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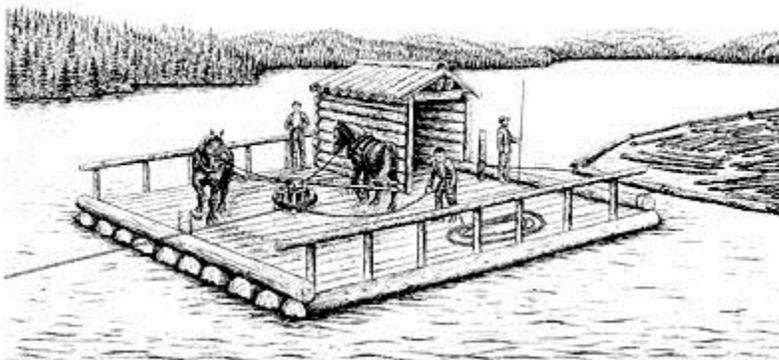
## **Alligators plied Nipissings waters**

In the 1870s, as lumbermen invaded the forests of Northern Ontario, an effective method of moving logs across water and downstream to sawmills was required.

Before steam power was adapted to the task, a "cadge crib" -a large horse powered raft-was used (see drawing, below).

A spindle (capstand) through the centre of the raft was turned by horses, winding (warping) a heavy rope which was anchored ahead or snubbed to shore. The cadge crib was attached to a group of logs (a "bag") surrounded by a circle of logs chained end to end (a "boom").

When the horses walked in a circle, they wound the rope around the spindle and moved the crib and logs ahead. The process continued until the logs were moved into moving water, if available, and on to the mill for sawing.



Horse powered cadge crib-drawing by Christine Kerrigan, in the "Algonquin Park Logging Museum Handbook."

In the early 1890s former Norfolk County Member of Parliament and lumberman, Joseph Jackson, had a logging operation in Hardy Township, below the mouth of the French River. He wanted a steam powered vessel that could do much the same thing as the cadge crib, but could also warp itself over portages and around rapids when moving logs from one small lake to another.

**Impossible feat?**

It appeared to be an impossible engineering feat until Jackson contacted acquaintances, John West and James Peachey, in Simcoe. They owned a metal fabrication plant and foundry and made boilers and other steam related equipment.

West put together a team that designed a prototype "steam warping tug" (see drawing).

The boat was basically a flat-bottomed scow, made of three-inch white oak and driven by two paddlewheels. The power came from a simple, upright, single-cylinder wood burning steam engine. A clutch allowed the power to be shifted from the paddlewheels to a winch, which could warp a cable like the rope on the cage crib. Two heavy oak rudders, capped with steel, were added to the bottom of the boat so it could be pulled onto and over land when the cable was attached ahead and wound up.



Alligator warping a log boom. Courtesy of the Friends of Algonquin Park, as in drawing above.

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The West and Peachey business revolutionized the logging industry by producing dozens of these tugs. West and Peachey themselves built over 200 in three different sizes from 1889-1934. Richard Tatley, in his book Northern Steamboats, called the tugs "squat, ugly and slow" but "cheap, powerful and effective." They usually used only five men and paid for themselves in only one season.

The West and Peachey prototype was brought to North Bay by flatcar on the CPR in 1889 and driven across Lake Nipissing to the French River and down to Hardy Township. The name painted on the side of the boat was very appropriate for this amphibious craft: "Alligator." From that point on, all such boats became commonly known as alligators instead of the official "steam warping tug."

After six successful years of work, the Simcoe British Canadian newspaper reported that the "Alligator" was involved in a "sad catastrophe."

### **catastrophe**

On the morning of May 29th, 1895 the "Alligator" left her winter work station and headed upstream to the Chaudière at the mouth of the French River. At the Persia Rapids, one of the

most dangerous on the route, the five man crew ran a cable 2,000 feet to the top of the rapids and tied it to a large tree in preparation for the ascent. They had done this before in previous years.

With four men on board and one on shore, the "Alligator" was about half way up the rapids when a heavy swell hit her. The deck and engine separated from the hull and she went under water. The force pulled the huge tree into the river, and everything hurtled down to the whirlpool at the bottom of the rapids. Miraculously, all of the men, except Angus MacEacheren, survived. The man on shore reached Angus with a pike pole, but Angus could not hold on and slipped away.

The Hardy Lumber Company later bought two more West and Peachey "Gators," the "Hardy" and the "Victoria."

Numerous other alligators, too numerous to mention here, plied the waters of Lake Nipissing and its rivers and tributaries over the years.

The Gordon Lumber Company at Cache Bay (1900-1965) had several alligators over the years. The appropriately named "Turtle (I)" (1892-1905) was used to pick up tows from the ill-fated John Fraser. The "Turtle (II)" served into the 1920s. Other names remembered are the Castor, the Mafeking, the Grasshopper, the Nighthawk and the Temagami.

Some alligators were produced by people other than West and Peachey. In 1908 the Gordon Company approached Sturgeon Falls boat builder Fred Clark, from the remarkable Clark family, to build an alligator called the "Veuve." Clark later built several other alligators and steam boats. The "Veuve" lasted a decade and was replaced by the Whitney (1918-1937) which ran for twenty years and was replaced by the Whitney II (1938-1955).

Improvement in alligator construction is indicated by the fact that the Whitney III (1945-1965) was steel-hulled and diesel driven. Paddlewheels had been replaced by propellers as an option many years before, making the boats six feet narrower and more maneuverable.

The Whitney III was built by the Russell Brothers Company of Owen Sound, which replaced West and Peachey as the main producer of alligators.

J.R. Booth at Wasi Falls, and most other companies, had various alligators over the years. Booth had the West and Peachey "Lorne Hall" as early as 1895, and the Fred Clark "Wisawasa" in 1909.

Next week I will profile the John B. Smith and Sons Lumber Company alligator, the Woodchuck.

It was not only the last alligator on Lake Nipissing, but apparently the last steam boat.

We will also look at the three remaining alligators that are now Ontario museum pieces and are available to see if you are interested.