

Riding the River  
By Bob Miller

The moon shivers on the face of the river as Ruddy floats down on the raft made from the logs cut from the forests of Randolph County. He had been traveling down the river for two days far from his home. There were six other men on the raft with him heading for the sawmill. Most were asleep in the shack perched atop the logs. It was Ruddy's turn to watch for obstructions. The current was moving slowly and that suited him, fast water always meant a dangerous ride. Last year Dan Tucker had been riding the logs and had slipped in a fast stretch of water and been crushed between two huge logs. Now he lay in a grave on a hill overlooking the river near his home. Ruddy was more careful after that trip. Riding the logs was dangerous. There were 70 logs in the raft Ruddy and his crew were piloting down the Elk. Not as large as some of the drives Ruddy had been on where the men slept in an ark and the river would be full of logs as far as you could see. Still the danger was the same.

Soon the town of Sutton would be coming into sight. Ruddy would be glad when the ride was over. Tomorrow a boom would be stretched across the river to catch the logs. Then the logs would start to be pushed toward the jack slip and hoisted from storage boom into the mill to be made into lumber. Ruddy and his friends would be paid. Rudy was an experienced man and made about \$5 a day so he would be going into town with enough cash to keep him drinking for a week. Of course, he had

to be careful because there were always those men in town who would rather roll a drunken logger and rob him than work.

Ruddy had made this trip several times in the past year and had begun seeing a girl from town. Sarah was doe eyed with straight brown hair. She was petite and looked almost doll like next to Ruddy who stood 6'4 and weighed 250 pounds. His leathery skin and big hands seemed to be in such contrast to the slight, fair skinned Sarah. The only thing they fought about was his drinking. Sarah came from a church going family that didn't abide drinking and gambling. Ruddy was willing to give up cards but the bottle was stronger than even Sarah it seemed. Ruddy had wrestled with his dilemma all the way down the river.

Suddenly the log Ruddy was standing on shifted he was thrown off and barely able to regain his footing on another log. He knew immediately what was wrong and started hollering for the others. "Sandbar" he shouted. The men started scrambling, two went for the rudders and the rest headed forward to see if they could steer around the bar. If they were lucky, it would be only a couple of the outer logs caught and when they were free, the raft would continue. If they hit the bar with the lead logs, the ones behind would pile up and jam against the sandbar. It could take them days to get free. Ruddy grabbed a peavey, others had pike poles, and they all knew what had to be done. They had to break the jam and get the logs moving again. Jumping off the logs and on to the sand bar they worked quickly to move the stuck logs back into the flow of the river. Two

hours later and weary to the bone, they finally broke the last log free. The raft was free and floating down river again. The men jumped aboard the raft watching the sandbar recede in the moonlight behind them.

It was late afternoon before they got to Sutton and the logs were secure behind the boom. Ruddy and his fellow loggers had been paid. Now the loggers were headed to the main street of town. Ruddy arranged for a room and hot meal at the boarding house. After the meal of pork chops, collard greens, fried potatoes and apple pie the other loggers headed for the saloon. Ruddy went to bed. He thought about his friends wondered if he should have gone with them. He thought about Sarah, what she would say? He was bone tired from the drive and too exhausted to even think, so he put the thoughts out of his head and went to sleep.

In the morning, Ruddy ate ham, eggs, hotcakes, biscuits, and gravy all washed down with coffee. Feeling better Ruddy went to the barbershop. He got a shave, a haircut and arranged for a hot bath. Three months in the woods did not make a man exactly welcome in a ladies parlor. A clean suit of clothes and he was ready to call on Sarah.

Standing on the porch of Sarah's home Ruddy was trying to get up the nerve to knock when the door opened. There she stood looking so beautiful in the morning light. "Good morning, so good to see you" she said. Sarah resisted the urge to throw her arms around his neck; since her father was just behind her in the door.

They sat on the porch and caught up on what had happened. Sarah told about the town and Ruddy told tales of the logging camp. Mostly they just enjoyed being with each other. When lunchtime came, they asked permission to go on a picnic. Sarah's dad finally agreed as long as they returned before dark. The basket was packed and the two of them headed for a grassy spot overlooking the river. The afternoon was hot but the couple never noticed. By the time, they returned to Sarah's home Ruddy had made up his mind. He hadn't thought about a drink all afternoon and he still had no desire to leave Sarah and party with his friends from the logging camp. Ruddy knew there would still be the temptation, but he also knew there was power in the love of a good woman. Ruddy would be going back up river in a few days but next time he returned he intended to make Sarah his wife and find a job in town. Tonight he just wanted sit here with his arm holding Sarah close and watch the moon shiver on the face of the river.