place by piling driven about 10 feet or 12 feet apart. The other two channels were dammed to give sufficient flowage to carry the logs into the lake.

The trail booms for rafting the logs were fastened to the last piling on either side of the river. These were made of fifteen boomsticks each, fastened together by chains and dogs. The sticks were 25 feet long and of the largest trees.

As the channel at the mouth was only about 20 feet wide, in order to change trails a rope was fastened to an end of the full trail and to one of an empty trail, the rope flung to men on the opposite side who pulled it across, closing the full trail and swinging the empty into place where it was fastened by ropas. The full trail was then closed and allowed to drift into the lake where it was picked up by the launch and towed to the mill.

As these trail sticks soon became water logged it was necessary to keep a supply of about 50 extra sticks on hand. The wet ones were pulled out and dried. The trail sticks were all peeled.

During the rainy season, from October until May, the driving wasn't so hard as there was a fair flow of water, but during the summer months when no rain fell the larger logs would drag the bottom in many places, causing numerous jams and in places had to be either rolled or shoved through.

Driving was also made disagreeable by sand sifting into the shoes and stockings where it had an action on the skin similar to what a rasp would have. It was especially bad in between the toes where its presence was followed by an absence of cuticle.

Another disadvantage was our inability to obtain caulks for our shoes which caused a lot of unnecessary and undesirable baths, especially when the water was cold. The best driving shoes we had were the regulation army, hob-nailed boots, and hobnails don't stick extra well on logs especially where the bark is loose or missing.

The French people whom we encountered along the river seemed to think it scandalous for us to get as wet as we did and some of them used to tell us we would get sick and die, mentioning for proof the case of a man who fell in about twenty years ago and died from the effects of his wetting. However, the French peasants aren't used to external applications of water so we attributed his death to that cause. At any rate, none of us suffered any ill effects aside from a few twinges of rheumatism.

The work itself would not have been so hard and disagreeable if we had had sufficient equipment and tools to work with, and this I think was due to the inability and inefficiency of our company commander.

(Editor's Note—The only reason the editor let this paragraph in Morris' story get by was because one night Morris and the editor returned to camp at Nevers, France, about three minutes late and were met at the gate by the company commander who politely informed them that in consequence of their tardiness they would be restricted to camp for a few days and would be requested to do a little extra labor. Therefore the above is "my sentiments.")

The annual banquet of the Forestry Club was held April 29, at the Hotel Sheldon-Munn. This banquet marked the return of pre-war activities as none had been given since the spring of '17. "Ping Bode" acted as toastmaster this year.