

The Eau Claire Sawmill Strike of 1881:

Ten Hours or No Sawdust

by Bart Boettcher

Preface

The major area I would like to cover is the sawmill strike of 1881 and the impact it had on Eau Claire during this period. I also would like to prove that the strikers really did accomplish what they set out to and that their efforts and heartache were not all in vain. All the strikers wanted was simply to reduce the work day to ten hours. The change did not happen as soon as they wanted but they were a catalyst for future changes. As far as I can tell I will be the first to write about just the strike. All of the other sources I have consulted only dedicate one or two short paragraphs about the strike, and in many cases it is blown way out of proportion. Most accounts show the strike as some kind of big drunken brawl. The truth is alcohol was not even involved, except in a few situations. Other accounts give an image of the strikers as an uncontrolled mob roaming the streets and causing trouble wherever they go.

I am surprised that someone has not already written a paper on this dramatic event. I believe I can give a very precise picture of what really happened from reading newspaper accounts and combining some manuscripts along with secondary literature. I have found a number of interesting pieces of information dealing with the strike. One that I found

especially interesting was a reprint of Charles Lamb's contemporary account of the strike. Lamb served in the Madison Company militia, who were sent to Eau Claire to help control the strikers.

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Writing the history of Eau Claire could not be complete without telling something about the lumbering industry. Eau Claire has gotten the nickname "Sawdust City" because of the vast amount of sawmills that once could be seen all over the city. Barland claims the beginnings of the city were built entirely upon the lumbering industry (37). The early pioneers believed the great pine forests of the Eau Claire area would be inexhaustible. Wisconsin represented an enormous and rich state full of pine logs. Eau Claire happened to be an ideal spot to locate mills because of the immense timber surrounding the area and because of the layout of the river. The use of the river was the major way of transporting logs and boards after the logs had been sawed. Lumbering became big business in Eau Claire when Nelson Chapman and Joseph G. Thorp purchased the land for the first saw mill in 1856 (Barland 37). Many mills have opened and closed since these two men opened the first mill and many millions of logs have flowed down the beautiful Chippewa River. The vast amount of material on lumbering contains a variety of different stories and incidents such as fights over land rights, deaths and accidents in the mills, and numerous accounts of fires and flooding.

Eau Claire has many interesting accounts and stories about lumbering, but the strike that broke out in July 1881 is especially interesting. The strike was intriguing in many ways. For example, it was one of the biggest in the state at the time and it was the first major strike Eau Claire had ever seen. Every secondary piece of literature I have consulted dealing with the lumbering industry has had at least a paragraph devoted to the Sawmill strike of 1881 in Eau Claire. This shows the significance the strike had on shaping some of the writing in secondary literature.

Lumbermen from all parts of the country had their eye on the strike and what would come of it. Orrin H. Ingram, who owned the Empire lumber company in Eau Claire, received letters from lumber barons all over the country. In these letters they gave their opinions about the strike and wished him luck. Although most letters basically dealt with business transactions (and many were too faded to read), two letters of interest were written to Ingram by a mill owner from Dubuque, Iowa and another from a mill owner in Hannibal, Missouri. The first letter was written to Ingram from M.H. Day, who owned the Dubuque Lumber Company. Day told Ingram in the letter that he heard about the strike and he believed that Ingram should try and run the mill with a partial crew. Day stated that he had a similar problem with his night crew once and that he ran his business with a partial crew and it worked itself out. It seemed to break the strikers backbone because

they needed the work and the money and they decided to come back to work (Ingram papers Nov. 1880-Nov.1881). A similar letter was written to Ingram on August 1, 1881 by a mill owner named Don Dulanny of Hannibal, Missouri. Dulanny stated that he was very happy to hear that Ingram was keeping his spirits up. He also told Ingram that no matter what happened, that he should never give in to his workers and pay them more money due to a strike. He said, the more he pays his workers the less work they do (Ingram papers Nov. 1881-Nov.1881). It is obvious to see where the sentiment of most lumber barons was during this strike. They knew that the outcome of this strike might someday affect their workers too. Many of the lumber mill owners did not have much time for the strikers. However, as we will see later, some mill owners were very compassionate. It is of interest to see how the mills with the more lenient owners had more output of lumber during the strike year.

Although there is much written about the owners and how they reacted to the strike, the major players involved in the movement of the strike did not seem to have as much written about them. The paper did not like to print too much information about the treatment of the leaders. It almost forgets to mention how the leaders were taken to the jail just to be questioned. This fact is mentioned in most secondary literature, but the paper insisted the leaders were arrested on the grounds of instigating riots, when actually the leaders

often mentioned in the papers sought to remain peaceful and work the strike out diplomatically. The three main leaders were Jerry Sullivan, T. F. Frawley, and N.F. Hendrix. Sullivan worked for the Eau Claire Lumber Company and Frawley and Hendrix were attorneys for their own firm (Eau Claire Directory 1882). It would seem to me that men of this stature in the community would be more civilized than they were perceived.

Although the strike was looming in the air, in the 1880's many people of Eau Claire believed it would be some of the best lumbering years ever, and for the most part they were right. Eau Claire had eight lumber companies in its city. New dams were built and everything was looking good (Barland 47). The year 1880 went as well as all had expected. Mills reported record amounts of lumber were being produced and the year 1881 was looking even better. The city of Eau Claire had a population of 10,119. Eau Claire county had a population of 19,993 people. Of that number 10,989 were men and 9004 were women (U.S. census 1880). With such an even distribution of men and women it seems that Eau Claire was more than just a seasonal town where lumberjacks rolled in during the spring of the year and out again in the fall to cut timber again. I would tend to believe that such an even distribution of men and women suggests that many mill men were married and had families in the city, but most literature suggests it was a seasonal city at the time of the strike. Even though these

men did this they needed the income of the sawmills to support them in the summer months. The reason I bring this up is to suggest that many of the men involved in the strike needed this income to get by in the summer. Most sawmills made contracts with the men and if they broke these contract they simply did not get paid.

The spring of 1881 looked just as promising in terms of the water and the amount of logs coming down the river (Barland 47). The labor force of the mills was composed mostly of lumberjacks who came from the woods after working on the cutting of the log during the winter months. These men usually worked from April to the time the cold weather would return in the Fall (Brown 21). In R.C. Brown's book, Sawmilling and Sawmills of the Chippewa he stated that the French, Norwegians, English, and Germans worked in the mills, but German men preferred working in the mills rather than working in the woods. It was interesting to note how the Germans liked working in the mills the best. Brown also noted that along with the weather, economics and river levels dictated the sawmill season (21). If there was not enough water, the logs could not be floated to the mills or rafted away from the mills. If the people were not buying lumber anymore at the end of the season, it did not pay to keep working.

A typical saw mill would be set on posts and it was usually two stories high. Figure 1 shows how the Eau Claire

Lumber Company was situated. The lower level would have all the line shafting used for running the sawmill. The upper level would be where all the sawing would be done (Brown 17). After the logs were cut into lumber, they were sent on to the next step which was the rafting shed. Each sawmill had a shed where they could stack the lumber on cribs, alternating the stacks of lumber, usually 16 layers high (Barland 36). Figure 2 shows a typical raft with lumber on it. As one can see it takes a lot of work to get a log down to the mills, cut them, then load them on the rafts. The hardest was guiding the raft downriver. Barland says that an ordinary man could not handle a raft. It took a man with massive upper body strength for this job, as one can imagine by looking at fig. 2 (36). It took high water all summer to make the rafting an easier job. When the water was low, the rafts would get hung up all of the time. The Eau Claire Daily Free Press reported about two weeks before the strike that water conditions were very favorable and that rafts were moving up and down the river (July 6, 1881). One week later, reports stated that a record amount of lumber had passed by the Beef Slough, which is 194,208,750 board feet (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 13, 1881). The Beef Slough was a backwater where rafts were usually hung up by the backwater. It is the place where the Chippewa drops into the Mississippi at Pepin, Wisconsin. In the newspaper articles, this place is always mentioned as the spot where the amount of the lumber was tallied. Due to all

the backwaters, lumber could be dropped off there and stored. On the 14th of July, the lumbering section of the newspaper reported that the industry was going just fine. It also stated that a new mill had just been finished. The new mill was owned by the Sherman Brothers and was located on Half Moon Lake (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 18, 1881). The Empire Lumber Company was turning out 300,000 feet of lumber per week and the Daniel Shaw Lumber Company was cutting 150,000 feet per day (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 18, 1881). This is better production than any other time. The city was witnessing one of the most prosperous times in the history of the lumbering business. Yet the threat of a strike was in the air.

One can only speculate how they happened to decide on the ten hour system or why they would strike at this time. In Philip Foner's book, History of The Labor Movement in The United States, he explains how the ten hour movement started in the New England states as early as the 1830's (199). The main reason for a push for ten hours was that working twelve or more hours per day left no social time. Working sunrise-to-sunset was really demoralizing and workers needed more time to rest (199). I would suspect that immigrants from the New England states brought the idea of working a ten hour day with them. Another proposal on why they decided to strike is that in 1873 lumber workers in La Crosse walked out of their jobs. This Strike was unsuccessful; the leaders were

blacklisted and replaced (Ozanne 18). I am convinced it was a combination of both of the reasons mentioned earlier that caused the walkout in the Eau Claire sawmills.

On the morning of July 18th at 6:00 A.M., everything changed dramatically for the mill owners and everyone in Eau Claire. The men who were working at the Eau Claire Lumber Company decided they were not going to work anymore that morning. The reason they did not want to work that day was because they were sick of the twelve hour work day. They decided it would be ten hours or no work at all. They stopped all the machinery at the mill. The men all gathered together in front of the mill and proceeded to head for the mills on the west side of the Chippewa River. They crossed the Dewey street bridge over the Eau Claire River and headed down Barstow Street and then crossed the Chippewa again on Grand avenue and moved on to the Valley Lumber Company. Once the crowd of about 380 men reached the Valley Lumber Company they demanded that the work be stopped. Some men at the Valley Lumber Co. did not want to join the strikers. So members of the crowd rolled some logs off the chain that brought the logs to the saws and stopped the operators from continuing. Many of the Valley Lumber Co. workers joined in the crowd but some were very upset and just went on home (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 18, 1881). The next stop on the strikers journey was the Eau Claire Manufacturing Company's Mill, which shut down without any trouble at all. Many of the men from there

joined the ranks of the strikers and they marched down to O.H. Ingram's Empire Lumber Company. At this mill the crowd ran into some resistance. Many of Ingram's men did not want to leave the mill. They wanted to keep working. To help persuade these men to join the strike a number of the strikers blocked the outlet of sawed logs and let them pile up forcing the mill to cease its operations. When Ingram's men finally conceded to the strikers very few of them joined the strikers. In fact, the majority of them had nothing to do with the strikers (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 18, 1881). Sensing that they were now unstoppable, the crowd of strikers moved on to the Shingle Mill of the same company where all seemed to want to join the ranks. Many men grabbed pieces of lathe to use as a walking stick or whatever else they might need it for in the long journey yet ahead (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 18, 1881). The next stop was to be the Daniel Shaw Lumber Mill. This mill also resisted the mob, as the newspaper called them, of strikers and refused to shut down. Finally, after many angry words were passed back and forth, they did relent and shut down. At this point, a number of speeches were made in English, German, Norwegian and French (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 18, 1881). Gene Shaw, the new owner of the mill (he took it over from his father, Daniel Shaw), made a speech in reply to the strikers. Although the papers did not say what was actually said, they do report that the speeches were civil. It was at this time that everyone

finally understood exactly what the strikers wanted. All that they actually wanted was their work day cut from 12 hours down to 10 hours per day (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 18, 1881). Although very few workers from the Shaw Lumber Co. joined the strikers, there were 800 to 1000 strikers in the ranks. See figure 3 for a map of the strikers path.

After all the speeches, the strikers turned back and headed North up to Shermans Lumber Co. located on Half Moon Lake. Captain Sherman's mill was already shut down due to needed repairs. He welcomed the strikers and told them he was glad to see so many visitors, and that he for one would be willing to consider ten hours as a fair days labor. He also believed other mill owners would agree or they would be willing to give additional compensation for the extra work time. The paper stated that his words were well taken as shouts of joy filled the air after he was done speaking (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 18, 1881). Captain Sherman (owner of the Sherman Lumber Co) is a man that I would characterize as "a man of the people". He seemed to have dealt with the strikers very diplomatically. Robert W. Well, in Daylight in the Swamp, tells how Captain Sherman handled the strikers by going to the brewery next door to his mill and brought back a barrel of beer to share with the group of strikers (175). This seemed to convince everyone that Captain Sherman was a great guy (176). Surprisingly, the next day the Sherman Lumber Co. was working only 10 hours per day. Captain

Sherman was truly a man who did what he said he would. He was not just appearing as a politician and trying just to appease the crowd at the moment there had been a need. He knew how the men felt and was able to deal with his men very well.

After all the strikers finished their refreshments they carried on to the Wilson Mill which had already shut down because they had heard the strikers were on their way there. Many of those men joined the ranks of the strikers. They then crossed the river and visited the Eddy Mill and came back to the west side park where between 1000-1200 millworkers and sympathizers gathered to see what would happen next.

At the park, the first major leader of the strike was elected. Jerry Sullivan was elected to be chairman of the strike. He was an employee at the Eau Claire Lumber Company (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 18, 1881). He seemed to be a main figure in the organization of the strike since the Eau Claire Lumber Co. is where it all began. After a number of speeches were made, a committee of two men from each mill was selected to be representatives for the strikers. The strikers pledged to stand behind whatever the committee decided. At the park, the committee advised the strikers not to use violence and to show respect to their fellow workers (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 18, 1881).

There was one order issued during that day that was very sensible. Mayor Farr ordered that all saloons were to be closed for the day so the mob, as the paper called them, would

not become crazy under the influence of alcohol (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 18, 1881). I mention the fact that the saloons were closed to disprove what other authors have said about the strike being a drunken riot.

The first day was very eventful. The strikers made all their initial appearances at the mills and what little violence that took place, like forcibly closing down mills, happened on the first day. Although the altercations were minimal and little harm was done, the threat of violence lingered in the air.

Tuesday morning, July 19, started out with the strikers meeting at the Eau Claire Lumber Co. again and a number of them decided to march to the Portersville Mill which was about six miles south of Eau Claire on the Chippewa River (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 19, 1881). The Daily Free Press sent a reporter to the ranks of the strikers on Tuesday to interview them. The strikers explained that their problem was simple. All they wanted was a ten hour work day. The strikers said that they were not asking for anything else, they would take the same pay at the old hourly rate, no more pay or compensation just "ten hours or no sawdust" (Daily Free Press July 19, 1881). The same reporter interviewed some of the more prominent mill owners in the city such as Gene Shaw and Joseph G. Thorp. Thorp was one of the wealthiest men in the state at that time. Some of his wealth and honors included being the founder of the Eau Claire Lumber Co. He

owned mansions in Eau Claire and Madison which later became the governor's mansion in Madison. Thorp loved to show off his wealth and spent all kinds of money. One time he bought his wife a \$5000 camel's hair shawl (Wells 172). He also threw a party in Madison for his daughter's wedding. There were a thousand guests, including such celebrities as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who all came to eat and drink from his solid silver plates, cups and bowls (173). These wealthy owners seemed to stress that the twelve hour work day was the same everywhere. The owners claimed that working twelve hour days was the only way the mills could keep up with the amount of logs that were cut. Also, they needed to produce as much lumber as possible for business reasons. All the other lumber mills in other regions of the country worked twelve hours per day (Daily Free Press July 19, 1881).

From reading the Daily Free Press the feeling of the people at the time of the strike seemed to be one of great anxiety (July 19, 1881). The paper infers that many people were afraid that if the strike went on for too long that violence might be used and that other businesses in the community would suffer (July 19, 1881). Many people were appalled that the strikers stopped men from working and made them join the ranks of the strikers. From the paper I got the feeling that most citizens agreed that this was wrong, but they really did not express opinions for or against the ten hour work day. All that the community wanted was to see that

the mills were back into operation again (Daily Free Press July 19, 1881). The next few days did not see as much excitement as the first day had. The strikers did remain active though. The strikers held mass meetings in the different parks around the city and also participated in many marches. One banner that could be seen carried around town said "We are no mob, but strikers. We ask not for eight or twelve hours, but ten hours or no more saw-dust" (Daily Free Press July 20, 1881). Speakers continued to promote non-violence and for the most part the streets remained peaceful. The weekly Free Press gave a report from the committee of strikers. The committee instructed the strikers to confine their operations to the local mills only. There was some concern that the Chippewa Falls mills would also be affected by the strike. It also was agreed that the men would not molest workers who did not want to strike. If a man did not want to join the strikers, it was his decision. The strikers were also prohibited by the committee from visiting mills they had already visited and the men who were back to work under the ten hour system. (Weekly Free Press July 28, 1881). The paper also stated that Mayor Farr issued an order that all the saloons be closed until the strike was concluded. The paper believed the streets remained calm and the strike proceeded in an orderly fashion because of this order (Eau Claire Weekly Free Press July 28, 1881). I tend to agree that the closing of the saloons was a good idea and was a major

reason for a calm strike.

On the morning of the 22nd of July, reports in the paper indicated that there were rumors of other manufacturing companies joining in the strike. It was just a rumor though because none of the others joined in the strike. The basic reason was that they did not have the same principles in mind as the men that were already on strike. Most of the other industries were already working more reasonable hours (Eau Claire Daily Free Press July 22, 1881). According to accounts in the Free Press, the river trade had dropped drastically during the week leaving many rivermen out of work (July 22, 1881). This gave a bad name to the strikers by many people who lived in the community. There is a tendency for people in a community to become upset and unhappy when people are put out of work. This is exactly what the strikers did to the rivermen by stopping production at the mills. The saloon owners were also losing business as they were closed down and could serve only a few thirsty lumbermen who would sneak in the back door once in awhile. Most people probably felt that by this time the problems would have been worked out, but they were not.

Mayor E. J. Farr knew that it was time for him to take some kind of action to get the people back to work and end the chaos in his city. He telegraphed Governor William E. Smith who was in Hudson at the time (Peterson 673). When the Governor arrived in Eau Claire the streets were literally

filled with people. Many of them were strikers, but many were there just to see the Governor. The Governor and his wife arrived on the midnight train from Hudson on their way back from Lake Superior where they had been spending some leisure time (July 22, 1881). The governor met only with the mill owners who were the prominent people of the city. He did not consult with the strikers or the committee made up of two workers from each mill who had been elected as the spokesmen for the group (Eau Claire Free Press July 22, 1881). The Governor, for a number of reasons the fifth day of the strike, decided to call up the state militia from Madison. I believe that the biggest reason the governor decided to make this move and call the militia was because of the huge crowd that met him after the news spread that he was in town. It is probable that the mill owners created some wild stories about the strikers that were blown out of proportion. These reasons along with the pleading of the mayor for some kind of help may have helped in the decision to call on the militia. There is not much evidence supporting the fact that the strikers were raping and pillaging Eau Claire. An article in the Weekly Free Press published on August 4, 1881 almost a week after the strike was over stated that there were riots and the strikers were out of control (Aug. 4, 1881). This may have been due to the sawmill owners influence on the paper. They might have wanted the strikers to look worse than what they really were. The Daily Free Press along with the few articles found in the

Chippewa Herald seemed to claim the strikers to be for the most part peaceful. The Eau Claire Weekly Free Press published a statement saying that Mayor Farr had sent the Governor which read: "Governor William E. Smith, a labor riot is in progress here, some twelve hundred men are participating and the number is constantly rising. Some violence has been done, and grave fears are entertained for the safety of the lives and property. I am almost powerless to maintain order and shall probably need assistance from the state. My special messenger will wait upon you tomorrow morning. Respectfully, E. F. Farr, Mayor" (Weekly Free Press August 4, 1881). It is plain to see that the governor expected to see riotous crowds creating chaos and reeking havoc in the streets. I believe this dispatch also had a lot to do with his call of the militia.

The militia received a wire from the Governor William E. Smith stating that a portion of the National Guard were to proceed to Eau Claire. "The cause for mobilization was riotous conduct of the mill hands and rivermen" (Lamb 8). Charles Lamb, who published an article in the Wisconsin Magazine of History entitled "Sawdust Campaign", served as an officer in the guard and went to Eau Claire during the strike. In his article, he tells how 376 men got on a train at Camp Douglas and headed for Eau Claire. The 376 men were from Madison, Janesville, Portage, Beloit and Mauston (Lamb 8). Each of them reported in full gear, including fixed bayonets.

Many of them did not know what to expect after hearing the exaggerated reports in some of their local newspapers. A report in a Madison paper cited that the strikers had turned a freight train off its track and that upon the Governor's arrival rotten eggs were thrown at him, all of which were false (Eau Claire Free Press July 28, 1881). The Free Press also stated the Milwaukee Republican and News as stating that from the looks of the Guard, one would think that they were looking for a bloody campaign. Each soldier was in full uniform, bayonets fixed and 60 full rounds of ball cartridges (July 28, 1881). Lamb reported that when the militia finally reached Eau Claire, the men marched from the railroad station to the camping grounds that were named after Mayor Farr. The bright uniforms and bayonets must have frightened many of the strikers. Lamb reported one person as shouting as the companies of militia marched by "Jasus theres the Rigulars!" (11).

The Governor's rejection of the strikers along with the entrance of the militia was the straw that broke the strikers backs. The Daily Free Press indicated that by Saturday, July 23 feelings among the strikers seemed to be of loving enthusiasm (July 23, 1881). The audience, at the arrival of the Governor, was very disappointed when he did not address them at all. By this time, most men wanted to go back to work no matter what the cost (Daily Free Press July 23, 1881). There were only about 200 die hard strikers left by the time

the militia was organized.

One of the first things that the militia did upon arrival was arrest five of the men who were supposed to be the leaders of the strike. Although the paper does not specify who all five were, three of the five are mentioned. They were Jerry Sullivan, he elected chairman of the strike, and T.F. Frawley and N.F. Hendrix, both of whom made several speeches to the strikers. These men were the leaders through it all and when they were arrested the bottom really fell out of the strike. The other two are not mentioned in the papers. Dale Peterson, in his thesis on lumbering on the Chippewa River states that at least two of the men were Norwegians and they worked at the Eau Claire Lumber Company. These men were just taken in for questioning but when the militia arrived they did not seem to be in the paper anymore. Lamb said that the guarding of the jail was about the only work that the militia did at Eau Claire (12). The people of the community showed a lot of hospitality to the militia. Lamb states that the lumber companies had tents already set up for militia at Camp Farr. He also stated that the women of the community would bring pies and food for the men of the militia to eat. Most of the men stayed at Camp Farr, but the others stayed at the courthouse which they named Camp Smith after the Governor (12). They usually ate corned beef, bread and coffee for food. When the men were not on duty they usually tossed a ball, played cards, or played some other type of games (Lamb

14). At night many people came to listen to the militia sing around the camp fires (Weekly Free Press July 28, 1881). On Wednesday, The Daily Free Press had a note written to all strikers and those who were sympathizers with the strike to meet at Randall park at two o'clock. Once at the park they would form a parade and march through the streets. The strikers carried banners with inscriptions such as "no sawdust at all" and the same banner saying "ten hours or no sawdust" (Daily Free Press). A reverend delivered a speech at the end of the march and everything was peaceful and quiet. After the parade was over, Governor Smith decided everything was under control and he left on Thursday, July 28 along with a company of the militia (Daily Free Press). By this time most of the mills were running with at least a partial crew and the rest of the militia also left. In Lamb's article, he spoke about a song he remembered that the men in the militia sang on the way home. It was sung to the tune of "Derby Ram", It goes like this:

Oh I'm Lake City guard, sir,  
I belong to the Company C  
of the gallant 4th battalion  
of the Wisconsin National G.

chorus Oh! hunky, dunky, Derby Run, etc.

Oh Glory was I bent sir  
for fighting I did part;  
So, to Eau Claire I was sent, sir,  
the strikers I supplant.

My buttons they were bright sir:  
and loaded so rounds,  
my belt was far from light sir,  
as I slept to martial sounds.

The strikers we did meet, sir,  
on the banks of the Eau Claire  
We fought them long and well sir,  
despite our villainous fare.

The sawdust campaign is o'er sir  
the rioters are foiled,  
and we have been ordered back sir,  
with uniforms all soiled.

Oh, war it is most cruel sir,  
specially a sawmill scare,  
But we are always ready, sir, to go  
again to Eau Claire (14).

This song sums up how unnecessary it was to call in the militia to Eau Claire. The song is nothing but sarcasm. The strike seemed to have a snowball effect as it rolled downhill and got larger and larger knocking over a few obstacles in its way. However, as the slope of the hill ends, so does all the momentum of the snowball. Finally, it stops and melts away. By this analogy, the strike took off with a lot of enthusiasm and excitement. It was something new and the men felt as though they actually had some power. They rolled through the city taking all the mills with them on the first day of the strike. But through lack of organization along with steady flow of cheap labor that would work the long hours for the mill owners if the strikers would not, the strike just did not keep going strong and it faded out after a few long hard days (Wells 175). Although I could not find any mention of strikebreakers or "scabs" being hired there were rumors that they may be on the way. this caused some men to worry and go back to work.

The strikers had a legitimate right to be upset, but at the time working 12 hours was the way economically way feasible to get lumber out and to make money. The mill workers did have some benefits. They had room and board along with their pay. They got credit from most stores in the city on many items, especially food. They also just worked in the mills. They did not have to worry about paying to rebuild the mill if a fire or something else would damage it, as Brown points out in his book Sawmilling and Sawmills of the Chippewa Valley. Fires were a definite hazard during this time period. On the other hand, workers faced hardships of their own. There were no unemployment benefits for mill workers who were hurt on the job and no disability payments or medical help. The sawmills were very dangerous. Brown points out there were numerous accidents involving crushed extremities, splinters in eyes, and fingers were often lost (21). According to the 1880 census, general labors made very comparable wages to laborers in the Iron and Steel industries in Dodge and Sawk Counties which were \$1.13 a day (U.S. census, 1880). The Eau Claire Sawmill strike of 1881 it did not seem to be very significant at the time, but it was the beginning of a new era of what would soon become known as organized labor. Organization was a key element missing from the sawmill strike. Robert Friese, in his book Empire in Pine, points out that the strike in Eau Claire revealed that there was considerable pro labor sentiment throughout the state (214). He also stated that

after the Eau Claire "Sawdust War" labor stoppage among lumber workers became very common (214). The Eau Claire Sawmill strike had a very important role on the outlook of organized labor in Wisconsin. The strike was one of the earliest and certainly the most serious in the state. Not many mills listened to the strikers at the time, but some such as the Sherman Mill did. It was not very long after the strike that many mills compromised and went to an eleven hour work day. Most mills had an eleven hour work day as early as 1882 (Ozanne 16). The Eau Claire sawmill strike played a major role in leading to organized labor in the state.

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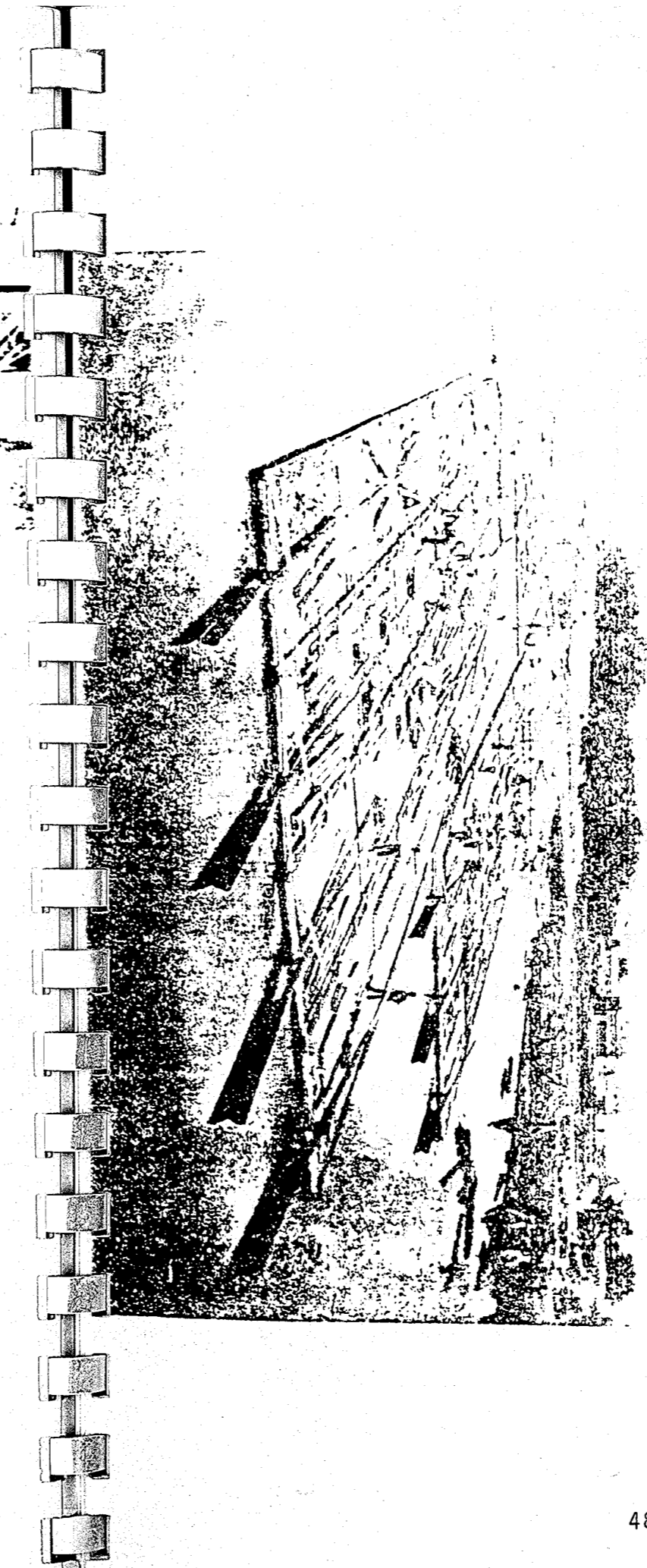
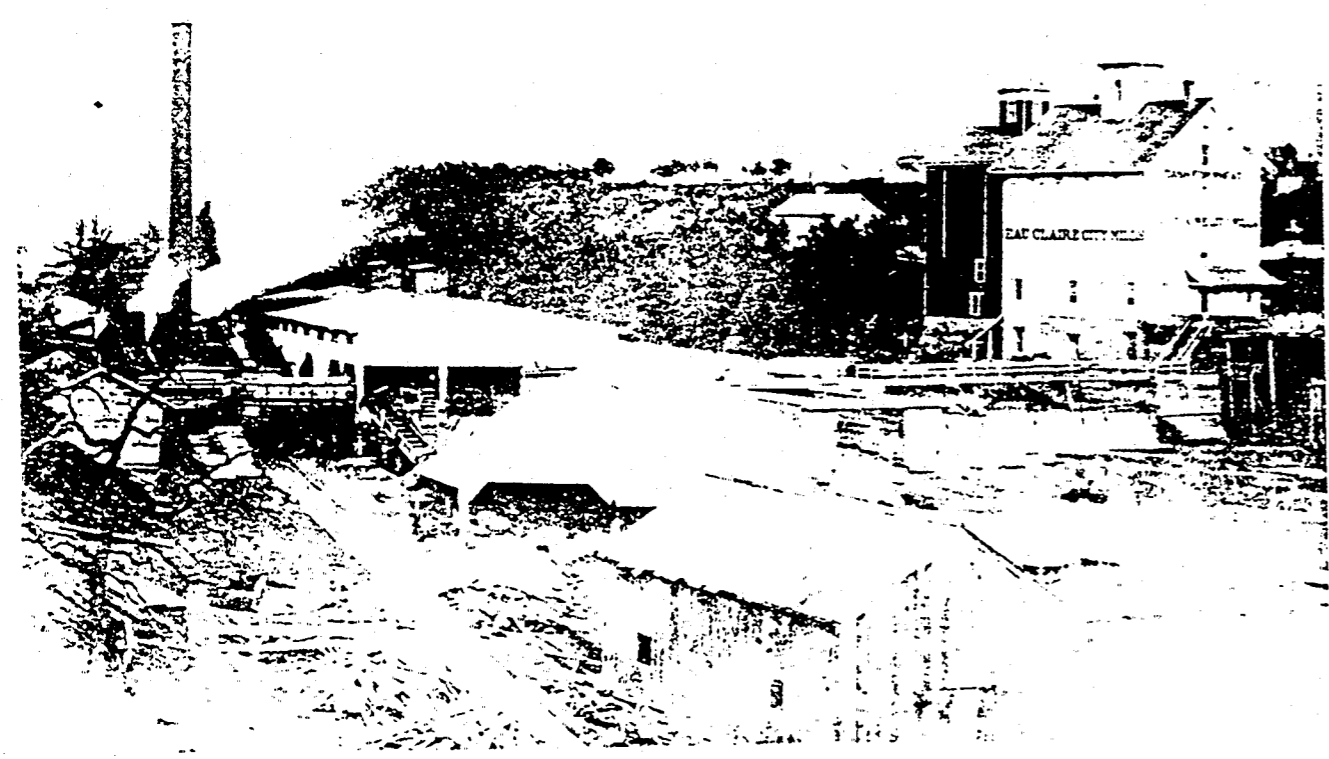
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Eau Claire Lumber Company sawmill on north bank of Eau Claire River was located about 100 meters east of Dewey Street bridge. Building at immediate left is rafting shed where lumber cribs were assembled. Cribs slid down ways, and two cribs apparently have just hit water. Smoke stack looms farther up river, site of second dam and water powered shingle mill for same company. Third stack represents planing mill. At right, flour mill. Below, photo of same sawmill taken in 1873, shows mill had already been converted to steam. At right, probably original flour mill on this site. Compare above. Both probably operated off water turbines.



Chippewa Valley Museum

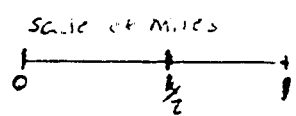
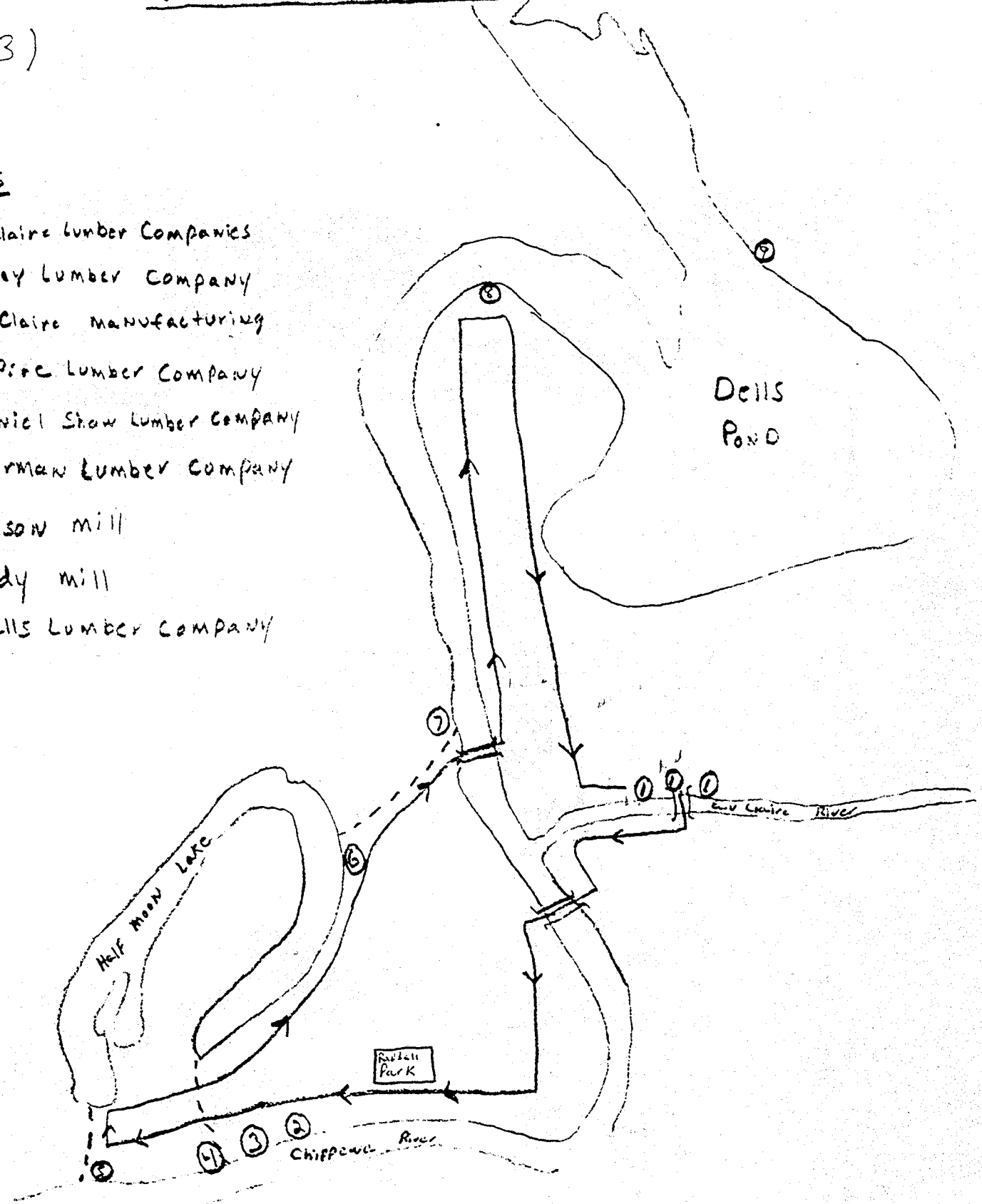
(Fig 2)

Path of Strikers ON JULY 18, 1881.

(Fig. 3)

MILLS

- ① Eau Claire Lumber Companies
- ② Valley Lumber Company
- ③ Eau Claire manufacturing
- ④ Empire Lumber Company
- ⑤ Daniel Shaw Lumber Company
- ⑥ Sherman Lumber Company
- ⑦ Wilson Mill
- ⑧ Eddy mill
- ⑨ Bells Lumber Company



Bridges

Canals

