

# Uniquely Ada Newsletter

## An Ada Tradition: Spring Log Runs and River Rats

Part One by Mike Zurgable

When Rix Robinson arrived in what is now Ada in 1821, there was an abundance of fresh water and the flora and fauna associated with the water and the adjoining forest. Ada was part of the Territory of Michigan established by an act of the U.S. Congress on January 11, 1805. Thirty-two years later, in 1837, after nearly a dozen treaties were negotiated with Ottawa, Potawatomi, Ojibwa and Wyandot tribes, Michigan was admitted as the 26th state in the Union. Stevens T. Mason served as the first governor of the state presiding over a population estimated at about 200,000 residents. Native Americans were not included in that initial population estimate. Detroit was the state capital and where most Michiganders lived.

With the population growth of the United States, growth of urban centers like Chicago, increasingly scarce timber in the eastern part of the U.S. and westward settlement into the treeless plains, the demand for lumber was growing. Harvesting Michigan's abundant forests was an opportunity ready for the taking. The newly minted state of Michigan employed surveyors to get information about the topography. From there, timber cruisers surveyed the state and noted the most



Ada resident Nellie Smith sits atop some sizable cut logs.

promising stands of white pine that were near rivers that would be used to transport the logs for processing. Next, crews would come in and build a bunkhouse, barns for the animals, a blacksmith shop and the all-important cook shanty and dining hall. Many camps also had a company store that sold basic items like clothes and tobacco.

The camp opened in late fall or early winter, as logging was initially a seasonal job. Crews worked dawn to dusk, six days a week, eating breakfast and evening meals in the dining hall, and the noon meal in the woods. Trees were dropped,

loaded onto sleds and dragged by draft horse or oxen teams to the banks of rivers. Along the way, trees were marked with the harvesting company's stamp, similar to the branding of a calf. A special ax was employed with the company initials or a logo molded into the square end of an ax, opposite the blade. One good whack was all that was needed to mark the ends of a log.

When spring arrived, logs were cast into the snow melt and rain swollen rivers to be processed downstream at the mill. Once the logs were



Logging crews in Ada Township, c. 1900.

launched into the river, the logger's job was done - back to the farm, 'See you next year boys.' The log drivers, aka River Rats went to work to make sure the logs made their way from the tributaries Maple, Flat, Rogue and Thornapple Rivers, then into the Grand River and all the way to Grand Haven to be processed. At the mouth of the Grand River, the River Rats separated logs by company stamp in boom ponds near the mill. Each log was separated by company mark and accounted for, allowing prompt payment to the company that harvested the log.

The River Rats were a transient group of men that performed a vital and dangerous job and they were beloved by few Ada residents. In "A Snug Little Place," Memories of Ada, Michigan 1821-1930, Frank Averill recalled "Those River Rats would get on the bar and dance, and boy, you could see where the hobnails went down in there that much. They had kerosene lamps with the reflector in back of them. Pretty soon the bottles were coming and they knocked the lamps all out and down. Just like a western movie and fight like the Devil, them guys. They were all men and all strong and working hard."

*More to come in the July edition...*

## Upcoming Events

- Thursday, April 18 - Presentation on Kreigh Collins**  
 7:00pm at the Ada History Center. With the new temporary exhibit, *Wanderlust: Ada Artist Kreigh Collins*, Collins' son Kevin Collins and grandson Brian Collins explore the life of the extraordinary artist.
- Saturday & Sunday, May 4-5 – Spring into the Past small museums tour**  
 Saturday 11am-5pm, Sunday 12pm-5pm. The Tri-River Historical Museum Network offers its annual event with special exhibits and hours at the 25+ member local history organizations, including Ada History Center. Pick up a directory at the History Center or check out: [www.tririvermuseums.com](http://www.tririvermuseums.com)
- Saturday, May 18 – Vintage Baseball Game**  
 5:00pm at Ada Township Park. After we knocked it out of the park last year, we're rounding the bases once again. Offered with Ada Township Parks and Rec, the game is played with turn-of-the-century rules, vintage uniforms, bats & balls. Concessions available and free admission.
- Starting June 12 - Music on the Lawn**  
 7:00pm at Legacy Park. Ada's summer concert series returns with the 23rd season of Music on the Lawn. June concerts are:
  - June 12 – *Thornapple River Band*, Pop Rock
  - June 19 – *Prior Noon*, Country
  - June 26 – *Rochelle & the Spoilers*, Rockin' Blues
- June 21 – Beers at the Bridge**  
 Save the dates for the summer concerts presented by Ada Township DDA. The events are planned for Fridays, June 21, July 19, and August 16. Stop by the Ada Historical Society booth and say hi!
- Thursdays, April 11, May 9, June 13 - Ada Historical Society Board & Membership Meetings**  
 3:00pm at the Ada History Center. Meetings are open to the public. Join us to find out how we're making history! May is our annual membership meeting and beginning of our fiscal year.

### Tri-River Historical Museum Network

The Tri-River Historical Museum Network put out a new directory for 2024. Our theme this year is "Notable Names, Prominent People and Public Places." Spring Into the Past will be Saturday and Sunday, May 4-5, 2024. Most museums will be open from 11am to 5pm on Saturday and

## Wanderlust: Ada Artist Kreigh Collins

The new temporary exhibit is in full swing – and it's a fun one. Thanks to those who came to the special members-only exhibit opening and particular thanks to Gravel Bottom Brewing for serving their Kevin the Bold beer. Why beer, you



ask? Come check out the exhibit to solve that mystery and explore the vibrant art and adventurous life of painter, illustrator, and cartoonist Kreigh Collins.

## Celebration & Acquisition

We had a couple things to celebrate this past month. We marked the 90th birthday of long-time Ada Historical Society volunteer Marilyn DeGood. We also received the donation of the elaborate dollhouse and furnishings created by Marilyn's sister Ethel and enjoyed by various family members over the years.



Marilyn DeGood with nephew Gary Beimers and the dollhouse.

12pm to 5pm on Sunday. Elections were held and the officers for 2024-26 are President Judy Gager from Greenville, Vice President Ben Merchant from Ionia, Secretary/Treasurer Marian Bolhuis from Ada.



## Collection Crew

While the museum was closed in January & February, much was going on behind the scenes. Volunteers focused particularly on the “preserve” aspect of our mission to preserve, share, and celebrate Ada’s history. Collections crew members Karey, Gary, Sheri, Mary, (yes that’s fun to say) and Katelyn worked week in and out (and all year) to make sure we’re properly caring for Ada’s treasures.



**Volunteers Gary, Karey, Katelyn & Rhonda making a difference!**

## Volunteering

Volunteers make a HUGE impact for Ada Historical Society and always have. Currently volunteers work on historic collections and photos, do fundraising and membership development, create and host the programming and events calendar, promote AHS at community-wide festivals, work on our finances, dig in the dirt of our lovely gardens, and so much more. And there’s always room for more helping hands.

Some areas we’d like to develop further include:

- Writing programs for school students
- Communications coordination
- Grant Writing
- Social media content creation

If you’d like more information on how you might help, please call 616.676.9346 or email [AdaHistoricalSociety@gmail.com](mailto:AdaHistoricalSociety@gmail.com). We’d greatly appreciate the opportunity to work with you.

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## Gardening Matters

Let us introduce you to Brooster the Rooster who has come to roost at the History Center. His name was chosen from some pretty clever online submissions. Some notable runners up include Rix (as in Robinson), Rex (as in Anthony), and Ada-doodle-doo.



## Happy Birthday to us!

In 2024, we commemorate 50 years of the Ada Historical Society and 25 years of the Averill Historical Museum of Ada. Have you seen the social media posts? We’re sharing stories of the Society’s volunteers and of the museum’s development all year. You’ll find us celebrating at Music on the Lawn this summer. Info will be out soon about the big birthday party we have planned for early fall.



## Gift Shop

There is excitement in our all-things-Ada gift shop surrounding the new exhibit about Kreigh Collins, local artist, illustrator, and cartoonist. We are busy acquiring items to support the exhibit. Kevin the Bold and Mitzi McCoy books have arrived that show Collins’s work as a cartoonist. Commissioned consignment items are being created to commemorate the artist as well as new Ada-themed pieces. We hope you will stop by on Fridays or Saturdays 1-4pm to browse the gift shop and see what’s new!



Want more facts, pics, & tidbits about Ada history? Follow us on Facebook and Instagram for all things Ada.

2024 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Membership Level

\_\_\_\_ Senior (60+) - \$15

\_\_\_\_ 2 Seniors - \$25

\_\_\_\_ Individual - \$20

\_\_\_\_ Family - \$30

\_\_\_\_ Friend - \$50

\_\_\_\_ Settler - \$100

\_\_\_\_ Business - \$100

Benefactors

\_\_\_\_ Lucius Lyon - \$250

\_\_\_\_ Edward Bradfield - \$500

\_\_\_\_ Rix Robinson - \$1000

Additional tax-deductible gift \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I have items to donate to the museum.

Mail completed form and check to: *Ada Historical Society, PO Box 741, Ada, MI 49301*

*The Ada Historical Society preserves, shares, and celebrates the unique history of the Ada community.*

www.AdaHistoryCenter.org 616.676.9346 AdaHistoricalSociety@gmail.com

**Ada History Center**

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