# Early Day Timber Cutting Along the Upper Bear River

BY L. J. COLTON

Early day timber cutting in the headwater drainages of the Bear River can be divided roughly into two periods. The first period would cover from about 1870 to 1900, and the second from the turn of the century for about 25 to 30 years. There was, no doubt, some cutting before 1870, but not in any great volume.

There was little or no governmental control during the first period, and since there was no thought for the future, no system

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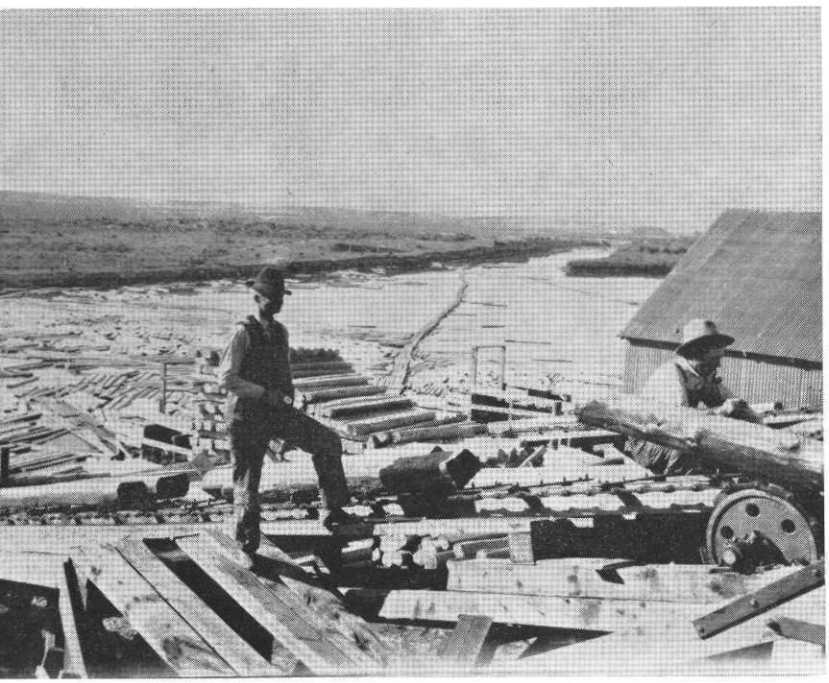
of silviculture was employed. It was a time when fires, man-made and naturally caused, raged uncontrolled throughout the burning season. Many areas were cut over, mainly high-graded, then set on fire and allowed to burn. Old-timers recall that early loggers often times deliberately set fires as a means of retribution and of obtaining higher wages for their services.

During the second period the U.S. Forest Service was established and gradually gained control of cutting and fires on federal land. This, in turn, had much influence on cutting and fires on private land, which covered large acreages since it was within the 20 mile bounds of the railroad land grant.

Volume of timber cut during the first period is unknown because no one kept any record, but it must have been substantial. Examination of cut and burned-over areas indicates a large amount of timber was removed. The principal trees cut were lodgepole pine and Englemann spruce, and they were made into lumber, hewn railroad ties, mine props and ties, and cordwood for charcoal. The charcoal was used in turn for ore smelting in Utah and Colorado.

The timber cutting industry during the first period and part of the second has a very interesting and somewhat romantic touch to it. Most of the timber in the form of saw logs, ties, props, and cordwood was floated to the market or point of manufacture down the Bear River or in a flume. The construction and use of the flume and the floating process on the Bear River must have indeed been colorful. Large numbers of men were employed, and there were, of course, brawls, injuries, drownings, and other activities that would be associated with this type of operation.

During the early days of Evanston and Almy, Wyoming, there was a large sawmill established at Evanston by Jessie L. Atkinson. This mill manufactured the lumber used to build early Evanston and Almy. The latter was a mining community a few miles north of Evanston and at one time was as large or larger than Evanston. The Atkinson mill remained in operation until cheaper and better-processed lumber began coming in on the railroad from the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere. The saw logs that supplied the mill were floated from the forest down Bear River. These logs had been hand-cut adjacent to the streams and then skidded or hauled to the streams by wagon and sleigh. Much of the cutting and skidding was done during the winter. The floating, or log drives, took place during the early spring runoff and early summer. It was necessary during the logging drives to station men along the stream to prevent and



*Two views of a tie loading operation along the Union Pacific in southwestern Wyoming.*

break up log jams. Some of these men lost their lives, but the whole operation provided a livelihood for many men and their families. The timber industry played an important role in the economy of this part of Wyoming and Utah at the time.

Besides the sawmill in Evanston, there were 12 charcoal kilns constructed in the immediate vicinity. Four-foot length cordwood was floated down Bear River from the forest to supply fuel for these kilns. The charcoal manufactured from them was shipped to smelters in Utah and Colorado.

Perhaps the most colorful operation in the first period of timber cutting was the construction and use of a 30-mile flume or aqueduct beginning near Gold Hill east of Mill City Creek and west of Hayden Fork and ending at Hilliard, which is about 14 miles southeast of Evanston. In addition there was a branch of the flume called the Howe Feeder, constructed for about six miles up what is now known as Main Fork[1] of the Stillwater Fork of the Bear River. Remnants of this branch are still seen even though the main flume has been removed or destroyed. The headwaters for the flume were taken from what is now known as Gold Hill

[1] This was possibly once known as Fish Creek.

Creek, which flows into Hayden Fork. Remnants of the old dam and canal that carried the water to the head of the flume still exist.

The course of the flume followed down the west side of Hayden Fork and the Bear River proper to a point about one-half mile above its confluence with East Fork. Here the flume crossed to the east side where it remained close to the river for approximately another two miles. At this point the flume left the river and was trestled to the flat bench lands to the east of Bear River. The trestle reached a point as high as 16 feet above the ground. The flume then continued north and a little east, crossed Mill Creek, then on to Hilliard Flat, and thence to Hilliard.

The total distance from the head of the flume to Hilliard was approximately 30 miles. The Howe Feeder branch joined the main flume about one mile above the confluence of the Hayden and Stillwater forks of the Bear River. This made a total of about 36 miles of flume constructed at a cost of $200,000.

The flume was constructed by the Hilliard Fume and Lumber Company. Construction began about 1872 and was completed in about 1875. The company was organized by W. K. Sloan, also treasurer of the company, who had migrated from eastern United States. The project was

*Tie hackers' camp and lumbering tools used on the north slopes of the Uintas.*

first known as "Sloan's Folly," but it became a successful business venture long before it was sold to a Boston firm after the price of charcoal had dipped to a low level and better lumber was shipped in.

The flume had a gradient that permitted the water to flow at about 15 miles per hour. A log placed at the head took two hours to arrive at the end, provided there was no jam or any other obstruction. The flume was built in the form of a V and was constructed mainly of 3-inch by 12-inch planks. Each side of the V was about 30-inches wide and was supported by scaffolding that varied in height according to the terrain. The bottom of the V rested on 3-inch by 6-inch cross pieces about 5-feet long and spaced at about 4-foot intervals. These in turn rested on 17-foot long by about 7-inch in diameter unsawed stringers running parallel with the flume and about 4-feet apart. Braces from these cross pieces supported the flume.

The flume was constructed one mile at a time from timber milled at a point located near the head of the flume. The lumber and logs used were floated to the point of construction as they were needed. Eighty tons of square spikes were used in building the flume. The construction was so well done that after water had run through the flume for a short time, very little of it escaped through the cracks.

During the construction and operation of this flume a small city was built on what is now known as Mill City Creek near Gold Hill. The city had a population that numbered as high as 500, a company store, and barracks for the men to live in. Remnants of this once flourishing camp are still present. Throughout the area that supplied the flume with timber, remains of once well-built cabins that housed loggers can be found.

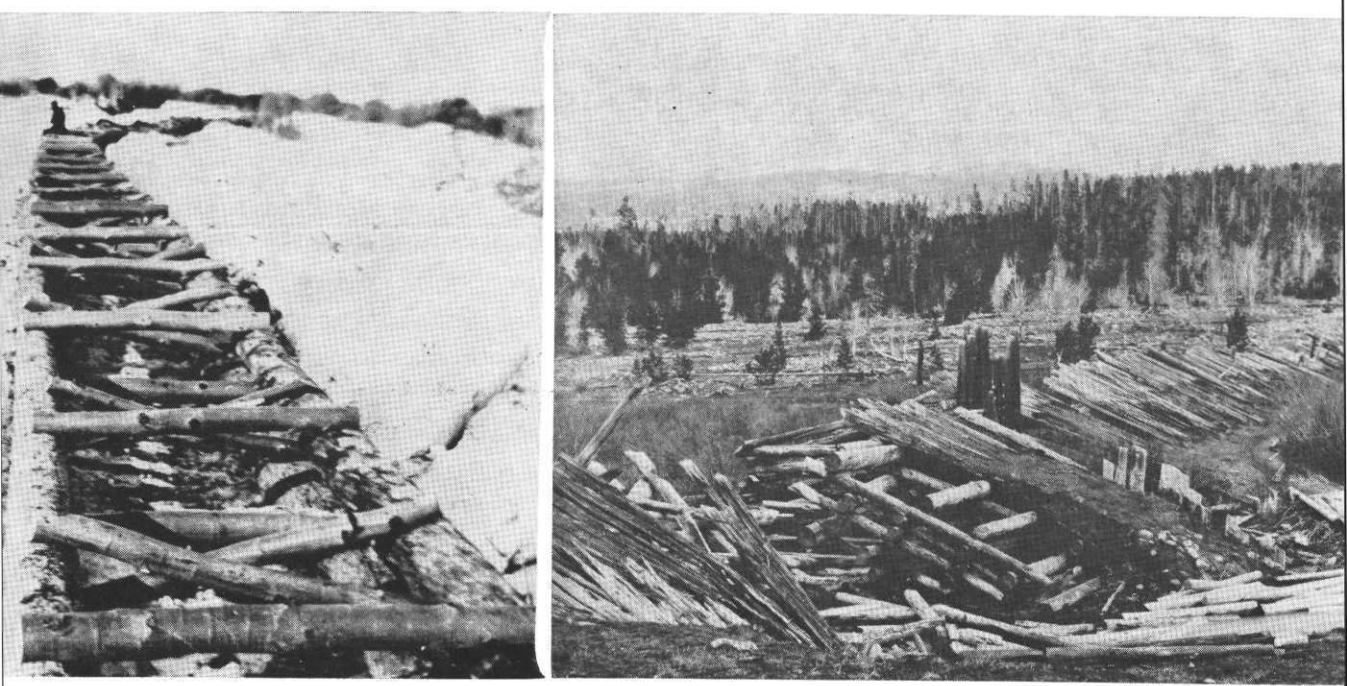
At three different places along the course of the flume, ponds or eddies were constructed. These were used to hold, reassemble, or sort logs if necessary and replenish the water in the flume. One eddy was located at the mouth of East Fork of Bear River, one where the flume crossed Mill Creek, and one at the upper end of Hilliard Flat. The one at Mill Creek was known as the "Big Eddy." Remnants of this eddy and the one on East Fork can still be seen. At two different locations lookouts were stationed. These were located on high vantage points so they could see each other and the terminals of the flume. A system of light signals was used to send messages back and forth.

The main purpose, of course, for constructing this flume was to get timber to Hilliard in the fastest and most economical way. Hilliard at that time was located on the main line of the Union Pacific Railroad. This line was later moved several miles to the north after two tunnels

were constructed. The main products as a result of the flume were railroad ties and charcoal. Thirty-two large charcoal kilns were constructed at Hilliard from rock. Four-foot cordwood was floated down the flume to supply the kilns. Several of these kilns are still standing and are in fairly good condition.

In about 1885 use of that part of the flume above the Mill Creek eddy was discontinued, but a well-known logger by the name of John W. Hadden supplied logs and cordwood to Hilliard from the Mill Creek and Deadman drainages for quite some time after. When the price of charcoal dropped, the flume was sold to a Boston company, which tried to bring the flume back into use after a period of idleness. After a period of unsuccessful operations, the company went broke. The lumber in the flume was then sold to George W. Carlton who tore most of it down and sold it for construction of ranch buildings on Hilliard Flat and nearby Bear River country. Lumber and logs not used for constructing buildings were burned. Of interest is the fact that the basic structures of many of the ranch buildings constructed from this timber are still in good condition and, while covered with modern siding, are still in use.

*Cribbing and splash dam to contain and control the flow of water and transportation of logs on Mill Creek.*



At about the time the charcoal industry was flourishing at Hilliard, two more kilns were constructed about five miles south on Sulphur Creek. Four more were constructed at Piedmont, which was then on the railroad line, and a few miles northeast of Hilliard. These were all active during the same period, but the latter kilns obtained their cordwood from the north slopes of Mount Elizabeth and the drainages of Big Muddy and Sulphur creeks near the Utah-Wyoming line. This timber was usually hauled in by wagons or sleighs.

The end of the charcoal industry at this location signaled the close of the first period of timber cutting. Many cut-over areas had been burned and much valuable timber and watershed destroyed. One such area is located near the head of the Mill City Creek west of Hayden Fork and north of Gold Hill. Here very little timber has grown back except on the west side where there is now quite a heavy stand of aspen with some lodgepole pine mixed in it. The evidence of what was once a beautiful stand of timber is still present in the form of many blackened stumps. Elsewhere, heavy stands of pole-size and larger lodgepole pine have healed the scars of the old burns and some day will make valuable stands of saw timber.

One must conclude that the early day timber industry on the north slope of the Uinta Mountains contributed a colorful and vital chapter to the settlement and development of this part of Utah. These timber cutters were courageous, rugged, and valiant, but apparently they had little concern, or at least it did not occur to them that what they were doing to the timber resource might have an effect on timber use for future generations. This effect was mainly adverse since millions of board feet of timber were destroyed by fires set by and uncontrolled by these people. Thousands of acres of fine timber land were converted to lands now covered with grass, forb, and aspen. While the resulting range land has great value for watershed and grazing purposes, of greater value would be stands of good timber. Much of the residual timber left from this early day type of harvest is inferior — insect and disease infested. During most of these timber cutting operations only the choicest trees were taken, leaving cull or diseased trees to supply seed for future timber stands to replace those that were cut or burned.

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