



Elderkin Raft of Cumberland

By Oralee O'Byrne

Lumber was as important to the Parrsboro area, as gold in the 1800's. It was the lumber that started the shipbuilding industry here. In the early 1800's England was running out of trees to supply building lumber but Nova Scotia had lots. So the Englishmen sent people here to cut trees, build boats and bring the wood back to England. Soon other places started to buy lumber from Nova Scotia so more ships were built and more trees cut and more people moved into the area to work and build houses and stores. That is what brought many of your families here years ago.

It cost a lot to build ships and hire sailors to transport the lumber so lumbermen decided to try building log rafts and towing them down to places like New York and Boston.

One of the first log rafts built in this area was built by a man from New Brunswick named Mr Robinson in 1888 in Joggins. It was 700 ft long, 30 feet tall on the end and 80 feet tall in the center and weighed 15,000 pounds. The first time they tried to launch it, it rolled and dug into the mud and they had to rebuild it. Finally it was launched but the hawser which attached it to the tug snapped and the raft burst into pieces. Another raft was built a bit smaller and towed to New York in 10 days.

In 1908 a big raft was built in Port Greville by a man named Mr. Elderkin. It had 7,000 logs on it and was sent to New York. Some people say the raft was towed all the way but others say it floated on its own in the currents. Either way it had a crew of 7 men who rode on it and made it to New York where the lumber was used to build the wharfs in New York city.

These rafts meant a lot of lumber could be sent away for a much cheaper price and the men could make more money. A part of one of the chains from this big raft is at our museum in Port Greville. It was bought by Mr. Wagstaff who owned a big shipyard in Port Greville and he used the chain as a brake when launching smaller ships because it is so big and heavy. The big rafts made moving lumber less expensive and became quite common in many areas because it was so much cheaper. Now a lot of lumber is moved by logging trucks like we see around here. On the pacific coast, in places like Washington state and parts of British Columbia, lumber rafts are still occasionally used to ship lumber along the coast.

This article written by Oralee O'Byrne-Executive Director, Age of Sail Heritage Centre and Museum, Port Greville was published in the Cumberland Forestry Advisory Committee, April 2021 Newsletter.



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