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# Log-Driving, Maine Style

*Tracking a lost practice in the Debsconeag watershed*

**Bill Geller**



ON A COOL, LOW-CLOUD, MISTY GRAY DAY IN LATE MAY 1987, Bob Kimber and I stood in the pines above the beach overlooking the Debsconeag Deadwater of the West Branch of the Penobscot River. No modern-day logging was apparent as we looked west. Actually, modern-day logging was nearly absent on our first trip through the Debsconeag lakes watershed to Nahmakanta Lake, down Nahmakanta Stream, to Pemadumcook Lake. The vision was in stark contrast to what we had experienced in Maine's Chamberlain, Caucomgomoc, and Allagash lakes area the year before.

Trampers and canoeists are attracted to the Debsconeag and Nahmakanta area by the lure of its environmental and natural attributes. The cultural history as revealed by clues in the woods can add another exciting dimension to a journey whether one is hiking the Appalachian Trail or the new Maine Bureau of Public Lands' trails, or following the canoe route of the *AMC River Guide: Maine* (2008). Logs once floated on the canoeist's route. The logger's tote road system provides both the portage and hiker's path.

Twenty years and twelve canoe trips later, in 2007, Bob Pederson and I took the time to solve the puzzle of the logger's rock cribs deep in the shallow inlet of First Debsconeag Lake. Had they been part of a dam structure flooding a garage-size boulder blocking the potential log flow from Second Debsconeag Lake? How logs got through this spot and the Debsconeag lakes into the West Branch for its famous log drives is partly answered by clues in the woods.

The Debsconeag watershed is one of a few large Maine land tracts where logging was once a function of ax, animal power, and water, and where the land has since remained untouched. The area has been preserved with timely purchases by the Maine Bureau of Public Lands (in 1990) and the Nature Conservancy (in 2003). The watershed starts in the hills between Nahmakanta and Rainbow lakes and runs twelve miles through seven lakes to the Debsconeag Deadwater on the West Branch.

Several factors contributed to no mechanized logging moving into the area. A 1924 forest fire burned the area from Eighth Debsconeag Lake down to and around the north and west sides of Third Debsconeag Lake. A proposed Bangor and Aroostook Railroad line (ca. 1900) from Brownville north to the

*The Debsconeag watershed is one of a few large Maine land tracts where logging was once a function of ax, animal power, and water, and where the land has since remained untouched. At left, the outlet at Nahmakanta Lake.* BILL GELLER

east side of Nahmakanta Lake and on to the Allagash River and Saint Frances did not attract underwriters. West Branch bridges, built at low water level, washed out each successive spring until the 1953 Abol Bridge was constructed.

The canoeist uses a logging road to drive westerly into the Debsconeag Deadwater. In the woods between the large beach and the boat launch lie rusted metal scraps and other remains of the logging and sport camps that dotted this location by the mid-1880s. Logs floated by here from 1830 to 1970. People used the river to reach this spot until the road was cut in about 1943.

Across the deadwater, the riverbank immediately downstream of the mouth of the thoroughfare to First Debsconeag Lake appears to be artificially built up with rock, much like a dike—in loggers' terms, a side dam. Many trees grow here; a bog has formed behind the riverbank. This may have been part of the abutment work done in this area from 1903 to 1904.

At its west end, First Lake narrows to the shallow, rock-cleared inlet stream from Second Debsconeag Lake. The remaining large rocks have sharp edges that suggest dynamite blasting, first used in 1879 to clear streams. The stream is so shallow that a canoe can barely pass in the summer months. The eroded side banks reveal a deeper water level that would ensure the passage of logs.

Deep in the outlet are rock cribs that are at the end of an overgrown excavated 200-foot channel extending upstream, but away from it on its south side. Beyond the cut are two lines of tall trees between which are smaller trees growing in the parallel running mounds of decaying logs with spikes. These



*It takes imagination to see the log landing and staging that once took place on the shore of Omaha Beach, on the Debsconeag Deadwater.* BILL GELLER

mounds, which define a direct route to the old dam at Second Lake, are the remains of a sluice used between 1912 and at least 1924. When it was time to sluice the logs, a dam gate was opened so water and logs could pass through. Whether there was a sluice before 1912 is unknown.

The carry trail to Second Lake is a 15-foot-wide straight swath with no rocks removed. The soils have been washed away, leaving deep gaps between them. This is the logger's tote road described in Lucius Lee Hubbard's 1893 *Guide to Moosehead Lake and Northern Maine*. Old tote roads looked like the gnarly surface of the portage path. They were used in winter, so snow and ice created a smooth surface. At about the midpoint, the trail crosses a wet area crisscrossed with the remains of decaying logs, the remains of the old corduroy that was used to span wet areas. A corduroy road was a bridge built right on the wet surface. Beyond the point where the portage trail leaves the tote road is an avenue of small trees outlined by larger ones. Tote roads tended to run straight, which enabled oxen and horses to haul tree-length logs. The roads were also perpendicular to the contour so that logs and sleds would not slip sideways.

At Second Lake, 150 yards into the outlet's rocks is the old dam with the sluice opening on the right. Here the crib logs are still visible under the water and in the side banks. Old dams are often downstream from the current open body of water. The terrain near the dam is relatively flat with the 200-foot-long and perhaps 4-foot-high dam built between almost imperceptible high points.

Logs came into Second Lake from three sources. The extensive sand bar and delta at the current campsite, at the mouth of the stream from Big Minister Pond, is an indication that logs came downstream. A fisherman's path moves up along the stream and passes through areas where water once overflowed the banks and took much of the soil, leaving the exposed rocks now covered by moss and similar size trees, a result of the channel being clear-cut before the drive. Current spring runoff doesn't typically reach these sections. This is another indicator of water released by a dam in support of driving logs. Deep in the outlet of the pond are old ax-cut logs. No sign of a dam exists, but the narrow outlet might have supported a "horse dam," one that was created by dragging a couple of large logs across an outlet and placing debris against them to further block the flow of water. Such dams were blown open for the spring drive.

The west end of the lake is likewise sandy partly for the same reason. Here logs came in from Big Beaver Pond (around 1912), where the obvious dam

evidence is a huge cut log at the outlet. The no-name pond high on the hillside south-southwest of Big Beaver also had a dam and a logging camp at its outlet, as evidenced by tools left behind, new trees growing up through old barrel hoops, and the outline of two buildings on the ground. Now the outlet stream is an invisible thread under rocks covered by a single blanket of moss hiding every hole.

On the lake's south side just west of the portage, the water is deep and the rocks are sharp, unlike others nearby. The end of the old sluice from Third Debsconeag Lake was in this area. About the midpoint on the portage is an overgrown gravel pit, and next to it are the decaying remains of a rock crib dam still holding back some water. The Third Lake dam lies well below the outlet of the lake, but was built high enough to raise the lake's water level. The small sharp rocks at the current stream opening into the lake suggest blasting and contrast with those at the lake's edge.

The area on both sides of the water between Second and Third lakes has old logging equipment pieces, downed telephone lines, and insulators wired to larger trees. This area was the site of a logging camp about 1910. A tote road came to it from Pemadumcook via the southeast side of Third Lake and continued on to Big Beaver. The upper section of this old tote road is part of the area's ski machine trail system.

The shore of Third Lake reveals other logging activity. Boom logs with holes drilled in both ends are trapped in the rocks near the shore. At two different spots on the south shore of the southwest finger are the remains of wooden boats, perhaps used in booming work. The remains of a 1909 logging camp are on the opposite shore.

In the lake's southeast corner, the portage to Pemadumcook is a tree-shaded tote road that was originally a section of an American Indian canoe route running from eastern Maine through the Penobscot watershed to the Kennebec watershed. Old rock work used to shore up the side banks of the road is still visible. By the 1840s, this was the loggers' supply route from Bangor to Brownville to the Jo-Mary Lakes and the Nahmakanta area. In 1910, Great Northern Paper Company built a depot camp at the Pemadumcook Lake end. As late as the 1950s, logs were hauled over this road.

The portage route to Fourth Debsconeag Lake, at the head of the southwest finger, rises through rocky 1924 burned land and passes a balanced rock. Further along is a large spring flowing from under a shed-size boulder. From the spring to the lake, the road is visible with its gnarly floor bordered by large trees. The portage trail is another section of the American Indian canoe route turned loggers' tote road.



The Fourth Lake outlet has an overgrown barrow pit at the south corner and near it are remnants of a phone line that is now an abandoned ski machine trail to Pemadumcook. The outlet has a collection of old logs. Below the outlet is a small gorge cleared of blockages to ensure the flow of logs. These are the suggestions of the dam that was here before the beginning of the twentieth century.

From Fourth Lake, the portage trail, which uses the old road to Pleasant Point Camps, leaves the north edge near the southwest end, rises over the height of land and goes right at the “Y” to Nahmakanta Lake outlet where a few crib logs are visible. The dam was once 917 feet long (ca. 1840–1935). The original American Indian route left the west end of Fourth Lake and rose up the hillside, joining the current roadway near the Debsconeag Loop trailhead parking lot.

The Debsconeag Loop Trail, maintained by the Maine Bureau of Public Lands, makes it possible to traverse the upper portion of the watershed. The trail leaves Fourth Lake, paralleling the stream to Fifth Debsconeag Lake. The area through which the trail passes is a good example of what remains after driving logs. At Fifth Lake’s rock crib dam, which is downstream from the main body of the lake, the trail follows the top of the side dam and continues on to Stink Pond. At about the midpoint on the hillside below the pond, the trail branches away from the stream. Across the stream, a series of old pails leads 150 feet up the right bank to a pile of sled runners next to a root cellar of an old logging camp that was destroyed by the 1924 forest fire. No other evidence remains to suggest a sluice was once located on this hillside.

The landscape changes noticeably at Stink Pond. Below the pond is a hardwood forest. Above the pond, poplars and conifers grow around the exposed granite and, with the exception of the next valley, reflect the nature of the land along the trail until just before Gould Pond outlet stream. The old tote roads that lined the area from the late 1800s to 1924 are no longer detectable. The forest is the natural untouched rejuvenation of nearly 90 years.

The trail passes above the outlet of Eighth Debsconeag Lake, the beginning of the watershed. The downstream area between here and the stream from Sixth Lake is terrace-like with beaver activity on each terrace. Some of the terraces are connected by long sloping granite shelves. Three of the terraces, including the one on which Eighth Lake rests, have a natural granite opening that could easily be blocked with a horse dam. The outlets have mounded soil, rocks, and ax-cut logs.

Once over the height of land northwest of Eighth Lake, the trail uses the old trail to Stratton Pond (old ax and yellow blazes) to its junction with Gould Pond Tote Road (ca. 1880), which the trail follows to Nahmakanta. At the lake, the trail follows the old loggers' and sport camps' phone line (wide faint blue blazes, wire, and insulators) down the east shore of Nahmakanta to the old fisherman's path (ca. 1890; old ax and yellow blazes), which the trail follows to reach Sixth Lake and a new trail back to Fifth Lake. The phone line linked Nahmakanta Lake camps to Pleasant Point Camps to White House Camps to Ambajejus Camps to Millinocket. Parts of the phone line were still in use in 1968.

At the northeast corner of Nahmakanta, the hiker can also take the trail that leads to the Appalachian Trail at Pollywog Stream Bridge and travel south to the Nahmakanta Dam. The original 1934 AT route used the late 1800s tote roads except for the short distance between Wadleigh and Prentiss valleys. The trail was relocated in 1981. One hundred yards before crossing Rainbow Stream, the trail passes over the first tote road from Nahmakanta to Rainbow Lake (ca. 1870). At Pollywog Stream Bridge, a grassy old road, the Bean Brook Tote Road, continues upstream and passes the graves of two river drivers, marked by two crude unscribed stones where the old AT departed right on the Rainbow Lake Tote Road.

Where the AT moves away from Pollywog Gorge near Crescent Pond, there is a natural cut in the gorge cliff. Perhaps this was the location of one of seven sluices in the gorge in the 1920s or the loggers' entry point into the middle of the gorge. Near the Wadleigh Valley shelter, the AT follows an old logging road, the Wadleigh Valley Tote Road (which dates to the 1870s). Once over the ridge and in Prentiss Valley, the trail follows the Prentiss Valley Tote Road (ca. 1870). Where the AT passes around the southeast corner of Nahmakanta Lake, softwoods grow on what looks like a crumbling rock barrier separating the lake from a swampy area. Nahmakanta had two side dams, and this might have been the site of one of them. Between this point and the dam, the AT is on the Prentiss Valley Tote Road. On the downhill side of the trail are metal remains, vestiges of old logging camps, the last one from 1960 to 1961 when the logs cut here were hauled by truck to Pemadumcook.

The opportunities to explore and reconstruct the area's historical activity were nearly lost. The 1953 Abol Bridge provided consistent easterly access by mechanized logging south into the hills above First and Second lakes. Loggers were within 100 yards of Big Minister Pond by 1990. In 2001, the grind of a



logging operation north of Big Minister was unmistakable. By 2003, loggers had reached Little Minister Pond, leaving a thin veil of woods at its north edge, and in places cut to the edge of the trail to Big Minister from Second Lake. By 2005, the loggers had stopped on the ridge above Second Lake. The cuts are invisible from the lake, but visible from the cliffs overlooking Fourth Lake.

Another encroachment came from the west at the head of Nahmakanta Lake, where loggers pushed down the east side of Nahmakanta Stream in the 1970s. They also moved northwest from the road to Fourth Lake onto the south and west side of the hill south of Fifth and Sixth lakes.

In 1993, the new bridge over the West Branch above Ambajejus Falls supported a road extending to the southern end of Third Lake and along the west side of the ridge east of Nahmakanta Stream. The new road breached the portage trail from Third Lake to Pemadumcook at the height of land in 1996. Echoing across Third Lake in 1997 was the noise of logging machinery. The 1990 Nahmakanta Public Lands purchase by the state of Maine prevented the loggers from reaching further and preserved the Nahmakanta and Fourth Lake corner.

Another road from the 1993 bridge extended into the area south of and between First and Third lakes. In 1992, timber cruiser markings appeared at two points along the portage from First Lake to Second Lake. By 1995, the new road was visible at the far end of the Third Bog off the southeast end of Second Lake, as well as flagging for a road that crossed the portage between Second and Third Lake. By 1999, logging touched the south edge of the portage from First Lake to Second Lake. In 2001, the tape was gone between Second and Third lakes.

For the curious observers, the artifacts of logging in this area will remain relatively undisturbed and continue to offer tantalizing puzzles for contemplation. I am grateful for those who had the foresight and perseverance to advocate for the area's preservation, to those individuals and organizations private and public that raised and gave the funds to ensure the preservation of a Maine treasure, and to the Maine Bureau of Public Lands and the Nature Conservancy for their stewardship. The dread of what I would find in each successive year's trip has subsided.

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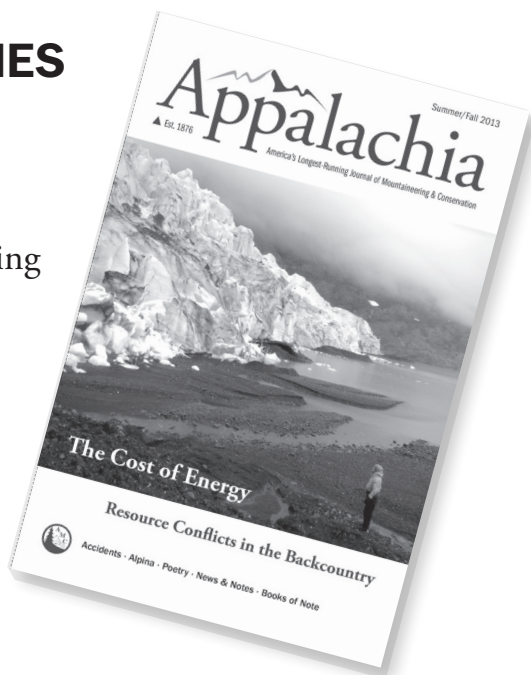
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