CHAPTER SIX:

Summit of Empire

Every regular reader of the Timber Trades Journal *is familiar with the name of Alexander Gibson, of Marysville, N. B., Canada. The owner of thousands upon thousands of acres of fine timber lands and the lessee of other large tracts; the owner of the Canada Eastern Railway, which runs through the heart of New Brunswick from Fredericton on the St. John River to Nelson, Chatham and Loggieville on the Miramichi; the owner of five lumber-mills and a large cotton mill; the founder and practically the owner of the thriving little town of Marysville, and the shipper annually of nearly, if not altogether, a hundred million feet of lumber to different markets, chiefly in the British Islands, Mr. Gibson is not only a man of note in his own province, but widely known beyond its borders.*
- Timber Trades Journal, February 1, 1896.

GIBSON HAD BIG plans for the Northern and Western, part of which involved the more efficient operation of his mill at Marysville and, perhaps more importantly, with easy access to Maine over the Fredericton Railway Bridge, expansion into the American market for laths and shingles. In the winter of 1886, before the spring freshets opened up the rivers for stream driving, Gibson was able to transport 2 million feet of logs to Marysville over the new railway. This amount, about 12 to 16 cars worth, was enough to get at least a few of the big mill's five saw gangs operational. This supply would continue for several months, until at least April, when the drives were able to reach the mills, or if for some reason the driving was held up, as was sometimes the case, by low water, ice or jams, the trains would keep running until they were no longer needed. Though prodigious amounts of cedar, hemlock, even pine and hardwood were said to be located all along the line from Boiestown to the Nashwaak, these early logs would probably all have been spruce, as it was essential to have these trees, the backbone of the lumber business, cut into deals and taken by rail to the Gibson wharf to await the breakup of the river ice.

Hitherto, the off-cuts of deal manufacture went to fuel a continuous bonfire in the village. Gibson stopped this wasteful practice in 1885 when he built just downstream from the main mill a second mill for lath and shingle manufacture. It was a three-gang mill, steam-powered, and began to cut the slabs and edgings into laths as soon as the main mill was operational. In 1887

it was reported that from June to October the lath mill employed 45 men and cut an average of 120,000 laths a day. When the water was high and the main mill was cutting at full speed, these laths, taken by rail car to the Gibson wharf, were being turned out so fast that it was difficult to get enough vessels to carry them away. There was an additional savings with the lath mill; its own edgings were used largely in the village as firewood and also, along with a good proportion of the sawdust, to fuel the cotton mill furnaces.

In the fall, when the main cut of spruce was finished, the lath machines were moved out and shingle machines put in their place. The shingle mill would run until spring, using a few hundred thousand feet of logs that had come down in the spring drive and a few hundred thousand more that would come down by rail over the winter.

In the summer of 1888, a *Gleaner* representative toured the Marysville lumber mills and provided a statistical and interestingly anecdotal account of the extent of milling operations at the Marysville site. The main mill, equipped with five gangs and gang-edgers, at low water cut 30,000 feet of spruce per hour, or 300,000 feet per day. A lay analogy was provided: if the logs cut in a single day were trees with branches, and were lined up 10 feet apart, so that the branches just touched, they would form a line extending from Marysville to Saint John, around Partridge Island and back again to the mainland. In one month's sawing they would make a row reaching from Marysville to California or, lined up end to end, to London. The deal placed end to end would make a bridge to Constantinople and back, "while the trees sawn in a season would form an avenue round the world."

To keep pace with deal manufacture, the lath mill needed to cut 41 thousand laths on each of its three machines per day. With a good head of water on the main mill and a fast supply of slabs, it could run 45,000 laths per machine and had done 273,000 each in a week. Readers not *au courant* in the lath business would please place the laths thus manufactured on a wall, and would find that a week's work would cover 10 square miles or 64 one-hundred acre farms; in 6 years all of York County, and in 60 years the entire province of New Brunswick could be made ready for the plasterers.

The shingle mill, steam-powered and employing 52 men on four Dunbar machines, manufactured in Fredericton by McFarlane, Thompson and Anderson, averaged 13,000 shingles a day per machine but one topped out at 20,000 in 9.5 hours. At an average of 17,000 per day per machine or 68,000 per day for the mill, bundled and placed one on top of the other, this number of shingles would form a column 300 feet high, with the year's output reaching 21 miles or 7 times the height of the Rocky Mountains.

WITH HIS LUMBER business, cotton mill, railway to Chatham and railway bridge all operating simultaneously, Gibson evidently felt the need for greater operating capital. In July, 1889, he formed a new company, Alexander Gibson and Sons Ltd., for the purpose of purchasing all of the real and personal property of himself and his wife. Alexander Gibson and Sons Ltd. negotiated a loan of 1.2 million dollars at 5 percent interest over 25 years from Gibson's friend and fellow lumberman A. F. Randolph of the British Bank of North America as a part of the deal, the company now being capitalized at $3 million dollars, $2,995,000 of which was in shares and $5,000 in cash.

Most of the new money seemed to be aimed at developing the timber lands along the Northern and Western Railway. In April 1889 Gibson's surveyor, Edward Jack, negotiated a lease-to-purchase of Scott Fairley's large sawmill at Blackville for $22,000. Located at the mouth of the Bartholomew River, a 35-mile long feeder of the South-West Miramichi and considered to be one of the best spruce rivers in the province, this property included 6,000 acres of timberland and 101 square miles of leased Crown lands, well stocked with spruce, hemlock and cedar. The mill regularly cut one million feet of spruce. Interestingly, Fairley had acquired the mill from Alexander McLaggan, a Scot who had been one of the unsuccessful lessees of the Rankin Mills property prior to Gibson's purchase of it in 1862. Though unable to make a go of things on the Nashwaak, McLaggan made a small fortune at Blackville, it was reported, and by the time of his death in 1871, correspondence was properly addressed to Alexander McLaggan, Esquire. In 1895 Gibson paid off the balance of $13,315 owing on this property and came into full possession thereof.

In the winter of 1890, after the logging crews went to the woods, the Blackville mill got a major makeover. What exactly Gibson did at the Blackville site is not known, but by the summer of 1890 a mill that used to cut one million was now expected to cut 5 million superficial feet before the season's end, and by summer was sending down the line six rail cars of lath and spruce deal daily, with a backlog of more awaiting transportation.

The next winter the Marysville mills were themselves upgraded. Between November and January, 1891, a crew of 10 men headed up by Richard Staples, master builder and veteran lumberman, replaced the foundation, completely rebuilt three saw gangs and added a new frame on the working floor, making it effectively a new mill. Gibson had plans to increase his output, and putting the two mills in first-class order was necessary to supply the large fleet of vessels he had chartered for the coming summer.

As a result of these upgrades, the summer of 1891 saw great changes in the nature of lumber traffic on the river between Fredericton and Saint John. At one time what wasn't rafted was managed by sail-powered woodboats.

In the Lumber Woods
The Present Contrasted with the Past

"Speaking of lumbering," said a prominent lumberman the other day, "there is no business in which the advance and improvements over the old plans and methods have been more rapid and complete than in the lumbering operations in the woods. Why," said he, "it is only a few years, since the man who went into the woods in the fall, saw no signs of comfort until he came out in the spring. The accommodations were all of the most rude and primitive character, the camps were generally built after the men went into the woods, and were mere protections against the weather. The men laid down at night on some boughs, with such covering as they might happen to bring into the woods with them; the fare was the most common kind, being chiefly pork and fish, none of the present comforts being heard of in those days."

"It was on the streams that the men suffered most. From long before daylight in the morning until after sundown at night the men drove the lumber down the swollen streams, and often drenched through at night by an accidental bath in the cold water, or by a beating rain, they laid down on the cold ground without covering of any kind and slept until morning. They always laid close together and built a huge fire, which two men of the party, in turns, kept blazing all night long, and by the time the men were ready to turn out they were pretty well dried, provided it did not rain during the night."

"Now these things are all changed and the old pain of getting along in the woods, has given way to the progressive spirit of the times, and the man who goes into the woods for the winter very often goes to a house far better than the one he left his family in at home, and almost always more conveniently appointed. The lumber camps of the present day are substantial and commodious, are fitted up with all the modern improvements."

"A good cooking range and a good cook are the first essentials. The sleeping accommodation around the sides of the camp are well supplied with straw beds, and plenty of woolen blankets. The 'grub' is of the best quality and the most nutritious that the country affords. Beans and pork and hot buns form the morning meal, a dinner of cold meat and bread is carried to the men in the woods, while a hot supper of fresh beef, potatoes, and some kind of a pudding or perhaps codfish or soup, awaits them on their return to the camp in the evening."

"The evening hours are spent in various ways, some of the men grinding axes, others mending socks, moccasins or snowshoes, others reading a book or a late paper sent them by their friends at home, while another plays a fiddle or entertains the company with a song. No card playing is ever seen in a well regulated lumber camp. A bundle of papers or books from the regions of civilization is looked upon as a great treat, and goes the rounds of all the men, who read everything, even to the advertisements. The old method of driving is improved on, the men being well fed and sleeping in tents each night. Taking everything into consideration, the life of the lumberman of the present day is a comfortable and healthy life."

The Herald, March 10, 1890

Rafting logs, c. 1900. **PANB Ole Larsen Fonds: P6-208.**

As described by Dan Soucoup, the woodboat was a craft designed specifically for carrying deals that by 1830 had evolved into its final form. Weighing in at about 70 tons, typically about 60 feet in length by 20 feet in width and equipped with two masts, it was a chunky looking creature with a cut-off stern like a dinghy and bulldog bow. Built for capacity, not speed, it could handle upwards of 100,000 feet of deals per vessel, and at any one time there were probably upwards of 500 of these boats in use on the Saint John River - as many as fifteen in Fredericton on a given day. With the average transatlantic deal ship carrying approximately 1 million feet of deals, it would take about ten to twelve boatloads of lumber to fill a three-master for the trip to Liverpool.

The popularity of the woodboat, and the business of woodboat operators, went into a tail-spin in the summer of 1891 when Gibson got heavily into the use of scows. He had had ten of these flat-bottomed barges built for him to transport deals from the Gibson wharf to Saint John in the fall of 1890, the woodboats having been taken