

The Original Spanish Peaks SUPers

By Anne Marie Mistretta

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Turn of the century log drivers practicing their balance on Jack Creek Lake—now known as Ulery's Lake—before testing their skills on the Gallatin River. PHOTO COURTESY OF HISTORIC CRAIL RANCH PHOTO ARCHIVES

Engage the core. Flex the knees. Reach, catch, power through.

First time stand up paddleboarders at Big Sky Resort's Lake Levinsky marina occasionally struggle for balance on the placid waters. But they need only look to local history to find inspiration from those who pioneered the sport in the Spanish Peaks more than a century ago.

Log drivers, as they prepared for their riotous passage delivering logs down the Gallatin River—and perhaps log driver wannabes—tested their surefootedness in local mountain lakes, such as Jack Creek Lake (now called Ulery's Lake).



Modern stand up paddleboarders learning the sport on Big Sky Resort's Lake Levinsky PHOTO BY ANNE MARIE MISTRETTA

Thousands of years ago, watermen on many continents guided their crafts while standing up to improve fishing, travel and stealthy invasion outcomes. Today's stand up paddleboarding—also known as SUP—most likely has its roots in the Hawaiian surf culture. Locally though, during the early 1900s these same athletic skills were so valuable that men were imported to this area for their abilities.

So who were those log drivers, and why were they here? Once the Northern Pacific Railroad chugged through Bozeman in 1883, the Gallatin Valley craved wood. The upper Gallatin watershed and its tributaries had plenty of it, and timber harvesting became an important local industry. Backed by Helena money, Walter Cooper formed the Cooper Tie Company in 1904 and set up a tie hacker camp in Eldridge on the Taylor Fork to supply the Northern Pacific with ties for the railroad beds.

But Cooper had a logistical problem: His timber was at the other end of the unimproved and treacherous Gallatin Canyon road, about 50 miles south of its ultimate destination in Salesville—now known as Gallatin Gateway. Once there, the timber would be hauled off to mills in the Gallatin Valley.

Enter the log drivers, recruited from Oregon and Canada to guide the logs downstream. Timber felled in the upper Gallatin forests in fall and winter was retained in dammed streams along the Gallatin River. At peak snowmelt runoff, the log drivers broke the dams, sometimes dynamiting them, and rode the logs downriver, hopping from log to log, prodding them with a pike pole to minimize jams.

“It was a colorful, boisterous operation,” according to Michael Malone, a former Montana State University president and Montana historian.

Log drivers were so nimble they were coveted by ladies as dancing partners. In fact, you can catch 40 seconds of impressive original footage of log driving at [youtube.com/watch?v=upsZZ2s3xv8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upsZZ2s3xv8), followed by the recording of a ditty called “The Log Drivers’ Waltz.”

The shapes of today's stand up paddleboards have greatly improved aerodynamics over logs. The staff of Big Sky's Geyser Whitewater—which operates the SUP operation at Big Sky Resort—reports that most people who try stand up paddleboarding actually master the balance fairly quickly. Plus, Levinsky is a calm lake without motorboats to cause balance-affecting waves.

Stand up paddleboarding in the Spanish Peaks is a great way to spend a day on water, while you imagine the log drivers of a century ago preparing for their rowdy journey down the Gallatin.

Anne Marie Mistretta is the chair of the Historic Crail Ranch Conservators who operate the Crail Ranch Homestead Museum on Spotted Elk Road in Big Sky.