

The History of Round Hill



Alone, rising high out of the Chippewa River bottoms, stands Round Hill. This distinct feature was, and still is, a landmark to river traffic navigating the Chippewa River. Round Hill rises about 400 feet and is quite a distinct feature when compared to the surrounding bottoms. Its height, combined with its distinctly "rounded" appearance, make it stand out. Round Hill received its name through obvious means. It looks round from all points on the river. This hill is not just another landmark, though. It holds a significance to the history of the city of Durand and to the development of Western Wisconsin.

Round Hill can be easily located by glancing downstream while crossing the Chippewa River bridge that goes out of Durand. The Hill is about three miles downstream and is quite hard to miss.

The first contact Round Hill has with the history books is in about 1680 when Father Louis Hennipen, a French explorer, is believed to have camped there while exploring the Mississippi River Valley. Hennipen is credited with being the first European to track the Mississippi River-- though probably not all the way to the Gulf of Mexico--and also named the site of Minneapolis, which is now the largest city in Minnesota.



Another famous explorer, Jonathan Carver, also has ties to Round Hill. In 1766, the Souix indians granted a large amount of land to Carver. The Durand Courthouse, to this day, holds the land deed that gave most of what is now central Wisconsin to Jonathan Carver. He later wrote a book about his expeditions, and mentioned the Weeping Rocks by

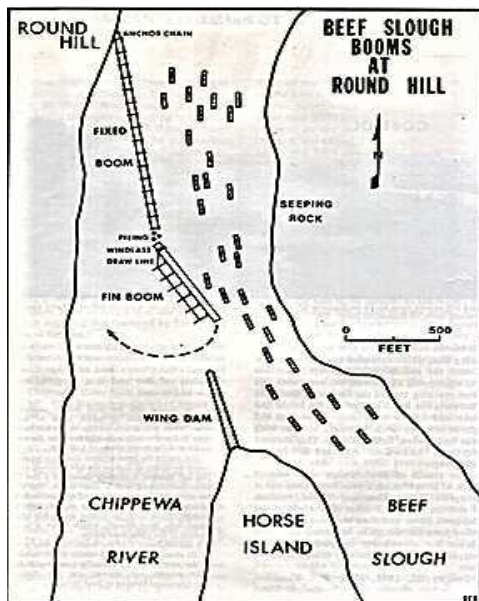
Round Hill. These rocks are located just downstream of Round Hill on the opposite bank. It is a vertical rock face that has water pouring continually out through cracks in the wall. As you can see in the pictures, the Weeping Rocks display some beautiful natural colors including some beautiful hues of green that have resulted from bacteria growing on the moist rock surface. The rough and colorful surface of the Weeping Rocks make them a truly unique and eye pleasing sight.



More recently, in 1854, a small sawmill was built at the foot of Round Hill by Nicholas Bowman. Three years after this, the area was surveyed. A platt was made for a small town that was to be called Onaway. This platt was complete with the names of future streets already decided. Onaway never materialized, though, and no one to this day is sure exactly why. At the time it probably seemed like a great place for a settlement because of all of the river activity taking place around it. Besides the building of the sawmill, Round Hill also had a steamboat port at which passengers and freight were unloaded for the surrounding areas of Arkansaw, Eau Galle, and the Dead Lake Prarie. This combined with its upcoming importance to the logging industry makes it puzzling as to why Onaway never developed. I guess we well never know.

The most interesting recent history of Round Hill began during the logging days. Round Hill was extremely important to the logging industry in the Chippewa

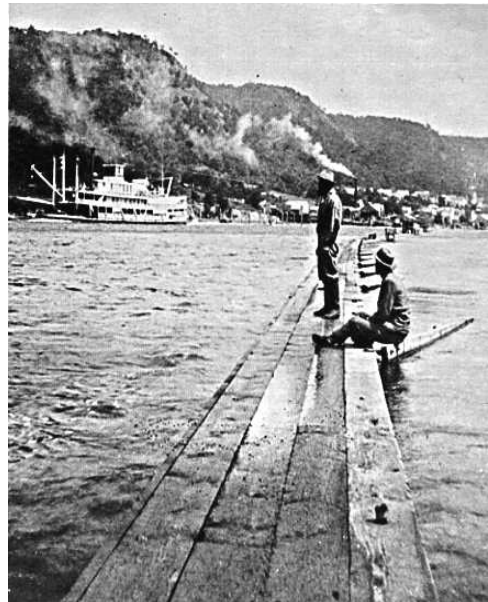
Valley because the Beef Slough branched off from the Chippewa at this point. After Round Hill, the main channel of the Chippewa bears left and, at this time, the Beef Slough beared to the right. The logging companies had to use these waterways to float logs down to the Mississippi, but the Chippewa was not well suited for this purpose. Its course was a very straight and wide open one that made it unsuitable for sorting logs. You see, the logging companies had to stamp the logs with their trademarks and count the amount of board feet--one board foot is a cubed foot of wood--that passed through their booms. Since there were no backwater ponds or sloughs where the logs could be stopped on the Chippewa, dams would have had to have been constructed for this purpose. This is why the Beef was so valuable. Its natural course that had a slow moving current and various ponds and sloughs offered many opportunities for sorting pools to be established. This could be accomplished by making small improvements to the Beef Slough that ended up costing about half a million dollars over its operating lifetime. The cost was absorbed by many different companies who controlled the Beef at different times, so it wasn't that huge of an expense to them when compared to the money they made from the logs. This was much more cost efficient than building and maintaining a dam on the Chippewa.



In order for the logging companies to make use of the Beef Slough, they had to have a way to divert the logs from the Chippewa into it. This was accomplished by a sheer boom. The diagram on the left does a good job of showing the layout of the area at this time and exactly how the sheer boom worked. This sheer boom was anchored to Round Hill on one end and to pilings in the river on the other. River traffic still had to travel on the river, though, so the boom couldn't go all the way across. A fin boom was installed at the end of the main boom to take care of this problem. It could probably be compared to a modern draw bridge. It was a

piece of the boom which had fins on the back of it that were made of planks. When a boat needed to pass through, the boom boss would crank in the fins to make them parallel to the boom. This would allow the current to push this section of the boom out of the way to let the river traffic pass. When the boom needed to be floated back into place, the fins were lowered and the boom swung back into

place because the pressure on the fins was greater than the pressure on the upstream side of the boom. As you can see in the picture, a wing dam was also built at the head of the Beef Slough at Horse Island to help make sure that the logs would be sheered into the slough. Even with this setup, though, some logs did manage to slip through the system, so a wing dam was constructed farther downstream on the Little Beef to catch the stray logs. The Little Beef is located just across from the Shoe-fly Boat Landing in Ella. It used to connect with the Beef Slough eventually and carried the stray logs back to the logging company's sorting operations. The Little Beef still flows off the Chippewa today, and is only deep enough in most places to float a canoe down. The Beef Slough no longer exists, though its path can be traced during high water. Its head was filled in by silt, and the improvements were deemed too costly to make, so Beef Slough was shut down for good. All remnants of the logging industry at the Beef have vanished over time. None of the booms or pilings used by the loggers can be found anymore. This picture shows what is believed to be the fin boom used at Round Hill. It shows the boom on the Mississippi River after the booming operations at Round Hill had ceased. It is believed that the fin boom was floated down the Chippewa into the Mississippi when the sorting operations were moved from the Beef to this site.



In the present day, absolutely no evidence exists to the rich history Round Hill has to the Durand area. The grandson of Round Hill boom boss Ab Gillmore still resides at the same place his grandfather worked during those busy logging days, but other than that, signs of the logging industry have vanished without a trace.

Information taken from:

Lumbermen on the Chippewa by Malcolm Rosholt

Round Hill historical packet by Annabelle Keys at the Durand Free Library.

This page was created by Eric Hartung in May of 1997