

## Riding the Logs of the Obey

By Darren Shell

If one takes the time to drive a boat or personal watercraft up or down this long and wonderful lake, it is difficult to imagine that these winding hollows were once only a vast section of valley land with rivers and large creeks flowing ever downstream. It is hard to imagine that in the late 1800s and very early 1900s, dozens of hard-working family men cut and sawed logs along this river, making a living selling lumber all along the banks of this once-rich timberland near this pristine valley of rivers and streams. Men from many walks of life traversed these shores, living a life few could understand...and even fewer could endure. Yet, they loved it.

From the miles far above East Port Marina, to the last few feet of Obey River as it met the Cumberland in Celina, this long and winding, cool and clear, ever swirling body of crystal clear water provided a navigational path for millions of board-feet of hardwood lumber for decades and decades.

These unlikely men knew every inch of this river system. Every shoal had a name. Every bend of the river was named and sometimes cursed in the often-harsh and rough bending current. These men knew the homes near shore and the families that lived therein. They knew where cattle could board certain boats and where high water could threaten downstream travel. They were savvy souls, crafty folk, making their living in the ever-changing currents of the Obey River Valley. And their voices could be heard far and wide as each turbulent bend of the river was navigated. Their long, bound-up barge of tied logs had huge oars tied to each end (fore and aft), which helped to keep the bound and staved craft from being splintered upon shore. Captains shouted commands to both fore and aft rowers, thus protecting both craft and those aboard from impending danger of crash. One of the most relished calls was "DO EASE", which meant "ease from rowing", or "rest". It was a call longed for by those exhausted from the river rowing. It was a small break from the ever-constant lefts and rights of the ever-bending river. It was a well-deserved break for those in charge of this craft's safe navigation. "DO EASE" was a joyous call.

In addition to the trading of the logs, often times rafts were large enough to actually carry the weight of many other trade items. For instance, chickens often made this long journey down the Obey, both for egg-laying benefits as well as a meal source of their own. Hogs, rabbits, and other wild game were frequently traded at river-stops. Boarding houses popped up at these locations early on, and families did their best to not only help those in the logging trade, but also prosper from their ever-constant trade of business up and down the river. There was an ever-changing and constantly-renewed flow of people along the Obey that provided commerce for these tiny and remote civilizations along it. It was a life source for these folks. The river somehow supplemented everything in their lives that was not already accessible. It was the stronghold of the entire community. And those that chose to call it home, loved it.

These river stops, or ports, became business trade centers in their days. Each special spot had its own different set of attributes. From the very upper forks of each branch of the Obey, to the last port near Celina, life was enhanced by river trade.

So with these thoughts in mind, I've decided that in this article, I would take us on a river logging trip. My historical views will be in the form of travel. We'll start at the juncture of the east and west forks of the Obey...East Port Dock. For those of you wishing to make a day of this...I suggest Clyde and Vicky's breakfast menu at East Port's Restaurant. And, oh yeah, fill up with gas too.

From there (full tank and full belly), we traverse past the Taylor Ford, a designated camping area just down stream. Its location on this shallow red clay point makes it an easy stop where the old road enters the ford across the river on its way southward. Tip your hat to the laborers helping load straw on another raft.

We navigate a few more miles and find Sunset Marina. Is it time for lunch yet? All this rowing makes me hungry.

Shortly thereafter, maybe a couple of miles, the great Eagle Creek enters our river stretch, enhancing water flow and clarity in the river. We then pass Gum Grove with its red buoys and few houses along shore these days. Of course, we can't see them along the old river we are traveling. And shortly, we pass the Lower Harrison School in the mouth of Jouett Creek. Just watch the kids waving at us ruffians on this old log raft. Ah, to be young again.

Soon, we pass Armstrong's Pier at the town of Lillydale. Colonel James Armstrong fixes the many "brokens" along the river. His port is always well stocked both from and for the logging folk.

From here, it's on to Willow Grove, our largest town on our journey. We hear the church bell sounding at the Church of Christ, and watch the kids rushing from pews to swings. I think I can smell fried chicken and white beans.

Now, we are off to Fox Springs, a small community at the mouth of Mitchell Creek. The little schoolhouse looks so quaint right along side the old wooden bridge. Just look at the fresh strawberries filling the tiny crates. Maybe we could make a quick stop and visit.

The next stop is the always fascinating Davis Landing, where Cedar Hill Marina is now located. Captain James K. P. Davis maintained his pier on this special point, and eventually married into the Dale family so prominent on this southern stretch of river.

From there, we navigate the Barksdale and Peterman Bend, where the graves of William Dale and his wife Rachel Irons Dale once overlooked the river they loved. Now, if we could just jump this huge chunk of concrete dam, we could dump ourselves into the Cumberland.

And there you have it! Forty-plus miles of river enjoyment...navigated as if the names of old helped us along... names like Smith, Parris, Hull, Rich, and Kyle...and many, many others too numerous to count. Names like these filled this stretch of river like the trees they logged.

Normally in these articles, I leave you with my "Views" as I see them in my mind. But in this story, I will leave you with two poetic verses which say all that need be said. The first of which is a snippet from Tennyson's "Brook". Though quite old, it is brilliant in any age. The second is a poem of my own. I hope these poems touch your heart, and I hope that you've all enjoyed your trip.

"I chatter, chatter as I go  
to join the brimming of the river...  
for men may come and men may go,  
but I go on for ever."

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### **By the Light of the Logger's Moon**

Darren Shell 2006

By the light of the moon  
in early June,  
I watched the darkness deepen.

When the light went away,  
and shadows stayed,  
and I watched the river glisten...

I drifted down river,  
and felt a quiver,  
as voices of old awakened.

I heard "Do Ease"  
amid the trees  
when I took the time to listen.

I heard splashing oars  
and loathsome chores  
as staves and logs were fastened.

“Tie those logs...  
drive those cogs...  
don't let those square knots loosen!

“We'll drift away  
at break of day  
after the rains have fallen.

“Currents will pull  
our cargo full  
of logs down the Obey swollen.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Now I wonder if others  
would ever bother  
to hear those haunting words...

To hear the men,  
both now and then,  
that waded the river fords.

To deliver logs  
down river bogs  
to feed their family fleet.

By selling wood  
as best they could  
by dollars and board-feet.

But I hear their words...  
amid frogs and birds...  
I hear that haunting tune.

As I drift along  
in silent song  
by the light of a logger's moon.

