

“The Benson Rafts”

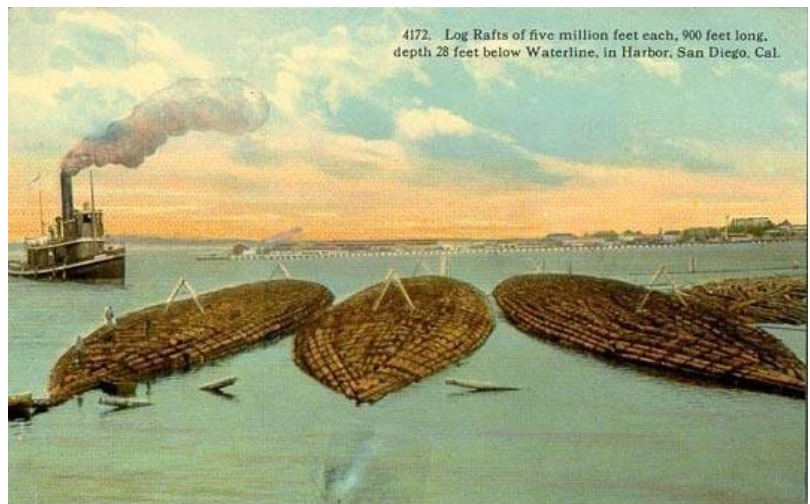
Prolonged blasts from nearly all the steam whistles in town heralded the arrival of the big Benson log raft at noon today . . . during its slow passage up the bay crowds of people hastened to the water front. Before the big mass of timber had reached the wharves all the docks were lined with spectators.

– *San Diego Tribune*, September 8, 1906.

San Diegans were awe-struck that morning as they watched the tugboat *Dauntless* steam around Point Loma towing what appeared to be a giant whale. The “whale” was an ocean-going raft of tree-length logs--600 feet long and shaped like a Perfecto cigar.

It was the first “Benson raft,” named for Portland lumber magnate Simon Benson, who claimed vast tracts of timber along the Columbia River and was eager to find a cheap way to ship lumber to booming Southern California. His log raft was completing a two-week journey by sea, all the way from Astoria, Oregon to the site of a planned Benson-owned sawmill in San Diego Bay at the foot of Sigsbee Street, south of the site of today’s Convention Center.

The raft was a dramatic commercial success. Benson had found a way to circumvent the high cost of shipping lumber by railroad or by ocean barge. Soon, between two and six rafts a year arrived in San Diego, enough to keep the Benson mill well supplied with raw material. In the next 35 years, 120 giant rafts would make the 1100 mile journey from Oregon down the Pacific coast to San Diego, supplying lumber for almost all major local construction projects.



Benson’s rafts were assembled in winter months in calm waters of the Columbia River near Clatskanie on the Oregon border. A floating derrick lifted logs into a wooden “cradle.” As the cradle filled, the logs were secured in a cigar-shaped bundle by an enormous network of chains. It took several weeks to build a typical raft that measured up to 1000 feet long, 55 feet wide, and 35 feet thick. Most rafts also carried deck loads of shingles, telephone poles, and finished lumber.

In summer the log rafts were towed out to sea to begin the long trip down the coast to San Diego. The rafts moved slowly—60 miles a day was considered a fast run. Mishaps at sea were rare. Storms would sometimes claim a few logs but the rafts stayed intact. Benson recalled: “if we struck rough weather . . . the steamer cast loose [and] let the raft wallow in the trough of the sea till the storm blew itself out. Then we reattached the cable to the raft and went on.”

The sea-going steamers towing the rafts were larger and more powerful than harbor tugboats. One of these steamers was the famed S.S. *Roosevelt*, the 134-foot ship that carried explorer Robert E. Peary toward the North Pole in 1909. After a distinguished Arctic career the aging *Roosevelt* became a salvage vessel, then a fishing boat, and finally a log towing tug in the 1930s.

When the rafts arrived in San Diego, the huge bundles would be disassembled by crane at the mill of the Benson Lumber Company and the timbers cut into dimension lumber. A big raft provided up to 6 million board feet of lumber, enough “to build 460 average residences,” boasted the *San Diego Union* in 1935.

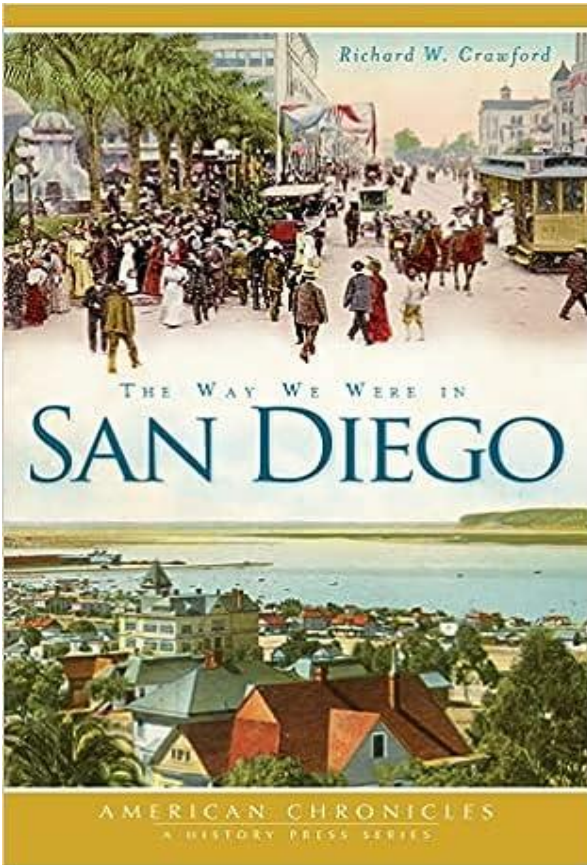
Simon Benson profited from his log rafts until 1911, when he decided to sell his San Diego interests to his mill manager, O.J. Evenson, and San Diego investor, Frank C. Lynch. Evenson ran the mill until his retirement in 1936. Frank Lynch took over but as World War II approached, the era of log rafts was nearing the end.

In August 1941 “Log Raft 120” caught fire off the coast near Monterey. The mystery of how a raft of wet logs could be destroyed at sea by fire was never solved. Lynch suggested wartime sabotage. He turned the wreckage over to the underwriters and then, blaming rising insurance rates, decided to terminate the Benson rafts, ending a unique chapter in San Diego history.



A 900-foot log raft, under tow by the tugboat *Hercules* (center), on the way to the Benson saw mill in San Diego Bay, circa 1910. *Courtesy Maritime Museum of San Diego.*

From Richard W. Crawford, *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011).



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