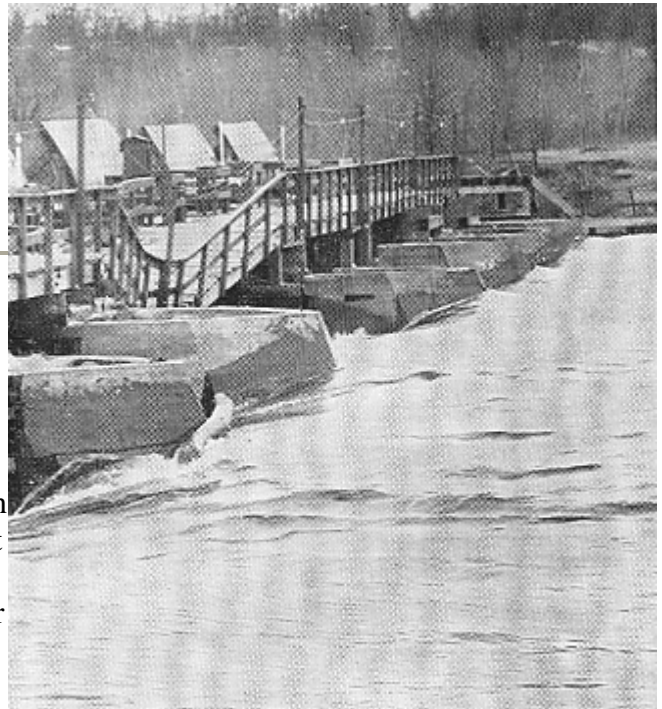


Nevers Dam . . . The Lumberman's Dam

*By Rosemarie Vezina Braatz
St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin*

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The end of Nevers Dam came in the floods of May, 1954, when sections of the structure were washed away. The dam became unusable and was removed by a wrecking crew in the fall of 1955. Huge bonfires on the shore consumed the wooden remnants. The concrete piers shown here replaced the original wooden ice-breaking piers. Art Comer, who was superintendent of N. S. P. here from 1948 until '56, counts the end of Nevers Dam as a real loss, as far as the St. Croix power dam is concerned. "With the dam at Nevers to help regulate the water level here, we could depend on the river for a more constant supply of power."



This story is meant to be more than a history of a dam. It is intended as a tribute to the hardy men who built Nevers Dam. . . . of timbers and rock, and their own endurance.

To these men, and to those who maintained Nevers Dam through the years, this story is respectfully dedicated.

We greatly appreciate the fine work of Bjorn Chinander, a student in Mr. Joel Prazak's Multimedia class at St. Croix Falls High School. He translated this booklet into HTML, making it possible to add this story to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' Website.

The Saint Croix River . . .

The River that made this valley also brought the men who lived its history. It carried the canoes of the Native Americans who fished and wandered on its banks, and lured the white trappers and traders who noted in their journals and letters the beauty of this deep, swift-running river. Later it brought the Eastern money-men who bought up land and river rights for speculation; and it gave passage to the settlers who flocked here after the mid-nineteenth century to farm the rolling land.

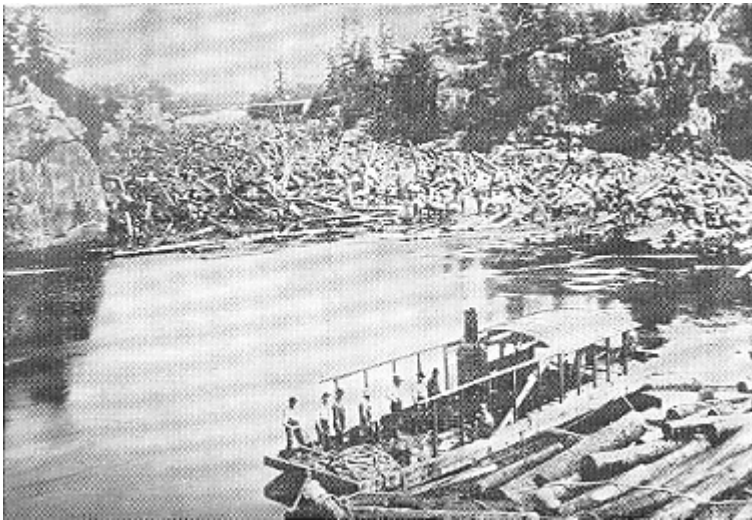
The River was transportation, supply line, and communication in those days before the railroad and highway . . . a fluid trail that connected these towns with the outside world.

The River also brought the lumbermen to the northern pineries, and it floated countless millions of pine logs down to their voracious sawmills.

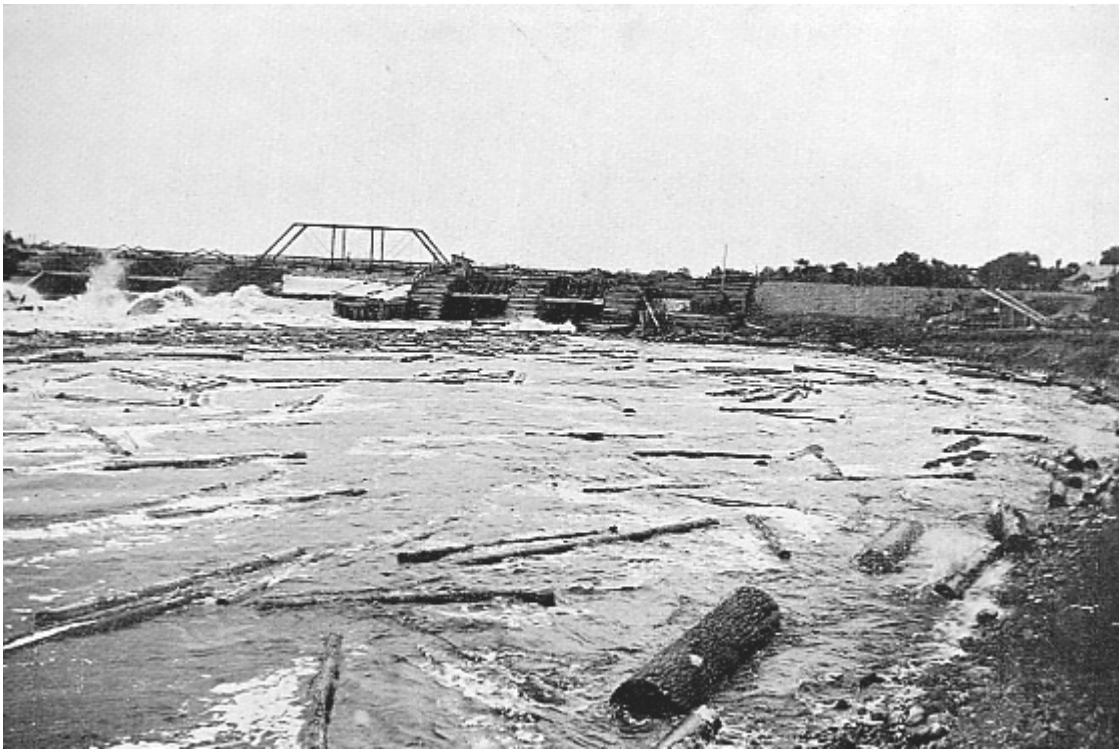
The River banks widened in places with a succession of small towns that boomed with the lumber industry. The towns grew as the northern forests dwindled. Wolf Creek, St. Croix Falls, Taylors Falls, Franconia, Osceola, Marine, Stillwater -- all flourishing as the river choked with logs.

The River soon became the scene of spectacular log jams . . . jams that stopped the operation of sawmills, that imperiled many a logger's life, that stopped all river traffic. By the last quarter of the last century, there was not enough river for the greedy lumber industry, let alone the steamboats that were the main link to the rest of the world. Many a steamboat and ferryboat was threatened by the unending flow of logs on the river.

The River was blockaded by big log jams in 1865, 1877, 1883, and again in 1886. In 1878, the Taylors Falls "Reporter" lamented that "ruin and stagnation" were being forced upon the St. Croix River by the loggers' monopolizing the river thoroughfare. The sawmill at Marine, the last one to survive above the Stillwater boom, was forced out of business after the gigantic jam of 1883, when the narrow bend at the Dalles held back millions of feet of logs for 57 days. It was clear to the prosperous enterprising lumbermen at Stillwater that their headlong race to strip the pine forests in the north would be hampered unless they built a dam to regulate the flow of logs and the level of the water in the river. Their answer was . . . Nevers Dam.



This old photo shows how the 1886 jam packed the Dalles of the St. Croix River solid with logs . . . an estimated 150 million feet of lumber was tied up in the jam. Loggers worked with dynamite to blast loose the logs at critical points. Jams such as this, as well as the necessity to control the flow of logs to the mills down-river, brought about the construction of Nevers Dam in 1889.



River Landmark, Nevers Dam Built to Serve Lumbermen

The St. Croix River again flows unchallenged past Wolf Creek and Nevers Place. Only a half-submerged wooden "crib" and a few wooden pilings in mid-stream hint that this was for 65 years the location of what was said to be the largest pile-driven dam in the world.

Nevers Dam was a product of the lumbering era; its purpose was to control the flood of logs that came down river from the northern pineries to the sawmills at Stillwater. Built in 1890 by the St. Croix Dam and Boom Co., it served the lumbermen for a relatively short time . . . the last log was sluiced through in 1912, signaling the end of the wood cutters' heyday on the St. Croix.

After those busy logging days, when Nevers Dam was an active little community of lumbermen, farmers, mill-hands and workmen, it passed into a quieter and longer period in its history. This second phase started in 1903 when it became a river control point and reservoir for the hydroelectric power dam about to be built at St. Croix Falls, eleven miles below.

Its end came after spring floods had completely undermined the dam in 1954. Since it was unusable and a potential hazard on the river, its owner, Northern States Power Co., had it torn out in the fall of 1955.

The dam had been threatened many times before, most memorably in the spring of 1950 when the old structure withstood the pressure of a seven-foot crest of the river, an all-time high.

An N. S. P. employee working at the dam that night, described the near-disaster in the company magazine "Our Shield." "Nevers Dam has been battered by logs, log jams, floods, storms and ice during its many years of existence, but the sudden and unprecedented flood of May 7th and 8th is tops. For hours and hours the only thing that kept the river from topping the 600 ft. earthen dike was a thin wall of dirt a foot wide and a foot high thrown up by hand shovels. A gas shovel, bulldozer and trucks arrived and went into service and finally at 1 p. m. on Monday the dam was considered secure."

By holding out against the rampaging river, Nevers Dam forestalled considerable flood damage to the lowlands beyond the gorge of the Dalles and to the power house at St. Croix Falls.

When the dam finally did wash out in '54, Pat Cain and Gene Pomeroy, both with N. S. P. at St. Croix Falls, were on watch at Nevers through the night to radio a warning ahead to the powerhouse at St. Croix Falls so it could brace for the crest of water and debris.

The St. Paul newspaper reported "the landmark on the St. Croix River is crumbling . . . the platform walk has snapped and some gates swept away."

Arne Olson, a N. S. P. man stationed at Nevers Dam for 35 years as gatetender, tells of the struggle to save it: "A crew of men worked three days and three nights, trucking in fill and building up the dike as the water rose up. We managed to keep the dike from going, but the dam finally just broke up."

Olson's home is located on the Minnesota side, a couple miles west of the dam. Nevers Dam had, through the years, provided a bridge across the river. But the last months he worked there, helping to tear out the dam, he had to use a rowboat to cross the river to and from his car.

Arne Olson mentions men who worked with him as Ed Erickson, Joe Lagoo, Robert Hurley, Henry Kelley and Charlie Underhill.

He was telling us about a flood in 1924 that washed away two 24-foot gates at the Wisconsin end of the dam. "The whole dam was actually rebuilt with new wood, after that, except for the east end, where the earthen dike was extended into the river to replace the two lost gates."

The dike is still there, at the request of the Wisconsin Conservation Department, because it forms an eddy that's a popular fishing spot.

Shortly before his death in the fall of 1963, N. S. P. veteran Gib Greenquist mentioned to us that he'd helped haul massive timbers up to the dam, in about 1921, for the construction of a huge barge. This was at the time N. S. P. was considering rebuilding Nevers Dam of concrete.

The barge, built at a cost of \$3500, one man recalls, was to be used in sounding the river bottom, and later in the construction work.

Arne Olson remembers the building of the barge, which measured forty by sixty feet, on the river bank. Carpenter Charlie O'Neil, who lived at Nevers Dam with his wife, Maggie, for several years, helped build it of the foot-square timbers.

"There was a "leg" in each corner which could be lowered to anchor the barge," Olson says.

Frank Hoover, a Taylors Falls well-driller (and incidentally, a grandson of Charles Nevers on whose land the dam was built) had a two-man crew up there for a couple of years, taking hundreds of samples of the river bottom from Nevers Dam area downriver as far as the Rivard farm (the old "Dobney place"). They used the barge for a brief time for their drilling.

But, as he tells us, their soundings revealed that sand and gravel extended down as far as 113 feet, with sandstone beneath that--"no kind of bottom for a concrete dam."

Northern States Power Co. had bought up a great deal of land along the river in the early 1920s, with dam improvement in mind, and had survey crews working at the same time. Hoover estimates that there were twenty to 25 men stationed there then. In '24 when the dam washed out, the barge sank in shallow water, and was salvaged years later.

But, after the plans for a concrete dam were abandoned, in the thirties, the big barge was purposely sunk in the river above the dam, weighted down with rocks. The idea was to raise it if it should ever be needed later, but it never was.

The only concrete that went into the structure was by the gradual replacement, through the years, of the wooden-icebreaker piers with concrete.

A line of these V-shape piers, staggered across the river, were meant to break up ice flows before they reached the dam; another series of piers, in the lumbering days, were intended mainly to guide the flow of logs toward the Wisconsin side of the river, where the water was swifter and deeper, and through the big Lang gate.

Ice floes rushing downriver, some "bigger than a house," did their share of damage to the dam, despite the rows of piers above.

"Those chunks of ice would come down and knock against the gates, and raise the devil with the cribs," Gene LePage says. In his early days with the company (he started in 1911), he helped build replacement cribs of cedar poles on the river bank, tow them out and sink them in place with rocks.

He was often called to Nevers Dam, he says, to help blast ice at the head of the gates. "We'd have to drill a hole in the ice and fasten the dynamite underneath, so the blast would raise the ice up."

Chester Fisk started work at Nevers Dam in 1898, when he was 18 years old, at the same time that Jim Frawley moved there with his family from New Richmond, to manage the dam. "I stayed for 30 years, and left just before Frawley died." (That was in 1930.)

Mr. Fisk worked first in the sawmill at Nevers, "where Frank Williams sawed all the lumber that went into the dam." (Other men who worked there during his time, he says, were Wirt Mineau, John Doty, and Charlie O'Niel) Later he worked on the logs, which paid a bit more than the \$1.25 a day for ten hours a day he got at the mill.

"About every two weeks we'd sluice logs out of the boom, some eight million feet at a time. It would take them about two weeks to sort the logs out of the boom at Stillwater, and when they were ready for more, they'd send word up.

"Sometimes it would be the middle of the night when a man arrived at Nevers on horseback, to tell us they needed more logs at Stillwater. We'd start right in early that morning with the sluicing.

"About one and one-fourth mile up river from Nevers, there was a set of piers. We knew that when the river was packed solid with logs between the dam and those piers, that made up eight million feet, and we'd send through just that many logs."

Every three years a time was set aside for "taking in the rear" . . . that is, searching up and down river for all the stray logs that had become stuck or lost along the way.

Mr. Fisk remembers sluicing at the big "Lang" gate that measured 80 feet across, and that was built like an upside-down "V" hinged at the top so it would flatten down on the river bottom to let logs through.

"Dave Barter and I were sluicing logs at about 11 one night when Frawley came running out to tell us that Pres. McKinley was shot." (That was in 1901.)

There were on the average about 30 people working at Nevers in the logging days, he says. Mrs. Frawley did the cooking herself for a while, and Mrs. Rose Wood also cooked.

The cook there about the longest time was Charlie Olson, of Taylors Falls, who started in the early 1900s and stayed until the '30s.

"You could go up anytime and Charlie was there in the kitchen," the N. S. P. men say. "He always had the coffee on, and fresh cookies and pie, and he'd feel bad if you didn't stop in and have something."

Chester Fisk was one of the men who operated the steamboat used to break the ice above the dam and to break up log jams. Other men who worked on the boat, he mentions, were J. A. Shambo, John Rogers, George Ward and Jim Frawley.

Both Pat Cain and John Robinson, who spent their boyhoods at Wolf Creek, recount the thrill of getting rides on that steamboat when they were youngsters. Robinson estimates the boat was about 30 feet long "and almost that wide," and had water wheels on each side that were about eight feet in diameter, four feet wide.

The boat was later taken apart and the upright boiler stood on the river bank for years, Robinson tells us.

Log jams frequently formed above the dam, Pat Cain says, when logs got lodged against the wedge-shaped piers.



A familiar figure

Charlie Olson as for some thirty years the cook at Nevers Dam...and a popular fellow with the men who worked (or just stopped by) there. A familiar figure in his apron and cap, he was sitting on the porch of the cook house with his pipe when Henry Kelley snapped this picture. The picture was taken in the late thirties, not long before Charlie left, when Henry Kelley had the star mail route to Cushing and Wolf Creek, and delivered meat to the the Nevers Camp. (He later became gatetender at the dam from '41 to '49.) Charlie Olson went from Taylors Falls to take over the cooking chores in the early 1900s.

In those days, the river in spring was a solid mass of logs, cut during the winter and floated down as the ice broke. Each logging camp marked its own logs with a distinctive sign (much as cattlemen brand their herds), so that when the logs reached the sawmill they could be credited to the separate lumber companies.

Harry Baker, 90-year-old real estate agent in St. Croix Falls, was describing the scene on the river in the spring-time of some 70 years ago. "The loggers worked on the masses of logs with cant hooks or peavies - those stout poles with a sharp spike at the end and a hook they used to maneuver the logs." The wood was all pine, he pointed out, since hard-wood was too heavy to float to the mills. "It would come down the tributaries of the St. Croix -- the Kettle, Snake and Rum, the Clam, Trade, and Yellow Rivers, from the various camps."

Before Nevers Dam was built, lumber companies at Stillwater had no way to check this flow of millions of feet of logs . . . boats were threatened and sometimes forced off the river; gigantic jams would form in the Dalles (one, of 150 million feet of logs); and in low water, the logs were stranded and mired in mud. "Whereas in years past there have been 40,000,000 to 100,000,000 feet left all winter in the river from that point (of the Snake river 25 miles above the dam) to the gap of the St. Croix boom," according to the Stillwater Gazette of July 8, 1890.

A dam was necessary to control the high water as well as to store a "head" against times when the water was low. An April 1890 Stillwater Gazette article, noting "recent heavy local and upriver rains" which caused the river and the lake at Stillwater to rise, says: "At the boom the rise is more marked and appreciable than on the much broader expanse of the lake. The river current became so strong and the water so impetuous that it became impossible to work the outside gap and (logging) operations at that point are necessarily suspended."

"This scheme has been talked of by our loggers for 25 years and during that time the log jam at Taylors Falls alone has cost \$75,000 which can now be prevented," the Stillwater Gazette reports.

After Nevers Dam was built, a "boom" of huge logs plugged together lengthwise to stretch across the river held back the flow of logs above the dam. The logs would be sluiced through just as they were needed. River navigation below the Dalles was safer. And in low water, Nevers Dam gates would close down to build up a "head" of water before sluicing began, so that there was a sufficient depth to carry the logs along.

When the dam shut its gate to build a "head" (the possible head of water for Nevers was seventeen feet), water would back up for twelve to fourteen miles, and John Robinson recalls how "the water would rise up and flood the chicken house on my grandfather's farm."

Many people have called Nevers Dam "the largest pile-driven dam in the world," but we have been unable to find any proof of this statement. It seems that there is no previous written history of this dam, and that the original records may have been lost or burned in one of the many fires that occurred at the dam.



This 1915 view of Nevers Dam, before the extensive repairs which replaced much of the battered structure, shows foreman Jim Frawley at the lower left of the river bank. Here we see the wide flowage of the river behind the dam. The 80-foot Lang gate is gone, as was the iron bridge atop it. A corner of a small barge is at right, just below the gatehouse. According to John Robinson, this gatehouse was for the little "fish-way" gates on the Wisconsin shore, which let the fish through when the dam blocked the river.

(J.R. Frawley photo)

The description given in an old newspaper account (the St. Croix Valley Standard of Oct., 1889) describes it thus: "In the big dam there will be thirteen Tainter gates, 16 by 24 feet and one Lang gate, 80 by 20 feet. The piers are twelve feet wide between each gate. It will take 5,000 piles in the foundation.

"The bridge above the gates will be 624 feet long. The piers are 86 feet long, 18 feet high, and 12 feet wide. The full dimensions of the dam when all completed will be 624 feet by 112 feet."

Although the builders of Nevers Dam had some steam-powered equipment -- saws, planers, and pile-drivers -- much of the work necessarily was done by hand. The dam was actually put together by hand-labor, as the men used augers to bore holes in the timbers and pilings, then drove in each spike and bolt.

Records say that "six carloads of spikes" went into the dam: Chester Fisk tells us that the spikes (or "drift bolts") were shipped as long iron shafts, which were cut to the needed length, and pointed at the end, at the building site on Nevers Dam. Since some of the timbers, he says, ranged up to 14 by 14 inches, "Some spikes were cut two feet long." The spikes, he says, were one inch square, and were driven into auger holes of three fourths inch.

Mrs. Wirt Mineau recalls that the piers of the dam were built of wooden "cribs" filled with rock. "The rock was bought by the yard from local farmers who hauled it to the site by wagon and stone boats on the river." She tells us that the dam was once featured in Ripley's "Believe It or Not" "as one of two largest wood-pile dams in the world."

Mrs. Mineau points out that "this was the most outstanding feature about Nevers Dam...the fact that they drove pilings to make the rock-filled crib foundation on the sand bottom of the river."

For more information about this, we turn to the "Stillwater Daily Gazette" of July 8, 1890: "The foundation consists of 9,000 piles driven close together in rows across the river, and down river 200 feet. The piles are driven into the bed of the river from 12 to 16 feet, and then cut off even at the upper and down river side of each row, flush with the top of piling, then bolted to the piling with large iron bolts.

"Between these rows is a solid filling of rocks and gravel, the amount of rock used being 20,000 cords, bought from the people living near, and delivered at the dam at \$4.50 and \$5.00 a cord. The amount of gravel used in the bed of the river and in the wings was all that could be transported with 20 gravel cars, running on a good iron track, in from three to four months, from gravel pits at either end of the two wings of the dam.

"On the top of these piles there is a double timber floor caulked water-tight 20 inches thick.

Wirt Mineau saw the dam built when he was 12 years old, and he had worked there many times in his life. Though he died two years ago, many of the colorful stories he could tell of life in the lumber camps north of here were preserved in a 1955 interview for the Forest History Foundation, Inc., of St. Paul, made by Helen McCann White.

In a story that particularly concerns Nevers Dam, he recalled one about "a fellow scaling pilings that he was buying from the farmers (to be used in the dam)." Stillwater lumberman Wm. Sauntry, noticed he was stealing and told the foreman to discharge the man. " 'A man who'll steal for you, will steal from you,' he said."

John Robinson's grandfather homesteaded land along the river at Wolf Creek, and his father, Bill Robinson, worked the farm belonging to the St. Croix Dam and Boom company at Nevers. There were also two other men who handled the farming work there, John recalls, named Lynch and Thompson.

Mrs. Mineau tells this anecdote about Lynch: "Lynch and his hogs were inseparable . . . when he called his hogs, they answered from a half-mile away. He slopped the hogs from a barrel on a cart, and even though the dinner bell would call the men to the dining hall, Lynch would not take off to eat his meal until his hogs were properly fed.

"This meant he mostly came to meals late, after the rest of the men were done eating . . . for which the men were grateful, since the aroma surrounding Lynch tended to ruin their meals.

"The men at Nevers made up this verse, my husband Wirt told me,

"Old man Lynch goes around in glee
Chief engineer in the swill factory
With old Rock and his four-wheel gig
All you can hear is pig, pig, pig."

This farm was a large-scale enterprise, carried on by the lumber companies to supply food to the logging camps all winter.

John Robinson estimates there were 300 to 400 head of cattle, countless hogs and horses. Milk was regularly hauled to the creamery at Wolf Creek.

There was a blacksmith shop, stable, four barns, two silos, granary, ice house and buggy shed and the sawmill we mentioned previously. There was a store at which the company men could buy personal items, which Chester Fisk says, was known as "the wannigan." And, during the log drives when men flocked through Nevers on their way from the northern logging camps, they were accompanied by the actual wannigans which served them as floating cook shanty and bunk house.

A gatehouse at the Wisconsin end of the dam housed the gatetenders. A bunkhouse 20 feet by 30 feet, with bunks stacked three-high, housed the workmen.

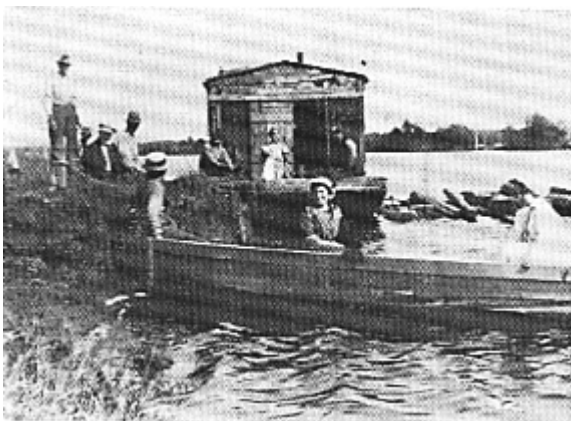
The old Charles Nevers house was used as an office and company residence during the construction of the dam, but burned in 1890. Another building raised on the spot replaced it until it, too, burned in 1941.

Nevers had settled his homestead here in 1860, and died in 1889 at the time negotiations were starting for the purchase of his land by the dam and boom company.

Mrs. Grace Bloom, Osceola, tells us that her grandfather, Seth Ayers, a pioneer lumberman at Osceola, had built a dam of rocks, stumps and sandbags across the river at "Nevers Place" as early as the mid-1850s. He used the dam to build up a head of water and to control the water level, for his logging operations 17 miles down-river at Osceola.

A big cook shack, the social center of the camp, was where John Robinson went to work at the age of twelve as "bull-cook" (his duties might be called 'K. P.' in modern slang).

He'd set the table with the tin plates and cups for as many as 80 or 90 men. The dirty dishes were dumped into a huge sink filled with hot soapy water and the dishwashing was done by simply stirring round and round with a wooden paddle. Forks, knives and spoons went into a sort of gunnysack that was swished over and over through the sink from end to end.



A home-built wannigan

The crew who picked deadheads in the flowage of Nevers Dam used this home-made wannigan built by Joe Arnal and the Lee Brothers shown in this photo taken about 1920.

Mrs. Wirt Mineau, who loaned us this print, explains that Geo. Lee is standing on the left side of the door, and the other three Lee brothers in the background are Vers, Harry and Fred. Otto Spengler is wearing the cap, in front, Frank Gustavson is seated in the boat to the left of Mrs. Spengler; also in the boat is Ruth McFaggen (Mrs. Adolph Eibs). The cook, Mrs. Ayres, is standing on the wannigan and seated at her right is Joe Arnal (he used to run boats across the Clam and St. Croix lakes).

This home-built wannigan, Mrs. Mineau tells us, is smaller than the usual 25 to 30 ft. length, but it is built in the true wannigan style, with no deck over the bottom of the boat. The cabin was large enough just to accommodate the cook crew, and it was built low to the water, so as to be more stable in swift running rivers.

Another type of boat used by the lumbermen, she explains, was the "shanty-boat," which was more like a houseboat, with sleeping quarters for the loggers during drives. This was in contrast to the true wannigan, since it had an upper deck, was higher from the water, and thus safe only in shallow, quiet water such as on the lower St. Croix and lakes. These were generally poled along, and were popular for towing.

The wannigan, though, moved along with the "river pigs" as the men were called who rode the logs down river in the drives. The men slept in a tent on shore, and every time it was necessary to move on down river, the "wannigan boy" had the duty of rolling up each man's belongings in the tent and putting them and the tent aboard the wannigan 'til they reached the next stopping place, Mrs. Mineau explains.

The Wannigan picture was taken on the left bank of the St. Croix river, just above the dam.

The farm raised "a lot of potatoes," John Robinson recalls, and one year they were plagued with potato bugs that could be kept from overrunning the place only by constant spraying.

He was 16 at the time, and working the neighboring Robinson farm, when he was enticed back to Nevers by Supt. Frawley's offer of \$1.00 a day to spray the bugs. This, he said, was the same wage the men were getting for a ten hour day, "if I could keep up with the men" in pumping the hand spray gun.

Even after Nevers Dam came under the control of the power company in 1903 (at the time construction began on the dam in St. Croix Falls) there was not at once a drastic change in its operations. Many of the employees stayed on, including Jim Frawley.



"Nevers Dam house," about 1916

This is Russell Frawley's photo of his birthplace. He and his brothers are in a buggy at the right. This house burned Dec. 19, 1941. A big porch was added after this photo was taken, encircling the front of the house.

Farming was continued, and for many years N.S.P. kept horses at Nevers, raising the feed for the animals right there.

Chester Fisk tells us also that the lumbermen kept the rights to pick deadheads and operate the sawmill at Nevers for some ten years later.

"The river was full of logs (deadheads) when the dam changed hands," Mr. Fisk recounts. "It took two years just to pick them out."

Some lumbermen took to shipping their logs by railroad, and Mr. Fisk remembers Stillwater lumbermen shipping logs from Pine City to Stillwater.

A 1902 "Taylors Falls Journal" noted: "So many logs have been hung up by delayed drives on the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers the past season that mill men would have been short of a supply but for those received by rail which is becoming the most popular and profitable way of getting logs to market."

As all logging operations on this river came to an end within a few years, the force at Nevers Dam was reduced to a couple of shifts of gate-tenders, a cook and a few men to tend the farm-until horses were replaced by motors, and even that was discontinued.

One by one, buildings burned, or were torn down, or sold and moved.

"You say 'Nevers Dam' to almost any native . . . and two thoughts will flash into his mind 'Big fishing and big eats.'"

This is how Charles O. Roos started his book on the St. Croix Valley, "Green Timber". (Quoted by permission of the publisher H. B. Satterlee.) "Green Timber" was first published in 1920, and a second edition printed in 1945. The book is a collection of some of Charles Roos' newspaper items published in the Standard-Press back in the early years of this century.

The first chapter, The North Trail, gives a colorful picture of life at Nevers:

"Nevers Dam has always meant more to me than chow or pike. It is the fifth and last chapter in the romance of pine on the Friendly River -- River history was made there. In the big camps on the Payette, Clearwater and the western Washington country one will meet men who have put logs through Nevers Dam."

He writes of the logging days, the great lumbermen and their log marks, and the trip up the river road to Nevers Dam. He talks of the pile driver at work there -- "with a Tom Scullion at the levers a giant's work can be done in the space of a day" . . . "The huge hammer on the machine at Nevers weighs three and a half tons and hasn't missed a lick yet."

"It was our good fortune to meet up with John McLaughlin, who has charge of the sunken logs operation on this river. John is an old St. Croixian and is the one man to write the story of 'Pine.' " Roos retells a story or two of the lumber days, and describes the "great dinner" waiting in the cook house.

Then, "It was a surprise to visit the sleeping shanty and find double-deck, one-man iron bunks with real mattresses and the whole place as clean as the best room at home. In the good old days we were glad to shake down in deep wooden "two-men" bunks -- two-deckers, too, with swamp grass to ease the aches. Then, straw was a luxury. What would the Old "River Pigs" say to steel bunks -- single -- and real mattresses?...Though I have bunked down in camps from coast to coast, this sleeping shanty is certainly the best I have ever seen."

"Three men are now at the dam who worked on the original construction -- John Mackey, Tom Scullion, and Bob Gray. These boys have rich stores of river stories locked up in their hearts. John Mackey retold the story of the drowning of Billy Webb in June, 1890. I shall never forget the day the news came to the Falls that Webb, the best swimmer on the St. Croix, was drowned at Nevers."

"Mr. Frawley has a crew of some twenty-five men making extensive repairs at the dam. Piling and new cribs are being put in to protect the foundation. The big flood of last spring put the old works to the acid test. Two gates will be opened that have been closed since 1898."

"Nevers Dam is the largest of its kind ever constructed and was built in 1889-1890 at a cost of over \$200,000. Mr. Robert A. Lang, the Builder, is known throughout the land as the inventor of the Bear Trap Gate. The great bear trap at Nevers is the largest in the world having a span of eighty feet. At the time of its construction this width was considered by many to be too great; yet later on, when the yellow flood waters were roaring down from the Snake, Kettle and Namekagon, this eighty-foot gate saved the dam again and again, proving Mr. Lang the master dam builder. Nevers Dam with her fifteen gates, makes a fifteen-mile flowage which affords fishing, boating, and duck shooting."

"Three years ago last spring the last log to run the St. Croix dipped its nose under the bear trap. We appreciate that Mr. Frawley sent for Uncle John Dobney, that he might be on the boom and spike the last stick through. Uncle John, who saw the first white pine drift down the quick waters of the Friendly River must have had a heartache as he pike-poled the last log through."

"It takes some ten thousand feet of lumber to build a snug home. Ninety-two hundred million feet of pine have been sluiced through the bear trap at Nevers. How many homes would they build?"

It was rather a brief "boom" for Nevers Dam, during that 15 years or so of logging that it served St. Croix river lumbermen . . . especially considering the legal battles that were fought over it, and the money, ingenuity and hard work that went into its construction.

There were some unique things about Nevers Dam, aside from the fact that it may have been the largest wood-piling dam in the world.

For one thing, there was the electric light system installed back in 1889 so that work could progress day and night. This was actually a carbon light, powered by a generator at Nevers. Few of the local people had ever before seen electric lights, and people drove from miles around to see it.

Chester Fisk recalls that it gave a light that "flickered all the time."

The "Lang" submerged gate was another novel feature. This was the huge 80 feet across gate designed by engineer Lang especially for Nevers Dam, in order to sluice the logs through, reportedly the largest gate in the world. Its sluiceway could handle a volume of 4,000,000 feet of logs each hour.

The "Stillwater Gazette" said, in 1890, "Probably the most interesting part of this work is its system of gates, and the ease and accuracy with which they work."

A description of the Lang gate appeared in the newspapers of the day (1890): "It consists of three sections, two of which slide over each other, and are connected to the bed or floor of the dam by chains and linked bars of iron, the third or main section being attached to the floor with links and staples of iron, making a flexible joint, which allows the gate to accommodate itself to any obstruction, such as formations of ice or soil and gravel.

"The gate when open lies flat on the bed of the dam, allowing the water to pass over it. When it is necessary to close the gate or to hold it at any desired point, it can be done without any trouble. It is operated by means of a hand-wheel on the adjoining pier . . .

"This gate, although a ponderous affair, can be handled by a boy, so nicely is it arranged. The method by which this result is obtained is by opening a small flume under the gate, the water pressing under creating a pressure, causing the gates to rise. By liberating the pressure, the gate descends to any level required."

An article in the May, 1890, St. Croix Valley Standard, while the dam was under construction notes: "The benefits of the Nevers Dam are already being felt . . . Only one day has the boom here (at Stillwater) shut down this season so far, and today all the gaps will be at work again . . . The success of the mills this year is phenomenal, not a break to detain them . . . the cut will be large, several of the mills showing a much better record at this date than for several years past."

But it had taken the intervention of both the Wisconsin and the Minnesota legislatures before the Stillwater lumbermen had been moved to organize the company to build the boom and dam at Nevers place.

For years, they had "oppressed the people of the upper valley" by their monopoly of the St. Croix river, protected by a territorial charter which was due to expire in 1890. Now, as an editorial in the Standard put it, "The owners of logs and pine timber on the St. Croix and its tributaries were forced to take action, and the result was that a corporation was organized in both states, which has in course of construction a large dam . . . "

The St. Croix Dam and Boom Company was the organization of Stillwater lumbermen, and they pushed through a new law in the 1889 Wisconsin legislature to give them rights to build the Nevers dam.

"The gentlemen who are seeking this franchise," the Standard reported, "are Wisconsin men representing four-fifths of the pine on the St. Croix waters . . . "

It turned out that the Wisconsin men were representing none other than William Sauntry, a powerful Stillwater lumberman, and the Weyerhaeuser company of St. Paul . . . and ultimately the whole company of Stillwater, Minnesota, lumbermen. (It seems that by working through the Wisconsin legislature, they opened the way for the same privileges in their own state legislature.)

The men named in the bill as it passed the legislature were: Amos E. Jefferson, James Thompson, S. W. Chinn, Edward B. Lewis and Edward A. O'Brien. The bill became effective on April 1, 1889, for an initial period of thirty years.

It stated that the boom company had to make allowances for sorting logs at any mill that might be erected at St. Croix Falls; it prevented the boom company from building any structure that might have interfered with the "improvement" of the water-power here; and it protected the Isaac Staples charter at the Falls.

But Isaac Staples, a wealthy Stillwater lumberman who had just sold his lumbering interests, opposed the bill long after construction was underway at Nevers. Staples had bought up vast land holdings at St. Croix Falls, as well as the river rights, which he purchased from Major J. A. Baker's Cushing Land Office in 1887. Staples, it seems, wanted to build a toll dam upriver at the spot where the Rivard farm is now located.

In June, 1889, the Standard reported: "The St. Croix Dam and Boom company filed articles of incorporation in the register of deeds office. The capital stock is fixed at \$100,000. The principal place of business is at St. Croix Falls."

The very next issue of the Standard said: "The St. Croix River Navigation and Improvement company has filed articles of incorporation with the secretary of state. Its purpose is to improve the St. Croix River commencing at Rock Island, above the village of Franconia, through the dalles at Taylors Falls, the main falls of the St. Croix, the rapids above the latter Falls, and over the Yellow Pine rapids above the mouth of Sunrise River; to handle and drive logs and to erect necessary sluiceways and booms, and to straighten the channel of the St. Croix river, so as to make the driving of logs over the rapids and falls certain at all times during the spring and summer.

"The principal place of business is to be at Taylors Falls . . . and the capital stock is fixed at \$100,000. Following are the incorporators: Isaac Staples of Stillwater; J. S. Baker of St. Croix Falls, and Henry Stetzer of "Taylors Falls."

A notice in the August 22, 1889, Standard next told: "The St. Croix Dam and Boom Corporation will commence the construction of a dam above the rapids as soon as the drive now in the river is out of the way. The stock is owned by the lumbermen in proportion to the amount of business done . . ." The article concludes: "All that is needed is the men with capital." (It seems that the Standard editor didn't know, or wasn't saying, that Stillwater and St. Paul lumbermen were behind this corporation.)



Here the steam-powered pile driver and boiler are mounted on a barge, during 1916 repairs. Note the rock filled cribs of the pier in the foreground, and on the Wisconsin shore, a wooden crib has been built, ready to be floated into position on the dam and sunk.

(J.R. Frawley photo)

The abstract of the Nevers property shows that Wm. Sauntry of Stillwater bought the Charles Nevers land in September of 1889.

The September 19 issue announced: "Work has commenced on the big dam to be erected at Nevers, ten miles above St. Croix Falls. Two engines, a pile driver, and several car loads of material have been hauled up this week. Work will be pushed as rapidly as possible. The structure will cost \$100,000 and work will give employment to a large force of men."

In the next issue: "Work is being pushed on the big dam at Nevers; two pile drivers are constantly at work. A large amount of material has been shipped here, and hauled up by teams."

Following issues report:

"Men are constantly being employed at Nevers, to work on the dam.

"Capt. Stewart is engaged in making a survey of the lands adjacent to the river above the dam.

"The Dam company floated the sawed timber required, from the Grantsburg crossing down to Nevers.

"The electric light is now in successful operation and a night force at work on the dam.

"There is a foot pass across the river at the dam."

And even now, the courts were still debating the question of where the dam would be located!

In the October, 1889, issue the Standard reports: "The hearing of the Staples dam company to condemn lands in Minnesota was on trial at Center City The Staples company had witnesses to prove that at Dobney's (about six miles up from St. Croix Falls) was the only proper place in their judgment, while the other side had a large number of witnesses to prove that in order to hold a sufficient quantity of water to insure against jams in the Dalles, and to entirely prevent a blockade of the river below, that the dam must be built at Nevers"

The battle was carried out in the newspapers, too. The Standard news accounts were strongly slanted in favor of the dam at Nevers. An October, 1889 issue of the Standard prints, indignantly (about a neighboring newspaper):

The "News" last week printed under the head of St. Croix items, a statement to the effect that no respectable man would work at the Dam, and that at meal times only those who would push and crowd got a chance to eat. One or two from Taylors Falls were discharged, and the "News" must have obtained its information from them or from some dead-beat who was hanging around the cook room. The fact is that some of the best men in the valley are at work at Nevers, and there is an abundance of good food, and to spare. Tom Wright is one of the best cooks on the river, and treats everybody in good shape, as many of our citizens who have been up there can testify. Mr. Lang, the superintendent, is a gentleman, and understands his business, but he has no time to waste with men who want to put in time and avoid work.

The November 28, 1889, issue says: "Litigation between the Staples dam company and the St. Croix River and Improvement Co. is yet pending in the Minnesota courts, but the work of completing the big dam at Nevers goes right along."

The following excerpt is from the October 3, 1889, issue of the St. Croix Valley Standard:

A visit to the works at Nevers will convince the most skeptical that the Boom & Dam company mean business. When a Standard reporter was there the first of the week, a busy scene was presented -- the two pile drivers were at work, one on each shore. The piles were only about twelve feet long, as the bottom is of the best. Pine is being used, and for the bottom tier oak twelve inches thick through has been ordered. Two more pile drivers have been set up this week, and also an engine to furnish the power for the electric light plant, and after this week work still progresses night and day.

Monday there were ninety men at dinner, but the number will be increased. The headquarters, office and cooking is in the Nevers residence. Adjoining this has been erected a dining room to accommodate the entire force. A short distance from the house a building has been constructed for sleeping quarters. A large blacksmith shop has been built and with the stables required for the teams employed on the work and in transportation, makes quite a camp.

The officers propose to construct the best dam ever built, and to have it completed before next spring . . . William Sauntry is general manager while Mr. Lang, an experienced dam builder, and Mr. Tainter, who will put in the gates, are in immediate charge of the work.

The December 5, '89 issue tells: "The St. Croix Dam and Boom Co. held their annual meeting in this village . . . all the stock was represented. The board of directors elected the following officers: Samuel McClure, president; Jacob Bean, treasurer; N. H. Clapp, secretary; Wm. Sauntry, general manager," (all of Stillwater).

The next issue deplores the fact that some persons still persist in saying that the development at Nevers Dam will hamper future improvements at St. Croix Falls, and "retail a lot of chestnuts about what Mr. Staples would have done some time within the next century, if he had obtained a charter to build a TOLL dam at the head of the rapids for revenue only . . . "

"There is no man in St. Croix Falls or in the valley who can truthfully say that Isaac Staples ever promised to make any improvement at St. Croix Falls provided he could obtain a charter for a dam at the head of the rapids"

(As it turned out, it wasn't until after Isaac Staples died that the Stone & Webster Co. of Boston bought up the Staples land and river rights from over 20 heirs of Staples, to finally "improve" the river here -- building the power dam. But by then, as Mr. Harry Baker points out to us, "it was too late" for this dam to lead to St. Croix Falls' and Taylors Falls' development as industrial centers -- high tension lines by then were developed to carry the electrical power away to the Twin Cities.)

Mention of the Staples company's petition was not noticed in the "Standard" again.

The lengthy Nevers News column is making regular appearances in the "Standard" by now, with items such as these, gleaned from several weeks' offerings:

"Mr. Thomas Wright is kept very busy now, cooking for 285 men . . . Wedine Bros. are putting their mill in working order, and expect to begin sawing the first of the week. They have a large order to fill for the Dam Co.... The electric lights have been extended to the gravel pit, a distance of half a mile, and assists the boys greatly mornings and evenings . . .

"A large work-house is underway of construction, to be used for the building of gates and etc. . . . Charles McCourt has parted with his beard and mustache . . . Mr. George Dolan is becoming quite an accomplished violinist under the tutelage of Chas. Fornell . . .

"Ole Swenson had his hand badly bruised while coupling cars last Friday and left for St. Croix Falls for medical treatment.

"Justice McPherson returned home on Sunday last, looking as though the lawyers had given him a severe cross-examination.

"Directors Jacob Bean and David Tozer were up and inspected the works yesterday. They expressed themselves as being highly pleased with the progress . . .

"Mr. Register claims that the party who substituted potatoes for his apples did not fool him very badly, as he knew there was something the matter when he took the first bite.

"On account of a shipment of carbons being delayed the night crew had to suspend operations for the present.

"Some of the boys who drive blooded horses were amused somewhat today to see a farmer pass with a horse and an ox harnessed together.

"The dam company has had a 25-horsepower engine hauled from St. Croix Falls, also a planer.

"The wood-work on the Dam has progressed sufficiently to admit of putting in rock and gravel as foundation.

"Chas. and John Aker, with ladies, from St. Croix, were gazing at the electric lighis, and buzzing the cooks, at this place Sunday evening.

"Mr. Carrigan claims that dry hard wood placed in a bed does not add to the heat of the room.

"Tom Wright and J. G. Gusterton are actively engaged in securing subscriptions for the purpose of starting a band amongst the boys at work here.

"A human skeleton was unearthed at the gravel pit on the east side of the river. It is supposed to be the bones of an Indian, as there once was a trading post at this place."

We're up to January, 1890, issues in the St. Croix Valley Standard with news of Nevers:

"The oak timber that is being manufactured here for use in the dam is as firm as can be found in this country.

"Isaac Register received quite a serious injury last Friday by a heavy timber falling on him, but he is now up and around again.

"Bill Wright, who has stayed by the dam ever since the building of it was commenced, left last Saturday for the woods for Sauntry & Tozer.

"Conductor Carroll has his cars running in fine shape and as soon as he can possibly get away he intends to go to Long Lake on a business trip for Tim Sullivan, of what nature we are unable to ascertain."
(Tracks had been laid to haul materials out to and onto the dam on horse-drawn cars).

"The dam is at a stage now when it is hard for one of inexperience to detect any growth at all, but to the men who are doing the funny work, it is growing fast. It won't be long now before it will loom up in great shape.

"The people in this vicinity were long since convinced of Mr. Lang's abilities as a dam builder, but not 'til the other night when he was presented with a fine meerschaum pipe did they discover that he was also an orator.

"Andrew Mattson's team startled a few of the boys Monday by taking a jog all by themselves. George Dolan made a flying leap into the sleigh, picked up the ribbons and brought the horses to a stand-still. George can get a move on him if he has a mind to.

"In putting a pump into a well Monday, it was necessary for Mr. Ole Baker to descend. They attached a rope, not to his neck, but to a pail, into which Mr. Baker inconveniently sat. When within about ten feet of the water the rope slipped, and down went McGinty to the bottom of the well. Frank Webb was singing the McGinty act as he was disappearing and he don't think it was entirely the fault of the rope. It was carrying it too far when they asked him if it was wet down there.

"Hans Soley (the cook) displayed his gallantry last Saturday evening, by showing a number of ladies around the many different buildings at the dam, and explaining to them how cookies, biscuits, etc., were made. Tom Wright will have to look to his laurels, as Hans is dangerous when he lets himself out.

"We have got it, and got it bad. LaGrippe has caught hold of us in great shape. The following are doing the sneezing act: Chas. McCourt, Hans Soley, Billie Blink, Chas. Williams, Mike Collins, James Carroll, John T. Markie, J. McLaughlin, Rob McLean, George Dolan, G. A. Mathews, M. A. Page, Jas. Brennan, W. H. Scott, and many others. Those who have not been favored with the latest style of distemper don't appear to feel very badly over it. James Brennan says he broke it up on himself by the liberal use of water -- that is, St. Croix mineral water. Others claim this medicine is N. G.

"Guy Mathews received quite an electric shock on Monday evening, caused by the electric light wires crossing the cable used in hauling cars.

"The boys have organized a society known as the Damville Codfish Club. President, Tom Wright; secretary, J. McLaughlin; treasurer, P. Kirkland. Sobriety and a knowledge of etiquette are among the numerous essential qualifications for membership.

"Seventeen applications have been made for membership to the Damville Codfish Club, during the past week; fifteen were rejected and two accepted.

" 'Where is my boy tonight?' was very nicely rendered the other evening, by a young lady, on leaving the works here, and the boys are all guessing what it is that is absent."

These were a fun-loving, comradely group of men, judging by these accounts. Perhaps that was because the work was so hard and so dangerous. These same old newspaper stories reveal that at least two men lost their lives in the construction work at Nevers.

On April 24, 1890, we read: "Andrew Anderson was killed while at work at the dam, last Friday, by the falling of a mass of gravel. Mr. Anderson's home was at Dresser Junction. He leaves a wife and several children. Although there have been several accidents at the dam, this was the first fatal one."

The June 12, '90 issue reports: "Tuesday afternoon Wm. Webb, while engaged in painting a gate on the Nevers Dam, fell into the water and was carried over the dam. There is a terrible undercurrent at the foot of the apron, but being an expert swimmer, he succeeded in getting into the smooth, but swift water below, only to sink before a boat could reach him."



During the 1916 repairs, tracks were built across the dam to haul gravel fill for the cribs from the pit on the Wisconsin shore (at right) in small dump cars. The track, according to Andrew Froberg who helped lay it, was built on an incline. The cars rolled downhill with two boys riding along to brake them. One of these "boys" was Clarence Vitalis, Shafer. This was a dangerous job, Froberg says, as the boys had to jump free in case of trouble. He identifies the man standing on the tracks as Albert Hulett. The pile driver is set right on the floor of the dam.

(J. R. Frawley photo)

The "Stillwater Gazette" of 1890 wrote of the dam: "Work was commenced last September and completed or nearly so June 1st. The average number of men engaged during that time 180; though late last fall the number reached 280. In addition, there were in operation five steam engines, two planing mills, one saw mill, one electric light plant, several pile drivers, seven flatboats for moving stone, lumber, etc., besides a large number of horse and ox teams."

We note in the news columns of the "St. Croix Valley Standard" that Wolf Creek was a flourishing community at that time, prospering with the Nevers Dam activity and business. "E. H. Florshutz of Wolf Creek, beef contractor for the company, is kept busy buying cattle. He delivers beef daily."

The population swelled (some say to 300 persons) probably including a number of dam workers who roomed with Wolf Creek families. And "culture" had a fling, too, with the Wolf Creek Dramatic Club regularly putting on programs and plays. "The Wolf Creek Dramatic Club gave an entertainment at Nevers, Saturday evening, which was largely attended, many being present from St. Croix Falls, Sunrise and Grantsburg, the hall being filled to its utmost capacity."

Mrs. Mineau mentions there were "Two general stores, a flour mill, two blacksmiths, and about a dozen residences, right on Main street." Raleigh Rogers, who now operates the store there -- the only business place now -- adds that there were also a post office, big dance hall, log saloon, creamery, a bicycle shop and millinery store.

Back to the "Standard" accounts, now, of Nevers Dam in 1890:

"A dance will be given by the leading jolly fellows of Nevers, in the large dining room tomorrow evening. A large number are expected to be present, and an unusually fine time is anticipated

(Next issue) "The dance a grand success, about 125 couples present. Music was furnished by Prof. J. R. Warner's orchestra of Stillwater. A continual round of pleasure from the hours of 8 until 4. The towns of Grantsburg, Taylors Falls, St. Croix Falls, and Osceola were well represented. E. W. Durant, Mayor of Stillwater and William Sauntry, general manager of the St. Croix Dam and Boom Company, attended."

"Mr. Lang lost his balance the other afternoon and found it in about five feet of water. Your correspondent failed to catch the reply when Mr. Lang was asked if it was wet.

"The gravel and pier work is being pushed very rapidly. The men are working with a will, and are taking advantage of the beautiful weather.

"John F. Mackie, Geo. Dolan and Jas. Dolan took part in a taffy pull at Wm. Towers' Saturday night, and claim they enjoyed a very pleasant time. Mr. Mackie was surprised as well as amused when he undertook to take off his overshoes, to find that some party or parties unknown had placed a quantity of taffy in his rubbers, thereby making it a very difficult task for him to remove them.

"Seen Under The Electric Light: Norman Howe dancing a jig . . . W. Blink playing the mouth organ . . . George Dolan looking for a laundry . . . John Carroll telling the last Stillwater news . . . George Morton not saying anything -- he was asleep . . . Guy Matthews, F. C. Webb, and Rob. McClean, writing . . . Arthur Ellison turning hand springs behind the gravel train . . . Ole Baker trying to break the cable by running against it . . . Tom Wright using a squirt gun through a hole in the wall . . . John McLaughlin settling with the farmers for rock, piling and logs hauled during the past month.

"The dam progressed rapidly last week, and on Saturday night the water was running over the plank flow the whole distance. All the piers have been started, and many are about half completed.

"The Milwaukee Bridge & Iron Works has the contract to construct the span across the 80-foot space at the large gate. They are to have it completed by the 8th of March. A Daniels planer is being put in place for the purpose of planing large timbers

"The dam is going right on towards completion. Five gates have been put in place during the past week. The 80-foot Lang gate is finally underway and many of the piers are about completed. There are ten piers being built in the flowage of dam, to hang booms on . . . Capt. Carroll, who has charge of putting the

booms in place, is getting there with both pedal extremities, and says: "You bet we will have things in shape when the boom is required." The Captain is a great favorite with his men as well as

"A sleigh load consisting of Messrs. Olcott, Wilson, Griswold and Baker brothers, accompanied by the Misses Thompson, Vincent, Snider and Nash, of St. Croix Falls, made us a pleasant call Monday evening."

(Mr. Harry Baker, when we talked with him about Nevers Dam, reminisced about the good times he and his brothers had had at the dam . . . and how it attracted visitors from all over the area.)

Next we'll skip to the May 1890 issue of the "Standard" for these two items:

"The Never's house at the dam with all its adjoining buildings, was consumed by fire last Saturday morning just previous to breakfast, the origin of which is not fully known. The building was divided and sub-divided into offices for the superintendent and clerk, sleeping apartment, both in the second story and below, cook room and dining room, also store room for groceries. The men just barely had time to remove the contents. The large sleeping shanty was untouched and has been divided off and suitably arranged for business, and matters are running as smoothly as ever."

"Such peculiar things will happen. For instance about as soon as there was no more use for the planing mill at the dam the flames reduced it to ashes, and now the main building and adjoining building are in the same state. Smaller quarters will do just as well as the crew is constantly decreasing. The long sleeping shanty will have to disappear next."

Following this observation by the editor of the Standard (J. H. McCourt) there is a considerable lapse in News from Nevers in this newspaper.

The first foreman after the dam was built was called "Hooper" McGraw. He was succeeded by Jack Ryan of Stillwater (whose family lived at Taylors Falls at the time, we're told), then James Frawley took over.

Names of the men who worked at Nevers Dam are unavailable, but many are well remembered, and have been mentioned to us . . . names like "Big Jim" Rogers and his brother, Ben Rogers, Elias Blair and Charlie Simpson, Tom Rainey, and Tom Clancy, Christ Petersen and Andrew Anderson.

Lucy Orr Johnson, now of Portland, Oregon, writes: "My own father, Thomas Orr, and Uncle Jimmie Orr, and even Aunt Maggie Orr O'Neill, knew the dam so well.

"At the time the dam was being built, my folks were living on the old home farm seven miles north of Wolf Creek, and used to walk to the dam mornings to work and then walk home again in the evening.

"This they did much of the time with only an occasional stay-over at the dam.

"Dad was a horseman so worked with the hauling. Uncle Jim did various jobs. His last, I heard him say, was as cookee. He quit in 1897 and left to go to Kellogg, Idaho, to live.

"It was at Nevers Dam that I saw my first silo. I remember they had a square silo at first and later built a round one.

"It was the thrill of a lifetime to drive the river road and pass the foaming water, and see the logs and men . . . "



A close-up view of the steam hammer used to pound pilings during the 1916 repairs. A section of the track is shown, on its trestle across the floor of the dam.

(J. R. Frawley photo)

Mrs. Ernest Armstrong of Trade River, writes: "In 1850 there was an Indian settlement at the mouth of Wolf Creek by the St. Croix River. (This was called Sebatana, meaning "Place of flowing clear water".) Near the site which later became Nevers Dam the Indians had chosen a place as a ceremonial ground where they came spring and fall to pray and give thanks.

"There were two Indian camps, one near the west bank of the river -- later this site was called Frawley's Trout pond, the other to the east, called the Big Pond. Years later in the woods and fields were found many arrow heads from these Indians." Another story of "old Nevers" comes from Mrs. Grace Brown, of Long Beach, California, formerly of Taylors Falls:

"I spent many weeks at Nevers Dam with Mrs. Frawley and ate many of Charley Olson's doughnuts and cakes. This was 1900-1921. I assisted Mrs. Frawley when they were short-handed.

'Yes, that dining room floor was scrubbed every morning and being unpainted white pine, sand was used to scour it till it was as white as elbow grease and sand could make it. There are a lot of things about Nevers I recall, specially a cook (first name forgotten) Staples, who could make up the darndest lies I ever heard anyone tell and I've heard a lot of those old timers' yarns in my day.

"When messages came to the Livery Stables at Taylors Falls by wire, from mills at Stillwater, I used to drive to Nevers many times to deliver them to Mr. Frawley. (There were no telephone connections and wires came about noon or six o'clock). It took a long day to make the trip. Sometimes I stayed overnight if weather was bad but otherwise I made the round trip. Sometimes that old river trail (scarcely worthy to be called a road) was a bit scary as it was ungraded just dirt over rocks of all sizes and chuck holes in between. The dirt washed off or blew away, leaving a "rock and roll trail" which left you feeling as though you'd just passed through a storm at sea.

"Bushes grew almost to wheel tracks and if you met a team one or the other had to back up to a place where you could pass." She continues, "One time I was going up with Mrs. Frawley, who was driving their team (must have been dusk when the telegram reached Taylors Falls) when all of sudden something screamed from a branch just over our heads. Mrs. F. used the horse whip and we moved out of there fast. Mr. Frawley later told us it was a lynx (Indian Devil) and if you've missed hearing one you've really missed something. Those screams could make your blood curdle They are horrible. Mr. F. said there was a deer crossing at that place and we had startled the animal waiting in the tree for its prey. Mr. F. said they would not attack a person unless cornered. (I boarded at Old Spangler home in spring of 1903 and many nights were made horrible by laughing loons and screaming lynx along the river near Daubney Rapids. Those night-sounds made one feel they were reaching the 'Gates to the Abode of Condemned Souls')."

More reminiscences of Nevers come from Mrs. Elizabeth Krueger (formerly Bessie Anderson) now of Wauwatosa, Wis.: "In 1915 we lived on a peninsula on the St. Croix river near the 'Old Saw Mill'.

"My two sisters and I played on many log jams near the shores and also the barges along the river. It was a thrill to see the logs come down the river and many log jams with men separating them . . . also the foaming water and the sounds as it came rushing through the gates at the dam. It was a beautiful sight.

"My step-father, Henry Sorenson, worked for Jim Frawley many years and at the sawmill. He had helped to blast the ice jams in the spring, so they wouldn't damage the bridge. Times were hard and money was scarce, he worked for a dollar a day.

"My grandparents, Dick and Grace Barter, also worked for Mr. Frawley. They lived on the old Englin homestead on the St. Croix River."

And, from Miss Sylvia Erickson, of Cushing, daughter of Andrew Erickson

"My parents came to Wolf Creek in 1887 and their work at the dam helped them get started. He walked the six or seven miles to work, carrying groceries home. Often they carried supplies from St. Croix Falls. A clock he bought at a store in St. Croix Falls is still ticking and striking away right in this room, since 1887. Things were made to last in those days!

"Times were hard when Nevers Dam was built. Even at the very modest wages, 50¢ a day, and long days with hard and dangerous work, my father was glad to get the chance -- taking the place of one who had been killed at his post, shoveling clay. Money was scarce, but interest rate of ten percent was charged, so there were many problems to overcome in order to come out ahead.

"The men at the dam were good customers of those who could provide good warm stockings and mittens. Sheep were raised and all the work from shearing to knitting was done in the homes. My sisters had become very proficient in that art and put out each a sock a day -- nice long ones. These were traded at the Wolf Creek Store, Hoover and Sally, for 50¢ a pair in trade!

"There were no idle moments in the farm house. At the early age of five my eldest sister, Elizabeth, had begged to learn how to knit; the one precious set of needles was denied her, whereupon she went outdoors and fashioned herself some from twigs, and raveled some old knitting material, and taught herself!

"Blueberries were picked and traded for groceries at 5¢ a heaping quart box; butter was six cents and eggs about the same, a dozen.

"While the men were at work the women and children took care of farm work, using oxen for power -- which was often itself quite a chore."

And we have this letter from Russell Frawley, of Minneapolis, a son of the James Frawleys. (There were two other sons, John and Emmet and a daughter, Alice, who died of diphtheria at the age of 12, at Nevers Dam):

"Prior to moving to Nevers Dam in 1896, my parents, I believe, were located at Solon Springs, Wisconsin, which is at the head of the St. Croix River and the starting point of the spring drive.

"I was born at Nevers Dam in June of 1899. About 1905 or '06 we moved to St. Croix Falls and I started school. Later we built a house in St. Croix Falls which is now occupied by one of the Pepper boys. (That house is at 325 North Jefferson.) My father commuted back and forth to Nevers Dam with horses, sometimes with a launch, and later with a 1911 EMF car.

"I don't remember a great deal about the logging operations. I do remember the steamboat at Nevers as I once stubbed my toe on the gang plank and fell into the water. George Ward (who you mentioned as one of the crew) pulled me out.

"There was a Nevers Dam house where we lived, which had a large dining room for feeding the loggers. The loggers lived in a bunk house which was outside the fenced yard. There was a stile over the fence near the bunkhouse. I have never seen a stile since, so guess they are not popular anymore.

"Believe it or not, but Wolf Creek was quite a spot in the old days for a 4th of July celebration. There was a mill pond (above the flour mill) and here the loggers would compete in log rolling contests and walking above the pond on a tightrope."

We also heard from Andrew Froberg, Lindstrom, Minn., who sent a photo of the house at Nevers Dam which later burned down. He was a watchman at the dam from 1912 to 1918:

"It is now 52 years since I came there to work in 1912. The first ones I met were Frank Cain and Tom Rainey, who worked there. In the spring of 1913 I got the job of taking care of the dam. Charlie Olson, the cook, and I had every other Sunday off. And he would take care of the dam when I was gone and I took care of the cooking when he was not there.

"In 1913 the last log drive went through the dam. In 1917 the water was the highest it had been for years, it was right up to the top. The old dam just stood there shaking with all gates wide open.

"We had good food, and the wages were good, no lost time Sundays and all."

Mr. and Mrs. Froberg were married 50 years ago while he was employed at Nevers Dam. Their first home was a small one-room house, plus a shed for the car, which Mr. Froberg says he built himself, on the Wisconsin shore of the dam. They both have many stories of good fishing at Nevers Dam.

Andy Froberg took part in the extensive repairs made on the dam in 1916, which put back into operation two gates washed out in 1898, and actually replaced much of the original structure, including new flooring on all the piers.

But the giant Large gate, Froberg tells us, being no longer needed nor kept in repair, just "went down and we couldn't get it up" in about 1915. That winter the crew put in an 80-foot bulkhead to cover the gap it left. Andy Froberg recalls a narrow escape that spring when, in high water, he was on the bulkhead reinforcing it with boards when the other half of it "just washed out."

Through the courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, we have an article from the "Mississippi Valley Lumberman," of April 1890, which gives some additional details on the construction of the dam. We quote in part:

"After it had been decided to build the dam and the stock had been subscribed, a committee of practical representative lumbermen were appointed to select a site, and they decided upon a location ten miles above St. Croix Falls at Nevers.

"In June, preparations were made, but active operations were not commenced until in September, and the first pile was driven on the 21st of that month. Four steam pile drivers were put at work and the foundation was pushed as rapidly as the nature of the work would admit. The river bed is 624 feet from shore to shore. Piles were driven three and one-half feet by five feet apart a distance of 112 feet up and down stream, requiring 7,500 pieces. The bed of the river was earth, and the piles were driven from twelve to fifteen feet. These piles were connected on either side with timbers 8x12 cross way of the stream and fastened with bolts and nuts to the tenants on top of the piles. This entire base, 624x112 feet, was filled with rock and gravel and floored over with four-inch oak planks, the seams in the plank being caulked with oakum.

"Upon this floor, or base, the piers are placed. The abutments on either side of the river are 190x20 feet and twenty feet above the floor of the dam. There are fourteen piers, aside from abutments, twelve of which are 12x84 and two 14x84, all eighteen feet above the floor. At the center of the base of the dam there is a drop of twenty-four inches. The jambs of the gate are immediately above the drop. There are twelve gates in the dam of the pattern known as the Tainter gate, with an improved hoisting gear.

From the Stillwater Gazette article "Mr. Lang has greatly improved the method of hoisting in the Tainter style by means of a box filled with rock weighing 3,000 pounds, which balances the weight of the gate as a weight balances a window."

"Each of these gates is twenty-four feet wide and sixteen feet high. There are also three submerged gates built under the patents issued to R. A. Lang of Eau Claire. One of these gates is twenty feet wide, one, twenty-four feet and the other eighty feet. The latter is said to be the largest gate in the world."

"In addition to the dam proper there is an apron before the dam of thirty feet. There have been used in the construction of the dam 3,500,000 feet of timber, six car loads of spikes, two car loads of iron and 1,800 cords of rock. The crew employed has varied from 85 men to nearly 300 at one time -- in all 37,000 days' labor up to this date.

"In the fall and early winter an electric light plant was operated and a saw mill and planer have been kept at work. The wing on the Wisconsin shore is 100 feet in length and on the Minnesota shore 1,200 feet, making a total of 1,900 feet. On the dam a substantial wagon bridge with a roadway of fourteen feet has been built.

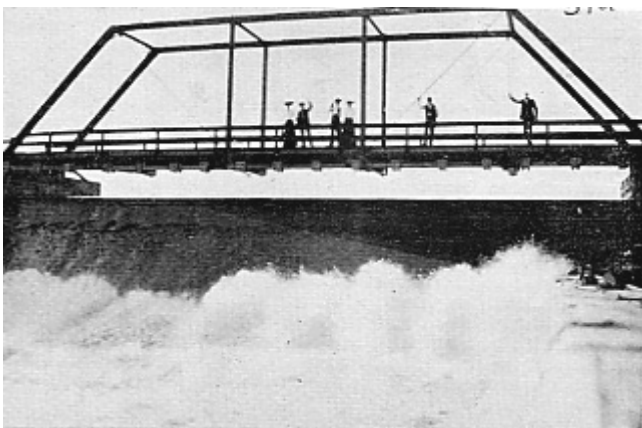
"This bridge will facilitate travel across the river, the only means heretofore having been a ferry above this pond.

"The flowage of the dam is immense, the bottoms of one point being nearly two miles in length and extend up the river for ten miles. This will afford ample storage room and give abundance of water to drive the river and operate the boom at Stillwater all the season. The corporation has secured most of the land required for flowage by purchase from the owners, although it has power to condemn, but has preferred to deal directly with the owners, and has succeeded in doing so except in a few cases. It will require some thirty days yet to complete the work on the wings and ballast the piers.

"The entire structure is a masterpiece of workmanship and reflects credit on the skill of the superintendent, Robert A. Lang, under whose supervision the entire work has been done. Mr. Lang is a practical mechanic. Samuel McClure of Stillwater is the president of the Dam and Boom company and William Sauntry, general manager. These two gentlemen have devoted a good deal of time to the enterprise. The cost of this work, including lands purchased and riparian rights, will exceed \$250,000."



The 80-foot Lang gate ("Bear Trap") open for sluicing.



The Lang gate closed.

(J.R. Frawley photos)

The next item in the Standard concerning the dam at Nevers is one reprinted from the Stillwater correspondence in the Pioneer Press of September 22, 1890:

"The boom has had another successful week, making the output for the season 407,000,000 feet. This is far beyond anything done before...the boom may keep open two or three weeks yet, as everything is favorable for work. At the Nevers Dam all logs will be sluiced through unless otherwise ordered, although they could hold there all the logs they have. To this new dam is the credit of the great output this season, and the small cost of getting them down, there being no jams this season."

Same correspondent, October 16, 1890, reports output up to 441 million feet.

With correspondence from Nevers suddenly cut off, another column, the Wolf Creek news reports in February, 1891: "Work at the Dam is nearing completion. The gravel crew was discharged Saturday noon. Superintendent McGraw went to Stillwater Sunday."

February 12, 1891 finds the Standard still championing the cause of Nevers Dam: "Seymour Blanding has been engaged circulating a petition in regard to the St. Croix dam. One party who signed said that Sim told him it was to prevent killing all the fish in the river, which closing of the gates had done or would do; another was informed that it was to prevent logs from getting out on private property, thus injuring the meadows; and still another that it was to help navigation."

February 19, 1891 reports: "The member from Polk, Hon. H. B. Dike, has introduced a bill to repeal the law under which the Saint Croix Dam and Boom company erected the big dam at Nevers. The Milwaukee papers announced the introduction of this bill, and gave a history which demonstrated such an ignorance of the facts, location, and of the business interests involved, as to be amusing."

Another article on March 12, again defends the accusations that the Nevers Dam has injured the "river business"... "It is true," the Standard reports, "that for more than 20 years the Staples management blockaded the river, and the people of the upper valley were treated with contempt."

"It is also true that during these years we had no railroads, and depended on the river for the transportation of all our goods and produce. But with the building of the railroad to Taylors Falls, the river business to St. Croix Falls declined, and with the completion of the "Soo" through Marine and Osceola to this point, it entirely ceased, so far as passengers and freight was concerned, the only business left was in cordwood, and that was very little."

"The talk about the farming interest being injured by reason of boats not running last season, is all rot, nobody thinks of shipping by river. The rates on grain and produce by rail are so low that boats cannot compete and merchants cannot afford to wait three or four days for goods from St. Paul."

"But if the reform Legislation will enact a law keeping the river at a good boating stage during the entire season, the excursion business might brighten up some."

The Standard, on April 30, 1891 announces: "The amendment to the Nevers dam charter provides that the company must give notice at least 24 hours before closing the gates, and also that the head must not be drawn down less than two feet above the floor of the dam. The provision requiring a three-foot stage to be kept in the steamboat channel was stricken out, as it was deemed an impossibility. The company is also compelled to appoint an agent in the county. These amendments are all reasonable."

"Our Osceola correspondent," the Standard says in June, 1891, "one week mentioned that a steamboat has been stranded on account of the closing of the gates at the Nevers Dam, and suggested that the captain

would recover damages. Which no doubt he can do under the law passed last winter, if the proper notice had not been given;

"But the last grievance is the worst: A party of picnickers got left on the Minnesota shore, and no provision of law entitles them to damages. Our correspondent pitches into the legislature, which is all right, as the local member should have borne in mind that the picnic business needed protection in order to build up the town. And the dam company should be compelled to keep and maintain a three-foot channel opposite Boom Island, Buttermilk Falls or some other romantic spot. Have the people no rights which soulless corporations are bound to respect?"

This remarkable document was brought to us by Evert Moberg of Taylors Falls . . . Dated February 6, 1900, it is a letter to Mr. Frank Fredeen, mayor of Taylors Falls, from Major Frederic V. Abbott, of the Army Corps of Engineers office at St. Paul.

Mr. Moberg, who has framed the letter to preserve it, assumes it was in reply to Mr. Fredeen's appeal to the Engineer Corps about the trouble the steamboat was having getting through to Taylors Falls.

"Sir:

"I have to inform you that after careful consideration of the controversies between the logging and steamboat interests on the St. Croix River, Wisconsin and Minnesota, between Taylors Falls, Minnesota and Stillwater, Minnesota, I have concluded that the logging and lumber interests are fairly entitled to the use of the St. Croix river during the season of 1900, except on Decoration Day (30th day of May), Independence Day (4th of July), and during the month of August, and that the steamboats are fairly entitled to the sole use of the river on Decoration Day (30th day of May), Independence Day (4th of July), and during every day in the month of August, 1900; also that the steamboats are fairly entitled to have the river free from jams of logs from the opening of navigation to the 1st day of September, 1900, in order that they may run if there is sufficient water to accommodate both interests.

"I will therefore vigorously push suits against any parties infringing the provisions of sections 10 and 15 of the Act of Congress approved March 3, 1889. PROVIDED, Said infringement consists of jams of logs previous to September 1st, or affects the navigability of the river on Decoration Day (30th day of May), Independence Day (4th of July), or during any day in August, 1900. PROVIDED Complaint supported by proper evidence is made to me of alleged infringement affecting the river in the manner or on the day or days above mentioned.

"After the 1st day of September, the loggers are fairly entitled to conduct their operations in such manner as may best suit their needs, even if jams are thereby caused."

So it was that Nevers Dam was built: massive and sturdy to withstand the mighty current of the river, the onslaught of the ice flows, and almost strong enough to endure the pressure of adverse public opinion. It was this last element, apparently, that finally "done it in."

We close our history of Nevers Dam with a statement from the Northern States Power Co. publication, "Our Shield." which notes the tearing out of the dam:

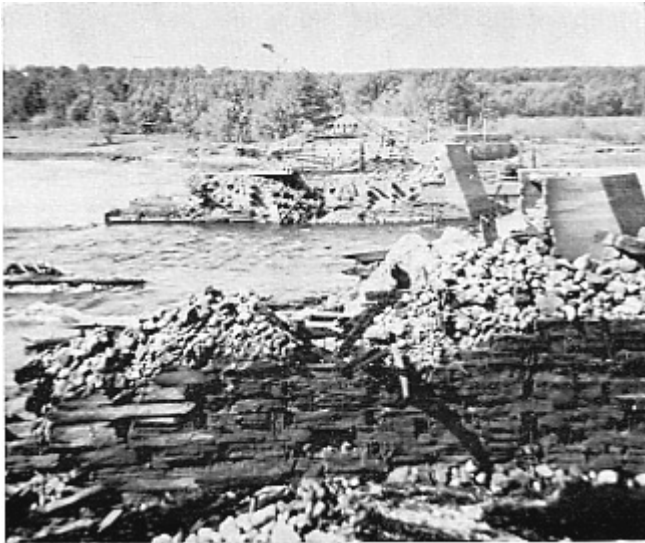
"When the logging boom began to dwindle some 50 years ago, Nevers Dam began to lose its importance. It was finally acquired by Northern States Power Company and was used by NSP to control the stream flow and regulate power production at the hydroelectric plant at Taylors Falls.

"It was used for this purpose for a couple of decades during which time NSP maintained a crew at the dam. It was never used to generate power, however, and simply served to equalize the stream flow. There were those who did not like the idea that the St. Croix was being 'manipulated'. They took their complaint to the U. S. Army Engineer Corps, which has jurisdiction over the nation's navigable streams.

"The Army Engineers some 20 years ago ordered that Nevers Dam must remain open and the natural stream flow maintained from June through October. This ended all usefulness of Nevers Dam, since there was no point in trying to regulate the stream flow during the winter and late spring months if all the accumulated water must be released on a given date.

"Since that time Nevers Dam has served no commercial purpose. In recent years it has twice been badly battered by floods, once in 1950 and again in 1954. Since then Nevers Dam has been a potential hazard whose floating timbers might endanger canoeists and fishermen. The rotting dam itself was also dangerous to the unwary who might be tempted to try walking on it. These considerations prompted Northern States Power Company to remove the dam."

And so it was removed: a major link to the dynamic lumbering era on the St. Croix River.



The end of Nevers Dam as it was being torn out in 1955 . . . looking toward the Minnesota shore. The concrete "noses" were added in later years to reinforce the splintering wood of the piers on the upriver side, where they were struck by ice flows.

(Henry Kelley photo)