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Idaho history: The Payette River is beautiful but deadly

The Payette River is notorious for the number of lives it has taken over the years. In Idaho's early days, most of those who drowned in its cold swirling waters were brave men driving logs down the river to saw mills below. In our time, it is those who use the river for sport who die while kayaking or rafting. The Payette has also taken its toll of motorists who went off the road into its rushing water.

Before logging railroads were built into Idaho's mountains, floating logs down rivers was the only way to get them to the mill. Log drives took place in spring and early summer when streams were at flood stage from melting snow. Obstructions in the river, usually protruding rocks, could cause logs to pile up and jam together. That is when the log drivers had to jump in among them with long spiked poles called peaveys and try to pry them loose.

Despite their spiked boots, necessary for running along slippery logs and jumping from one to another, loggers often fell into the water where they could drown or be crushed between logs. To follow a log drive down river, crews used dories, wooden boats that were pointed at both ends with high prows and sterns.

Called "bateaus" (bateaux), French for "boats," these distinctive river craft followed the lumber industry and its log drives across the continent, from eastern Canada and New England to the forests of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, and eventually reached Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and California.

On August 5, 1876, the Idaho Statesman reported: "A young man named Walter J. Dingley was drowned June 28th just above the North Fork of the Payette while engaged in driving logs for Messrs. Warriner & Downs of the Cold Springs lumber mills at Emmettsville." The body had been in the river since June when it was found and then buried at Horseshoe Bend.

Many Idaho loggers in the 19th Century were French-Canadians from Maine, like the Aveline Brothers, who floated logs down the Boise River to their sawmill in Boise. The Archambault Brothers, whose mill was on the Payette, lost one of their men in June 1885.

The Statesman printed a letter from a correspondent in Garden Valley describing what happened: "As near as I could learn, three men undertook to run a boat over a tree that had fallen across the river. They were all stripped for swimming. Before the boat struck the tree two of them jumped out, and one of them, a man named Williams, from Wisconsin, was drowned. The body has not been seen since."

Sadly, many of these "river pigs," as they were called, had never learned to swim. Williams apparently could, but in a raging river filled with rocks and floating logs, it did not save him.

In July 1881, 27-year-old J.W. Robinson, a native of Maine, was drowned in the river about 20 miles above Horseshoe Bend.

The Payette took the life of John N. Pollard in July 1903. He was driving logs for J.W. Prestel & Sons who had a saw mill at Payette. In May 1904, four more of the Prestel loggers drowned when their bateau capsized in the rapids where the South and Middle Forks of the Payette come together.

On June 1, 1907, the Statesman reported that a crew of seven men on the annual log drive down the South Fork of the Payette had drowned, and only four days later, three men had drowned while driving logs down the Boise River to the Barber Lumber Co. mill, six miles upstream from Boise.

The Barber Company had just moved to Idaho from Wisconsin. It would later become one of the parent companies of Boise Cascade.

The dangerous log drives on the Payette and the Boise were discontinued after The Idaho Northern Railway was extended up the Payette River in 1912, reaching McCall in 1914.

The Intermountain Railway was built up the Boise River and into Boise Basin by the Barber Lumber Co. in those same years, using some of the tracks laid by the U.S. Reclamation Service during construction of Arrowrock Dam.

The Payette River is still one of the most dangerous whitewater streams in the West. American Whitewater, an organization dedicated to the sport of river running, has kept statistics on the Payette River since 1978. Its Web site reports 14 fatal boating accidents on the river since that year, including two as recently as 2006 and 2007. The Payette River deserves to be treated with great respect by those who dare to accept its challenge.

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