Ruins of a Forgotten Highway

A steamer maneuvers past a log drive.
MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Dams in Context: part 1

Army Corps work on the St. Croix coincided with the busiest commercial period in the river's history. Logging reached its peak in the 1880s and 1890s. Railroads continued their spread north and west, reaching places like Duluth and Hayward in the early 1880s. Permanent settlement increased, facilitated by land now cleared of trees and the new transportation routes. It was a time of rapid change.

A Growing St. Croix Valley

The Corps' survey and planning work began on the St. Croix with approval from Congress in the 1873 Rivers and Harbors Act. Improvement projects were authorized five years later. During the decades after the Civil War, river and harbor legislation was one of the primary means for the federal government to subsidize local trade, the other important subsidization being railway land grants. In particular, river navigation projects throughout the Mississippi River watershed were strongly supported by Midwestern farmers and commercial interests in river towns that sought to balance the economic power of railroads with cheaper water-borne alternatives.

Navigation improvements were a boon to the river towns of the St. Croix. Reliable steamboat service, dependent on a minimum three-foot channel, allowed these communities to become regional hubs for commerce and trade. Farmers traveled to nearby towns like Taylors Falls, Osceola, Franconia, and Marine Mills to send their valuable crops to market on steam packets, a cheaper form of transportation than railroads. Predictable navigation and farmer prosperity also spurred the growth of river town businesses which provided those same farmers with necessary goods and luxuries for their homesteads. River town merchants, steamboat captains, and farmers were the chief champions of navigation improvements. They argued the cost effectiveness of river travel and hoped to alleviate the negative impact of the log drives and jams that had regularly disrupted river commerce since the 1860s.

continued

Both ends of the River System

Although not their principal intention, Corps projects contributed to the larger St. Croix system of river-control structures that enhanced log drives. Every spring, loggers progressively opened over 80 dams, releasing impoundments of water to push logs toward the main channel and the market at Stillwater. Through this process, they created over 800 miles of drivable river, from a natural system that originally had 100 floatable miles, and enabled many more logs to be brought to market than the unaltered flow would have allowed.

While logging companies and their crews were damming the upper river and its tributaries to make it drivable for buoyant and valuable white pine, the Corps maintained the common highway where the tide of logs converged. The dredging on Lake St. Croix and the construction of wing dams near Hudson and Afton also facilitated the logging industry, creating a more predictable path for the massive lumber rafts that had been assembled at the Boom Site and were floating to downstream markets. Improvements to the navigation channel on the lower river closed off sloughs, impacted islands, and scoured away sand bars, but they were not enough to prevent some of the largest log jams in the valley's history.

Dredging on the St. Croix circa 1910.
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