

READS LANDING, MINNESOTA IN THE 19TH CENTURY

First In A Series Of Articles On The 19th Century Photography Of Gerhard Gesell

Reads Landing in the 19th century was a wild and woolly riverfront town with saloons, hotels, raftsmen and raft boats abounding. The thriving logging days choked the Mississippi with lumber and log rafts, towed by raftboats on the way downriver to the mills and lumberyards. The levee at Reads Landing was the scene of bustling activity, with as many as 400 raftsmen waiting for Chippewa floats to be made into rafts and many raftboats were tied to the wharves. It is said that at the height of the logging days, the logs were floated downstream in such



numbers that a person was able to walk across the river on them from Reads Landing to the Wisconsin side. Timber coming down the Chippewa to its confluence with the big river “rafted” at Beef Slough near Alma, Wisconsin.

When 19 year old Gerhard Gesell came to Reads Landing, on the Minnesota shore directly across from where the Chippewa River empties into the Mississippi River, the towns on both sides of the north-south water route were young and bursting with energy. It was 1863, at the very beginning of a fast-moving era of change that the young German immigrant eventually would document with his camera

Within a year of his arrival, Gesell enlisted in Brackett’s Battalion and spent two years on the western Minnesota plains, protecting settlers from attacks by dispossessed and disgruntled Sioux warriors while the regular militia was fighting in the South. Two years later he returned to Reads Landing, where he learned the new and fascinating trade of studio photographer. In 1873 he advertised as a professional photographer, and three years later he moved to Alma, Wisconsin, where he opened a studio and an art & stationery store.

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Photo: Reads Landing, Minnesota 1873 (AHS Image)