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Article Summary: While the *El Paso* was a real steamboat, her alleged Platte River Trip was a myth.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Thomas Brierly, John Durack, Robert Stuart, Robert Campbell, Francis Parkman, Pierre D Papin, Andrew Wineland, John A Latta

Supporters of the Myth of the Platte River Voyage: Edward Everett Hale, G L Shumway, Alfred J Mokler, Edward Bradley Trail, Frederick Way Jr, C Bradford Mitchell, Annalies Corbin

Historians Who Discounted the Myth: Hiram Martin Chittenden, Addison Sheldon

Nebraska Place Names: Platte River, Loup River, Elkhorn River

Keywords: elk's antlers, John Durack, Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company, Andrew Wineland, *Mary Cole*

Photographs / Images: advertisement for the *El Paso*; Alfred J Mokler; Edward Everett Hale; map from Hale's *Kansas and Nebraska*; view of the North Platte River, 1880; Grant L Shumway; Council Bluffs (Kanesville) ferry landing on the Missouri River; lower Platte River near Fremont about 1904; Addison E Sheldon surveying Mitchell Pass at Scotts Bluff

Those familiar with the quip that the Platte River was "a mile wide and an inch deep" must have been amazed by the brief article, "Platte River in Wyoming Navigated by Steamboat," in the September-October 1941 issue of *The Wyoming Pioneer*.

The Mythical

BY WILLIAM E. LASS

Platte River Voyage of the Steamboat *El Paso*

REGULAR LEXINGTON PACKET.

THE SPLENDID  PASSENGER STEAMER

EL PASO!

H. THORNBRUGH, MASTER,

WILL LEAVE

FOR WASHINGTON, HERMANN, PORTLAND, JEFFERSON CITY,

Providence, Rocheport, Boonville, Arrow Rock, Glasgow, Cambridge, Brunswick, Windsor City, Miami, Hill's Landing, Dover, New Berlin & Lexington,

On the inst., at o'clock, A.

For Freight or Passage apply on board, or to
Keemle & Hager, F.S.

WALL & WIDEN, or } Agents.
WM. DWYER, }

1850



“People living at Fort Mitchell were startled by the scream of a steam whistle, and so far as was within the knowledge of the people here there was no such thing nearer than the Missouri river.”

Alfred J. Mokler

THE JOURNAL'S FOUNDER AND PUBLISHER
Alfred J. Mokler wrote:

Could you conceive a steamboat navigating the Platte river from the Missouri to the site of the Guernsey dam? Knowing the Platte as it is today with bridges and dams obstructing its course for navigation you would hesitate to believe so weird a tale, but authentic history tells us that a steamboat did navigate the Platte from its mouth where it empties into the Missouri to the canyon above Guernsey. There was then no Pathfinder, Seminoe and Alcova dams to hold back the water of the melting snows in the mountains. Early in June in the year 1852, people living at Fort Mitchell were startled by the scream of a steam whistle, and so far as was within the knowledge of the people here there was no such thing nearer than the Missouri river. That year the spring turned off warm and the river was filled from bank to bank. It was the first and only steamboat ever seen on the Platte in Wyoming. It proved to be the El Paso, and it continued its journey to the mouth of Platte canyon where

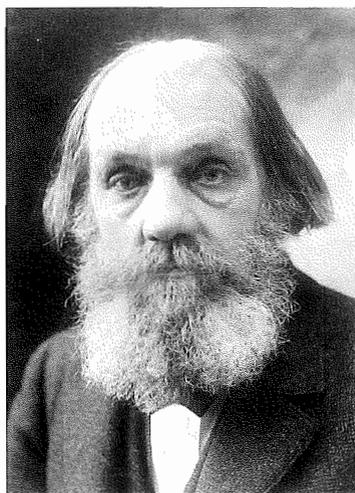
the current proved too strong for it to proceed further. Then the return journey was commenced. G. L. Shumway mentions the steamboat incident in his history of Nebraska and the historian, Everett Hale, published a book in 1854 in which he mentions the navigation of the Platte by the steamboat El Paso. The advance up the river below the junction of the North and South Platte was made at the rate of thirty-five miles per day and through the North Platte at the rate of twenty-five miles per day to the Platte canyon above Guernsey. The return voyage was made at the rate of seventy-five to ninety miles per day. The El Paso in ascending the Platte river into Wyoming was an achievement never surpassed by a boat of its class. In those days boats that distinguished themselves, were entitled to wear elk's antlers as a mark until another surpassed it, but the El Paso wore the horns until it was removed from service. The trapper Reulean [sic] was among the passengers to be left in the valley who is mentioned by Francis Parkman as being at Fort Laramie.¹

Above: **Alfred J. Mokler, a Casper, Wyoming, newspaperman and historian, helped perpetuate the story of the Steamboat El Paso's mythical Platte River voyage.** Used by permission, Casper College Western History Center, Casper, Wyoming

Opposite: **The Steamboat El Paso's career as a Missouri River packet lasted barely five years, from her first voyage in March 1850 until she struck a snag and sank on April 10, 1855.** Digitally enhanced and restored. Used by permission, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia.

*“At most seasons of the year
the river is of little use for
navigation.”*

Edward Everett Hale



In presenting this bit of “authentic history,” Mokler helped perpetuate a myth that was originated in 1854 by Edward Everett Hale. In his 264-page emigrant guide, *Kansas and Nebraska: The History, Geographical and Physical Characteristics, and Political Position of Those Territories; An Account of the Emigrant Aid Companies, and Directions to Emigrants*, he reported:

The Steamboat *El Paso* is said to have ascended the river [Platte] last year [1853], when the water was high, more than five hundred miles from its mouth, passing up the North Fork above Fort Laramie. In token of this triumph, she still “wears the horns,” for it is the custom on the western waters for a steamboat which has distinguished herself by any decided feat like this, to wear a pair of antlers, until some more successful boat surpasses her in the same enterprise by which she won them. The distance achieved by the *El Paso* is probably over-estimated. At most seasons of the year the river is of little use for navigation.²

But later in the book Hale abandoned his apprehensiveness by concluding, “the *El Paso* ascended the Nebraska [i.e. Platte] four or five hundred miles, in the spring of 1853.” Perhaps he got his information from the same source that caused him to report, “the Missouri river can be navigated by steamboats to the Great Falls.”³

When Hale was writing *Kansas and Nebraska* in the summer of 1854, the achieved head of steamboat navigation on the Missouri was *El Paso* Point, eight miles above the Milk River and 777 miles below the Great Falls in Montana. St. Louis-based Missouri River steamboatmen then aspired to establish their head of navigation at the fur trade post of Fort Benton, thirty-seven miles below Great Falls. However, that feat was not accomplished until 1860.⁴

Hale’s assertion about the Platte River voyage of the *El Paso* was not true. Newspaper reports

Edward Everett Hale had never visited Kansas and Nebraska and relied on a limited number of sources when he wrote his 1854 book about the region. Used by permission, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts

from Missouri River towns prove conclusively that in the “spring” of 1853 the boat was not on the Platte. Whether or not Hale meant astronomical spring (ca. March 21–June 21) is immaterial. For purposes of disputation, give him the benefit of the doubt and generously define spring as from the beginning of navigation into July.

Where was the *El Paso* during that time? Missouri River navigation opened very early in 1853. On February 20 the *El Paso*, bound from St. Louis to St. Joseph, landed at Brunswick in central Missouri. After this first voyage the vessel completed five more St. Louis to St. Joseph round trips before the end of June. It was not navigated above St. Joseph until July. On July 7 the steamer ascended past Brunswick bound for Council Bluffs, Iowa, and returned to Brunswick on July 12. On this six-hundred-mile round trip it would have passed the mouth of the Platte both ascending and descending. But its excellent time of only five days away from Brunswick precludes any Platte River navigation.⁵

Since the *El Paso* did not make a Platte River voyage in the spring of 1853, it could hardly have been awarded a set of horns for that accomplishment. In relating the horns story, Hale again betrayed his lack of knowledge about steamboat navigation. In the early 1850s honoring captains with a set of elk horns was coming into vogue on the Missouri in emulation of its earlier practice on the Ohio and Mississippi. But the award was for speed, not distance, records. In trying to satisfy the public’s lust for speed, Missouri River steamboatmen invariably tried to set a new time record for covering the distance between two designated points. Boat officers knew prospective passengers would think that the fastest vessels were the best in all other respects. Thus, winning the horns was an advertising coup. Elk horns mounted on the pilot-house symbolized the legendary swiftness of that animal. Awarding them was often done at a public banquet replete with flowery speeches and numerous toasts.⁶

It is possible that Hale was told a somewhat garbled version of Captain Thomas Brierly’s exploits. Brierly in the spring of 1850 was the first captain of the newly launched *El Paso*. One of his greatest achievements occurred in May 1853, when he commanded the *Polar Star* during its

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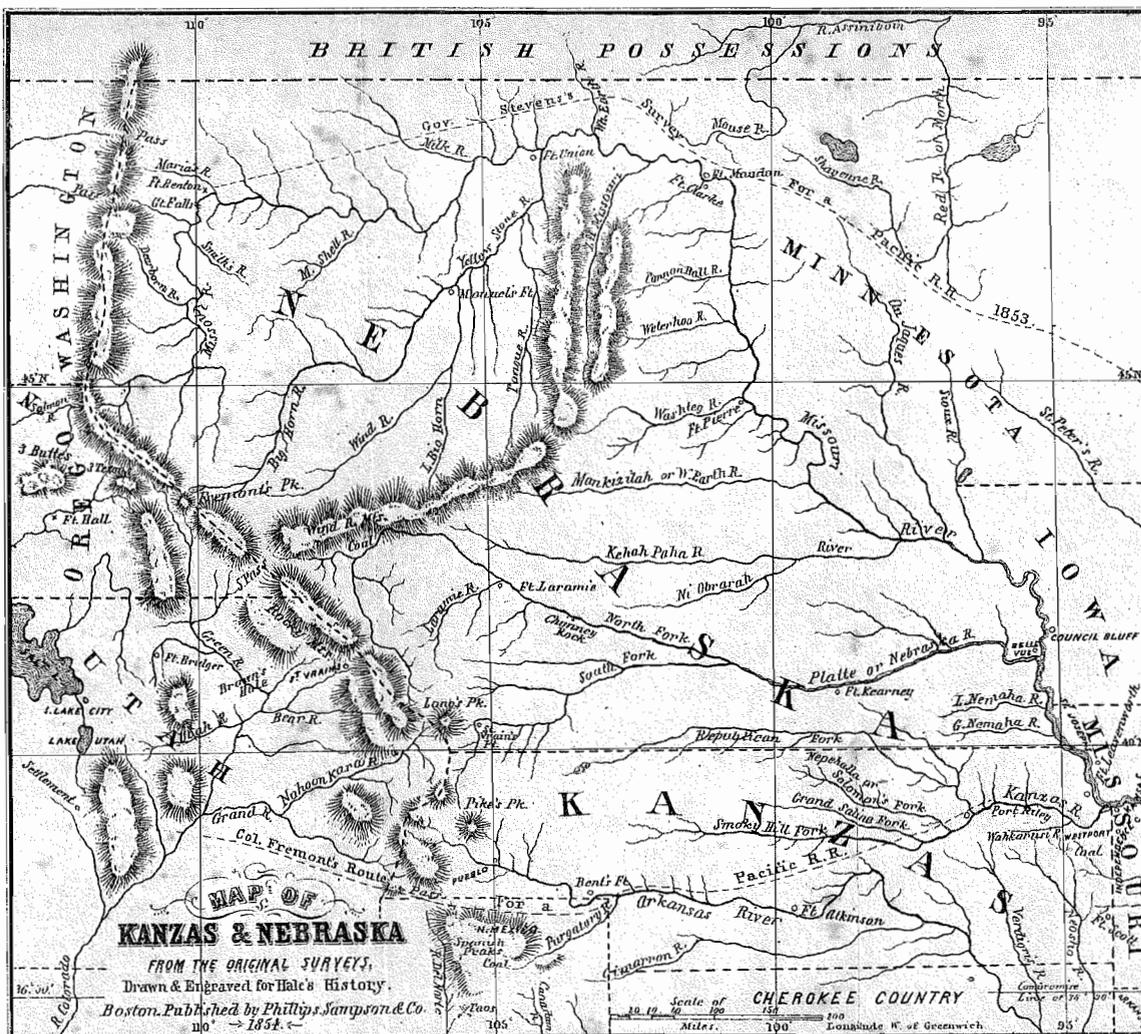
sixty-eight-hour passage over the 565-mile ascent from St. Louis to St. Joseph. Brierly was feted in St. Joseph and presented with a polished set of elk horns whose mounting was inscribed "Saint Joseph TO CAPT. BRIERLY. The fleetest Elk has shed them from his brow. Fit emblem 'Polar Star' to deck thy prow."⁷

Hale may also have been given some information about the *El Paso*'s record-making trip on the Missouri in 1850 and confused it with the Platte. During its first navigation season the 260-ton side-wheeler, which was 174 feet long and 26 feet wide, broke the Missouri's steamboat ascension record by about one hundred miles. Captain John Durack, an employee of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company (the "American Fur Company" colloquially), designated his turnabout place as El Paso Point.⁸

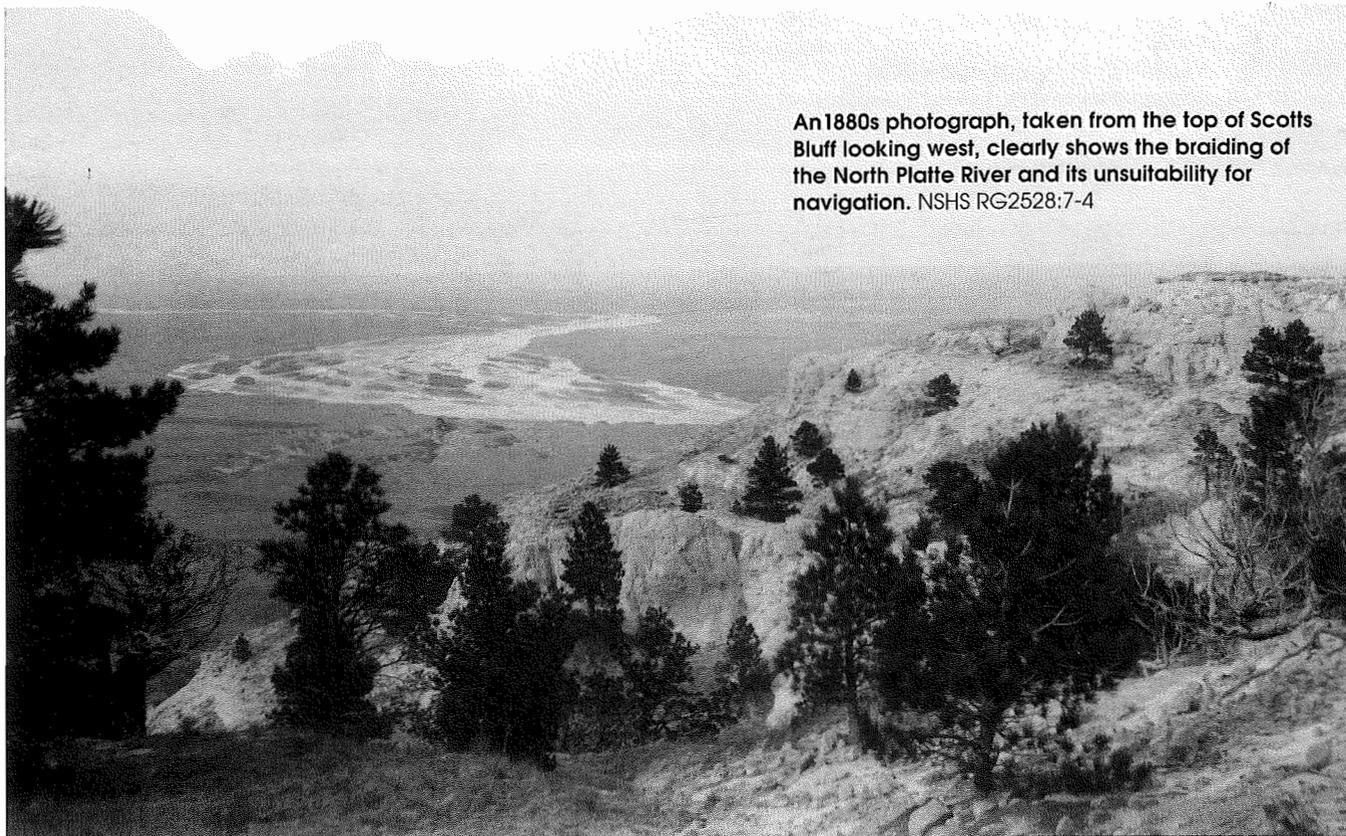
The *El Paso*, which was chartered to the fur trading company, was selected for the voyage because it drew less water than most other steamers.

Its St. Louis builders deliberately broadened its beam and decreased the depth of its hold to make it float higher. Its construction was a key step in the evolution of western steamboats to make them more adaptable to shallow streams. Because of its relatively light draft, the *El Paso* was sometimes run above Kansas City to Kanesville (renamed to Council Bluffs in 1853) in connection with heavier, deeper-draft craft that were not operated above the mouth of the Kansas River. The *El Paso*'s record-making Missouri River voyage was heavily publicized in St. Louis and throughout Missouri River settlements. When Hale was writing *Kansas and Nebraska*, the boat was one of the most famous Missouri River steamboats. Despite its design and success, however, the *El Paso* proved to be no more immune to the treacherous Missouri than the hundreds of other steamers that were lost there. It was snagged and sank in the Missouri near Boonville, Missouri, on April 10, 1855.⁹

The El Paso proved to be no more immune to the treacherous Missouri than the hundreds of other steamers that were lost there.



This map was included in Everett Edward Hale's book, *Kansas and Nebraska*. NSHS M78/1854/S192K



An 1880s photograph, taken from the top of Scotts Bluff looking west, clearly shows the braiding of the North Platte River and its unsuitability for navigation. NSHS RG2528:7-4

Hale's report about the *El Paso's* Platte River voyage is especially amazing because he was aware of the river's reputation as the Missouri's largest non-navigable tributary. He mentioned that fur traders descended the Platte "sometimes in canoes and batteaux [*sic*] from Fort Laramie to the Missouri river." But he qualified this statement by noting, "this navigation, however, is intricate, and very tedious. The canoes or boats constantly get aground, and it seems to be regarded, even at the season of freshets, as a last resort in the way of transfer of goods from above."¹⁰

This judgment mirrored the experiences of traders. In March 1813, when Robert Stuart was leading a small party of fur traders from the mouth of the Columbia River to St. Louis, they attempted to descend the North Platte in dugout canoes. They soon discovered that the river was "a wide but extremely shallow stream, with many sand bars, and occasionally various channels. They got one of their canoes a few miles down it, with extreme difficulty, sometimes wading, and dragging it over the shoals; at length they had to abandon the attempt and to resume their journey on foot."¹¹

Much farther downstream they were able to resume navigating. When Stuart and his party were about forty-five miles from the Missouri, they obtained a hide canoe made by Oto Indians. The

craft, twenty feet long, four feet wide, and eighteen inches deep, framed with poles and willow twigs, was covered with five elk and buffalo hides sewn together. With it they reached the Missouri and descended about 150 miles before the frame wore out. Obviously, since the Oto made the canoe they were accustomed to navigating the lower Platte with similar craft.¹²

After the mid-1830s St. Louis-based traders occasionally tried to descend the Platte because successful navigation would be faster and cheaper than overland transportation. In addition to hide canoes, they used bateaux and mackinaw boats. Both bateaux and mackinaws, approximately twice the size of hide canoes, were made of thick boards and propelled by rowers and a helmsman who manned a stern tiller. Trader Robert Campbell in 1835 built a bateau on the North Platte to ship buffalo robes. But during most of his reported six-hundred-mile descent to the Missouri he had to use "small boats made of skin." After this experience he reported, "the navigation of the Platte is made very difficult by its great width, its shallowness, the absence of a channel in any part of it, and its quick-sand bottom."¹³

Nonetheless, Campbell and other traders continued to attempt Platte navigation. In 1839 "a boat" owned by Campbell and his partner,

William L. Sublette, reached St. Louis from an unspecified point on the Platte with “about one hundred and sixty packages of robes and about a thousand weight of beaver.” Four years later a “fleet of Mackinaw boats” was reported to be descending the Platte. In June 1846, overland traveler Francis Parkman met a fleet of eleven boats laden with buffalo robes and some beaver pelts about three hundred miles below Fort Laramie. He visited briefly with its commander Pierre D. Papin, the Fort Laramie bourgeois. As Papin hurriedly resumed his trip, Parkman observed: “They had reason for haste, for already the voyage from Fort Laramie had occupied a full month, and the river was growing daily more shallow. Fifty times a day the boats had been aground; indeed, those who navigate the Platte invariably spend half this time upon sand-bars.”¹⁴

Platte River navigation by small boats was notoriously unreliable. Fur trade historian Hiram Martin Chittenden concluded that Platte River navigation “was of course largely out of the question. Bull-boats, or flatboats made of buffalo hide, have descended from above Fort Laramie, but where one such attempt has succeeded, probably ten have failed.” Chittenden also reported that from the mouth of the Loup River (at present-day Columbus, Nebraska) “near where the Pawnee villages were located boats did frequently descend the short distance to the Missouri with the trade of those Indians.”¹⁵

During their experimentation with Platte River boating, fur traders developed an alternative to the Platte River overland route from the Missouri to Fort Laramie. Aggravation with the approximately five-hundred-mile trail caused them to regularly use the Fort Pierre-Fort Laramie Trail by 1837. The new route, about two hundred miles shorter than the Platte River way, saved time and money in the transportation of steamboat-delivered freight southward from Fort Pierre (near present-day Fort Pierre, South Dakota) to Fort Laramie.¹⁶

It is not surprising that Hale’s book contained errors and inconsistencies. Not only did he lack background in the subject, but also his frenetic writing pace precluded systematic research and factual verification. On July 12, 1854, when he signed an agreement with his publisher to write the book manuscript, Hale was a thirty-two-year-old Congregationalist minister in Worcester, Massachusetts. An ardent abolitionist, he had been involved in the antislavery movement since 1845, when he wrote a pamphlet criticizing the annexation of Texas as a slave state. Like most other abolitionists,

he was concerned that the Kansas-Nebraska Act of May 1854 opened the way for slavery’s expansion. Since the legal status of slavery in the two territories was to be determined by “popular sovereignty,” (i. e. the voters) both slavery and antislavery supporters realized the importance of colonizing Kansas with their adherents. Both sides assumed that Nebraska’s more northern location would preclude the introduction of slavery there.¹⁷

Soon after his neighbor and state legislator Eli Thayer called on the Massachusetts legislature to organize the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company, Hale offered his services to their cause. Although he had never visited the Kansas-Nebraska region and was only in the early stages of his writing career, Hale obviously felt qualified to write an emigrant guide to attract antislavery New Englanders to Kansas.

Amazingly, Hale, writing in longhand, produced “most, if not all” of his approximately sixty thousand-word manuscript in August 1854. His generous quoting from a limited number of sources facilitated this effort. Indeed, later observers, including his own son Edward E., thought *Kansas and Nebraska* was “little more than a compilation.” The book was undocumented, but Hale indicated the nature of some of his sources in the text. Much of his narrative was copied directly from reports of federal government explorers. But he also acknowledged such dateless sources as “an intelligent writer for the New York Tribune.”¹⁸

Although Alfred J. Mokler later proclaimed Hale to be an “historian” and Grant Lee Shumway called him “the profound student,” *Kansas and Nebraska* does not evidence such claims. Only a portion of the book dealt with the history of the Kansas-Nebraska region. Furthermore, Hale was not concerned with doing thorough research, critically evaluating sources, synthesizing masses of information, and presenting an objective account.

Shumway, who played the key role in perpetuating and expanding the *El Paso* Platte River voyage myth, was undoubtedly awed by Hale’s fame. But Hale’s celebrity status was achieved for reasons other than his writing of *Kansas and Nebraska*. A prolific author, he wrote about one hundred stories over a fifty-five-year career, highlighted by *The Man without a Country* (1863), a ringing call for American patriotism. Despite his later reputation, when Hale wrote *Kansas and Nebraska* he was a young man dedicated to supporting a highly emotional crusade. Consequently, he wrote the book in the spirit of other emigrant guides, whose aim was not to present accurate information but to

The El Paso's ferrying receipts were reported to exceed \$5,000.

promote an area. Promotional literature by its very nature was advertising that had to be used with caution.¹⁹

Hale's claim about the *El Paso's* Platte River voyage lay dormant until it was revived and expanded in 1921 by Grant Lee Shumway in his *History of Western Nebraska and Its People*. Shumway, however, concluded the voyage had occurred in 1852, not 1853 as Hale had stated. Specifically, he wrote, "early in June, 1852, an event of more than passing moment came into the existence of Fort Mitchell" when the *El Paso* landed downstream from the fort. Shumway observed that on its trip from the Missouri to the fort near present-day Scottsbluff, the steamer had ascended to the juncture of the North Platte and South Platte at an average daily rate of thirty-five miles. On the North Platte, he claimed the *El Paso* proceeded upstream at twenty-five miles a day. At Fort Mitchell, stated Shumway, "among the few passengers alighting" from

the *El Paso* "was Reuleau [sic], the trapper" mentioned by Francis Parkman in *The Oregon Trail*.²⁰

The day after landing at Fort Mitchell the *El Paso*, according to Shumway, resumed its ascent of the North Platte. It was navigated to the canyon near present-day Guernsey, Wyoming, where the swift current forced its captain to turn about. *El Paso's* descent to the Missouri was at the daily rate of seventy-five to ninety miles.

Shumway presented his account as actual history, but there is no evidence that the voyage really occurred. For openers, it would have been impossible for the *El Paso* or any other boat to have landed at Fort Mitchell in 1852 because the post was not established until twelve years later. Fort Mitchell, an outpost of Fort Laramie, was built to bolster fortification of the Platte River route during Nebraska's Indian War of 1864–65. It was located on the south bank of the North Platte River, three miles west of the gap in Scotts Bluff. Shumway, who had lived in the Scotts Bluff vicinity for more than three decades before his history was published, certainly demonstrated his lack of local history knowledge by such a colossal error.²¹

Furthermore, evidence from contemporary sources proves that the *El Paso* was not on the Platte in "early June" 1852. Using Shumway's travel rates, it would have taken the boat about fourteen

or fifteen days to ascend the river to Scotts Bluff (nine to cover the 310 miles to the juncture of the North Platte and South Platte and five to six on the North Platte). Another two days of navigation would have been required to reach its highest point, and the down voyage would have consumed six to seven days. The entire round trip would have taken twenty-two to twenty-four days.

Shumway's date of "early June" precludes the reconstruction of a precise chronology. The first ten days of the month would be a generous interpretation of the *El Paso's* presumed arrival at Scotts Bluff. This means that the boat would have entered the Platte at least by May 17 or 18 and no later than May 27 or 28.

The *El Paso's* activities in the spring of 1852 were well documented by the newspapers of four Missouri River towns and by the diary of an overland emigrant. Commanded by Andrew Wineland, the *El Paso* was slated to run in the St. Louis to St. Joseph trade during the navigation season. The steamer gained the distinction of being the first to ascend the Missouri that year, when it reached Glasgow and Brunswick, Missouri, on February 8. After descending past the towns three and four days later, the *El Paso* made several more St. Louis to St. Joseph round trips before mid-May.²²

After stopping at Glasgow and Brunswick on May 10 and 11, Wineland navigated the vessel to St. Joseph, where he learned of an inviting upstream business prospect. An unprecedented emigration to California and Oregon created a demand for additional ferry service in the Kaneshville vicinity. The regular ferries at or near Kaneshville could not satisfy the demands of the crowds who were anxious to get themselves with their wagons and thousands of animals across the Missouri.

Soon after the *El Paso* docked at Kaneshville on May 17, it started ferrying emigrants. Wineland kept his boat busy for four or five days, moving more than 2,000 people, 500 wagons and 4,215 head of livestock across the Missouri. The *El Paso's* ferrying receipts were reported to exceed \$5,000. Since the *El Paso* and the other boats had a captive audience, their ferrying rates were high. Caleb Richey paid \$20 for crossing on the *Robert Campbell* (another regular packet that had been diverted to Kaneshville ferrying) because it and the *El Paso* "could get almost any price for ferrying, as the ferryboats could not cross near all the emigration."²³

After its ferrying stint, the *El Paso* returned to St. Louis. It stopped at Brunswick on May 27 and Glasgow the next day. On June 7 it was back at



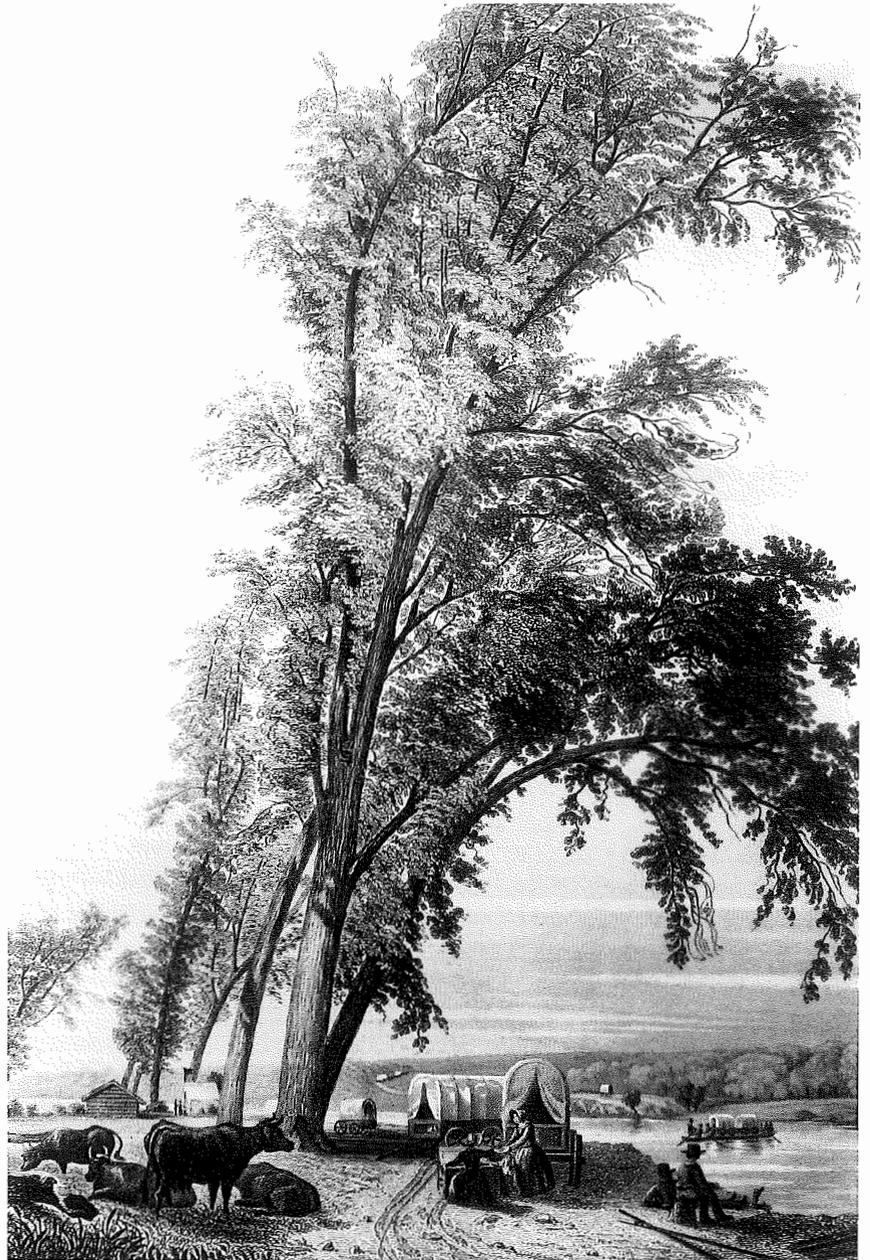
Grant L. Shumway, author of the 1921 *History of Western Nebraska and Its People*, was responsible for reviving and embellishing the tale of the *El Paso's* Platte River trip. NSHS RG2411-5069

Brunswick en route for St. Joseph and again at Brunswick while descending on June 12. Obviously, its appearances at Glasgow, Brunswick, St. Joseph, and Kaneshville in May and June 1852 means it could not have been at Shumway's presumed Fort Mitchell in early June. Furthermore, there is no possibility that Shumway was incorrect only about the month of the *El Paso's* Platte River ascent, and it actually occurred at another time in 1852. The weekly newspapers of Brunswick and Glasgow show the boat was engaged in its regular St. Louis to St. Joseph trade until late November, with the exception of much of July when it was at points below.²⁴

Even if Shumway was unaware of the *El Paso's* whereabouts, he should have been highly skeptical of the tale about its routine Platte River voyage. He knew Hale had reported the difficulties of Platte navigation with small boats. Consequently, he should have realized that the Platte was a braided river with many channels intersected by islands. This feature, and the tendency of the stream to widen rather than deepen during its most vigorous flows, should have made him very dubious about the possibility of a steamboat pilot finding a continuous main channel.

Additionally, Shumway assumed there was no significant difference in the potential navigability of the lower portions of the Platte and the North Platte. In actuality, the Platte's greatest flow occurred in its lower reaches because of the entry of the Loup and Elkhorn rivers, its principal tributaries. The Loup is the Platte's main tributary. The river, its three branches, and their feeder streams drain an area encompassing nearly fourteen thousand square miles (approximately one-sixth of Nebraska's area). Downstream from the Loup's mouth, the Elkhorn, which empties into the Platte about seven miles northeast of Ashland, drains more than six thousand square miles. Situated in the easternmost portions of the Great Plains, the Loup and Elkhorn drainages have about twice as much precipitation annually as the Scotts Bluff vicinity. Normally, the Platte's greatest flow, caused by the combination of prairie rains and Rocky Mountain snowmelt, would have occurred in late May and early June.²⁵

Those who experimented with Platte River steamboating knew that their best chance of succeeding was on the lower Platte. By the time Nebraska Territory was formed in 1854, the Platte River valley was well established as the region's corridor for westward expansion. Dissatisfaction with slow, costly overland transportation prompted



The Council Bluffs (Kaneshville) ferry landing on the Missouri River. Drawing by Frederick H. Piercy, *Route From Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley* (London: 1855). NSHS RG2401-3

*When the El Paso
was launched
in 1850
its construction
cost was
approximately
\$21,000*

schemes to open Platte River steamboating.

The first effort was made by the owners of the *Mary Cole*, a ninety-three-ton side-wheel ferry about half the size of the *El Paso*. The vessel was navigated from Quincy, Illinois, in the early spring of 1855 with the aim of ascending the lower Platte and part of the Elkhorn. But the *Mary Cole* was grounded before reaching the Elkhorn. Its brief Nebraska career ended later in the spring when it was snagged and lost at Plattsmouth.²⁶

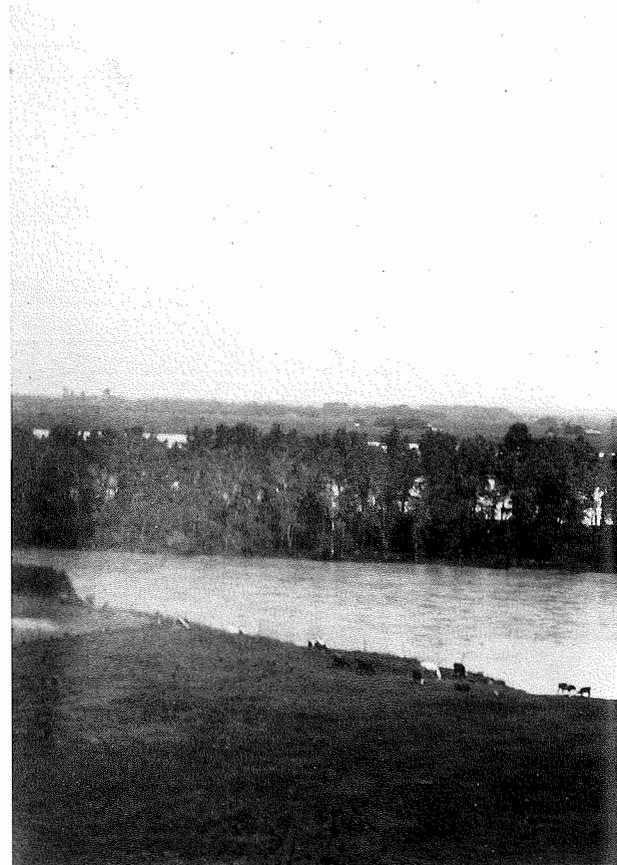
The next year the Nebraska Territorial Legislature tried to promote steamboating to Fort Kearny. It petitioned Congress to grant twenty thousand acres of land to John A. Latta, contingent on him constructing and running a steamer from the mouth of the Platte to Fort Kearny. Latta managed to build a small steamer, which he put on the lower Platte in the spring of 1859. But there is no record that it engaged in successful navigation. Perhaps Latta's effort was the same as the Saint Mary and Fort Kearny Line, which announced in the summer of 1858 that it intended to steam the *Pioneer* from Saint Mary's Landing (on the Nebraska side of the Missouri about eight miles above the Platte) to Fort Kearny. The scheme prompted the dubious editor of the nearby Glenwood, Iowa, newspaper to observe: "The opening up of the river Platte, is a new and to us a rather doubtful enterprise, yet one that has our sympathies and best wishes."²⁷

The inability to establish steamboating with small boats on the lower Platte underscores the fallacy of Shumway's assumption that the *El Paso* was navigated easily over five hundred miles up the Platte and North Platte. But Shumway was not burdened with knowledge of these failures or the economics of steamboating. Since his description of the *El Paso's* voyage offered no motive for the trip he made it appear that its captain was merely on some madcap adventure without concern for making money. Logically, no steamboat owners would have permitted such harebrained scheming. The very idea that a boat like the *El Paso* would have been removed from a paying trade on the Missouri during a busy period of more than three weeks is preposterous. Like any other business, steamboating was expected to make a profit. From an entrepreneurial standpoint, a boat's most important crewmember was the first clerk, who was its business manager. At the time of the *El Paso's* alleged Platte River voyage, the first clerks of Missouri River steamers were usually part owners of their boats. Among other things, they strove to recoup the vessel's construction cost and to make

money on each voyage, despite having to cover daily operating expenses as well as insurance, depreciation, and interest.

Operating the *El Paso* was relatively expensive. When the boat was launched in 1850 its construction cost was approximately \$21,000. If any of this expenditure were borrowed capital its owners would have to have paid about 6 percent annual interest. Daily operating expenses, including wages, crew subsistence, and fuel, averaged an estimated \$125 for steamers in the Mississippi River system. The prevailing annual premium on hull insurance was 12 percent of the boat's value. It was higher than that on the Missouri because insurance underwriters knew the stream was riskier than the Mississippi. One can only imagine the reaction of the underwriters if they had been approached about covering a boat that proposed to ascend the previously unnavigated Platte. Because steamboats were short-lived, annual depreciation was calculated at 24 percent.²⁸

Despite such expenses, Shumway would have one believe that the *El Paso* steamed up the Platte even though its only possible income would have been the fares of the "few passengers" that landed at Fort Mitchell. The *El Paso* would have passed



the army posts of Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie both ascending and descending, but overland freighters based at Fort Leavenworth supplied those installations. With no settlement along the Platte, the prospects of the *El Paso* soliciting business en route were nil.

Aside from economic aspects, Shumway's belief that the *El Paso* had no difficulty navigating the Platte is ridiculous. Since small boats usually could not even descend the Platte, how could a vessel that size of the *El Paso* have ascended without any problem? Even if one could assume the river had a navigable channel, how would a pilot have been aware of it? The Platte had never been charted. Its landmarks, depths, locations of sandbars and islands were all unknown. Under those circumstances, a pilot would have had to reconnoiter a route by sending a rowboat in advance of the steamer to take soundings. Such painstaking advance work would have precluded the travel rates mentioned by Shumway.

The need to gather wood would also have slowed the *El Paso* immeasurably. There were no commercial wood yards along the Platte, so the crew would have had to have gathered driftwood or, as Shumway mentioned, cut green trees. Doing

so would have been very time-consuming. A boat the size of the *El Paso* would have consumed about 1.25 cords of wood for every hour of operation. Furthermore, because wood was heavy and increased the boat's draft and the risk of grounding, a captain would not dare stockpile quantities on deck. The usual practice was to re-fuel several times a day.²⁹

A final consideration of Shumway's claim relates to the lack of eyewitnesses. By writing of "the wilderness" about Fort Mitchell, he implies only a few people were there. It is true that except for traders and the army garrisons at Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie, there were no permanent white residents in the Platte River valley. But in 1852, at the very time the *El Paso* was supposedly making its voyage, thousands of emigrants were slowly moving up the Platte valley. By July 13 an estimated 25,865 men, 7,021 women, and 8,270 children bound for California and Oregon had passed Fort Kearny. This number would not have included those who moved on the north side of the Platte, opposite the fort. Historian John D. Unruh, Jr.,

The lower Platte River near Fremont, Nebraska, about 1904. In times of higher flows, the river tended to become wider instead of deeper. NSHS RG2039





Addison E. Sheldon, superintendent of the Nebraska State Historical Society, here surveying Mitchell Pass at Scotts Bluff, was skeptical of Grant Shumway's version of the *El Paso* story. NSHS RG2039:1-115

concluded that a record sixty thousand people moved through the valley in 1852. The novelty of a steamboat on the Platte certainly would have attracted someone's attention. Merrill J. Mattes identified and described 335 narratives (diaries, journals, letters, and recollections) written by 1852 Platte valley emigrants. None mentioned seeing a steamboat on the Platte. Other than the emigrants, potential eyewitnesses included people returning from California to Missouri River towns, troops at Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie, overland freighters who supplied the forts, and carriers on the Salt Lake City mail route. It is inconceivable that the *El Paso* could have been on the Platte for more than three weeks, but that no one in this mass of humanity would have reported seeing it.³⁰

Although there is nothing credible about Shumway's claim that the *El Paso* made a Platte River voyage in 1852, he must have based his coverage on something. But where could he have gotten information that was so wrong? Soon after Shumway's history was published, this question occurred to Addison Erwin Sheldon, secretary and superintendent of the Nebraska State Historical Society, and later the author of the three-volume general history, *Nebraska: The Land and the People*. Sheldon wrote Shumway, asking for proof

of his *El Paso* story. Sheldon recalled that Shumway "was unable to give the authority but named two or three books from one of which he thought he might have taken the statement." But Sheldon subsequently determined that the *El Paso's* Platte River voyage was not mentioned in the books recalled by Shumway.³¹

Is it possible that Shumway simply could not recall his source, but that he actually got his information from a book? Eighty-seven years have elapsed since the publication of Shumway's claim. By now the numerous researchers of Nebraska history would have discovered any such book. Does it really matter if there is such a book? Assuming that Shumway summarized it accurately, it would be as fallacious as his description of the supposed *El Paso* voyage.

The lack of a published source for Shumway's *El Paso* story still leaves the question about where he obtained the information. Possibly he simply heard an embellished retelling of Hale's mention of the *El Paso* and accepted it wholeheartedly. Oral tradition, even when mistaken, can appear to have veracity merely because of its repetition. Shumway certainly would have been vulnerable to such bogus information because he was deficient in critically evaluating sources, citing authorities,

and verifying facts.

Shumway's bogus claim might have died quietly had it not been discovered by Alfred J. Mokler, whose acceptance of Shumway was a reversal of his own conclusion of eighteen years earlier. In his *History of Natrona County* Mokler, in writing about Hale's coverage of the *El Paso*, rejected the notion that the boat could have ascended the Platte and North Platte for over five hundred miles. He thought the water levels would have been inadequate for such a voyage.³²

Why Mokler found Hale to be unbelievable but Shumway's version to be "authentic history" is puzzling. Perhaps he was influenced by Shumway's more detailed account. But Mokler, who had published the *Natrona County Tribune* from June 1, 1897 to October 15, 1914, obviously never investigated any of Shumway's facts. With even a cursory review of the North Platte River region history, he would at least have uncovered the colossal error about Fort Mitchell's supposed existence in 1852.

Mokler proved to be a key link in transforming the *El Paso*'s mythical Platte River voyage into a seemingly true historical fact. By repeating and endorsing Shumway's claim, he bestowed the story with an undeserved legitimacy. Those who used Mokler's journal article as a source were evidently convinced that the *El Paso* actually ascended the Platte and North Platte for over five hundred miles in 1852.

Mokler's endorsement of Shumway's premise would likely not have been perpetuated had it not been for Dr. Edgar Bradley Trail. A Berger, Missouri, dentist and steamboat aficionado, Trail collected Missouri River steamboating business records, writings, photographs, and relics for more than half a century. A copy of Mokler's article was among the hundreds of items Trail donated to the Western Historical Manuscript Collection in Columbia, Missouri.³³

After Trail added Mokler's *El Paso* coverage to his collection, Frederick Way, Jr., who shared Trail's interest in steamboating history and lore, became aware of it. Way, of Sewickley, Pennsylvania, in partnership with his son-in-law, started the Steamboat Photo Company in 1939. To facilitate sales, Way issued his first packet directory three years later. It contained about nine hundred brief sketches of the steamers in his negative file. As Way's business grew he expanded the directory periodically with new editions published in 1944 and 1950. Further growth led to the publication of the 1983 edition, which included 5,907 steamboat sketches. In this work he reported, for the first time,

that the *El Paso* "in 1852 ascended the Platte River to Guernsey, Wyo. the only steamboat ever to go there."³⁴

Because Way's directory is widely regarded as an authoritative reference book on western steamboating, his inclusion of Mokler's information about the *El Paso* on the Platte made it appear to be an indisputable fact. Obviously, Way could not do primary research for thousands of entries. In the case of the *El Paso*, he unwittingly relied on an erroneous report that was proclaimed to be "authentic history."

Following Way's publication, researchers accepted his statement about the *El Paso*'s Platte River voyage as gospel. C. Bradford Mitchell was the first to follow Way's lead. Acknowledging Way as his main source for new information about western steamboats, Mitchell reported that the *El Paso* was the "first steamer to ascend Platte River to falls at Guernsey, Wyo., 1852." Annalies Corbin, in her compilation of "Steamboats on the Missouri River," closely paraphrased Way by noting that in 1852 the *El Paso* "ascended the Platte River to Guernsey, Wyoming. She was the only steamboat to ever go there."³⁵

Today, anyone checking the *El Paso* in Corbin, Mitchell, and Way would find its Platte River voyage presented as a true historical event. But it never occurred. Because successive writers used only a single secondary source, the *El Paso* myth has been relayed from Hale through Shumway, Mokler, and Way. Most of the details about the mythical voyage, however, date only from Shumway.

The creation and perpetuation of the *El Paso* on the Platte story is a classic case of the hazards of writing accurate history. Ascertaining historical facts is beguilingly easy if writers uncritically follow any published source. But the real test of historical authenticity is to investigate records contemporary with the event. Unfortunately, none of the mythmakers about the *El Paso* on the Platte studied the history of the steamboat during the time the supposed voyage was made. ❧

NOTES

¹ *The Wyoming Pioneer* 1 (September–October 1941): 214.

² Edward Everett Hale, *Kansas and Nebraska* (Boston/New York: Phillips, Sampson and Co./J. C. Derby, 1854).

³ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴ William E. Lass, *Navigating the Missouri: Steamboating on Nature's Highway, 1819–1935* (Norman: Arthur H. Clark Co., an imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 145, 192; Missouri River Commission, *Map of the Missouri River* (1892–



95), 65, 75, 77. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers calculated these mileages in the late 1880s. The distances used by St. Louis boatmen were approximately one-third longer.

⁵ *Brunswick* (Brunswick, Missouri), Feb. 26; Mar. 5, 12, 19, and 26; Apr. 2, 9, 23, and 30; May 7 and 28; June 11, 18, and 25; July 9 and 16, 1853. Although the *Brunswick* record is the most complete, the record of steamboat landings published in nearby Glasgow substantiates most of its reports of the *El Paso* landings. See *Glasgow Weekly Times*, Mar. 3, 10, 17, and 24; Apr. 18 and 26; May 5 and 24; June 9 and 16; July 7 and 14; Lass, *Navigating the Missouri*, 136.

⁶ Lass, *Navigating the Missouri*, 136.

⁷ *Liberty (Missouri) Tribune*, Apr. 15, 1850; *St. Joseph Gazette*, May 25, 1853.

⁸ *El Paso* enrollment certificate, May 27, 1851, Licenses/Enrollment Records, U.S. Steamboat Inspection Service, microfilm copy in the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County; Lass, *Navigating the Missouri*, 145.

⁹ *Boonville (Missouri) Weekly Advertiser*, Aug. 16, 1901; *Annual Review of the Commerce of St. Louis for 1855*, 27; W. J. McDonald, "The Missouri River and Its Victims: Vessels Wrecked from the Beginning of Navigation to 1925, First Article," *Missouri Historical Review* 21 (January 1927): 241.

¹⁰ Hale, *Kansas and Nebraska*, 72.

¹¹ Washington Irving, *Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1836), 2:180.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2:183–84.

¹³ *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), July 18, 1835.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, June 19, 1839; *Jefferson City (Missouri) Inquirer*, Aug. 31, 1843; Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1905), 70–71.

¹⁵ Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 2 vols. (Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954), 2:770–71.

¹⁶ James A. Hanson, "A Forgotten Fur Trade Trail," *Nebraska History* 68 (Spring 1987): 4–5.

¹⁷ Cora Dolbee, "The First Book on Kansas: The Story of Edward Everett Hale's 'Kansas and Nebraska'," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 2 (May 1933): 140–41; Francis J. Bosh, "Hale, Edward Everett," *American National Biography* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9:816–17.

¹⁸ Dolbee, "First Book," 144, 167; Hale, *Kansas and Nebraska*, 66.

¹⁹ Bosh, "Hale."

²⁰ Here and below, see Grant Lee Shumway, *History of Western Nebraska and Its People*, 3 vols. (Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Co., 1921), 2:28–29. Parkman, who used only the trader's surname, spelled it "Rouleau."

²¹ Merrill J. Mattes, "A History of Old Fort Mitchell," *Nebraska History* 24 (April–June 1943): 73–75, and Mattes, "Fort Mitchell, Scotts Bluff, Nebraska Territory," *Nebraska History* 33 (March 1952): 10. For a biographical sketch of Shumway, see Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People*, 3 vols. (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1931), 2:7.

²² *St. Joseph Gazette*, Mar. 24, 1852; *Brunswick*, Feb. 21 and 28; Apr. 3, 10, 17, and 24; May 1, 8, and 15, 1852; *Glasgow Weekly Times*, Feb. 19 and 28; Apr. 1, 8, 15, 22, and 29; May 6 and 13, 1852.

²³ *Western Bugle* (Kanesville), May 19 and 26, 1852; *St. Joseph*

Gazette, June 9, 1852; *Transactions of the 40th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association, Portland, June 20, 1912* (Portland: Chaisse-Prudhomme Co., 1915), 590. All dollar amounts used in this article are of the time period it covers. The estimated 2008 equivalent of the 1852 dollar is \$25.80. "Consumer Price Index (Estimate), 1800–2008," <http://woodrow.mpls.frb.fed.us/research/data/us/calc/hist1800.cfm> accessed Feb. 14, 2008.

²⁴ *Brunswick*, May 29; June 12 and 19, 1852; *Glasgow Weekly Times*, June 3, 1852.

²⁵ John Lawrence McKinley, *The Influence of the Platte River Upon the History of the Valley* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1938), 7, 13–14.

²⁶ Lawrence C. Allin, "A Mile Wide and an Inch Deep': Attempts to Navigate the Platte River," *Nebraska History* 63 (Spring 1982): 10; William M. Lytle and Forrest R. Holdcamper, comps., *Merchant Steam Vessels of the United States, 1790–1868: "The Lytle-Holdcamper List,"* rev. and ed. by C. Bradford Mitchell (Staten Island, N. Y.: Steamship Historical Society of America, 1975), 280.

²⁷ *Glenwood Union*, as quoted in *Sioux City Eagle*, July 17, 1858.

²⁸ Lass, *Navigating the Missouri*, 110, 154. The *El Paso*'s construction cost was derived from data about steamboats built at St. Louis in 1845. The two closest to the *El Paso* in size, the *Iowa* and the *Ocean Wave*, cost respectively \$88 and \$82 per ton.

²⁹ William E. Lass, "Dakota Resources: Trader Edward T. Latta's 'List of Wood Sold to Steamboats,' 1866–1867," *South Dakota History* 35 (Summer 2005): 166.

³⁰ *Glasgow Weekly Times*, Aug. 5, 1852; John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 120; Merrill J. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives: A Descriptive Bibliography of Travel Over the Great Central Overland Route to Oregon, California, Utah, Colorado, Montana, and Other Western States and Territories, 1812–1866* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 335–99.

³¹ Sheldon to Mrs. G. E. Mark, Apr. 23, 1929, superintendent's correspondence, box 63, RG14, Records of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

³² Here and below, see Alfred J. Mokler, *History of Natrona County, Wyoming, 1888–1922* (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley and Sons, 1923), title page and 83; Mokler obituary in *Annals of Wyoming* 25 (July 1953): 207–8.

³³ For Trail's obituaries, see *Missouri Historical Review* 59 (July 1965): 512 and *Waterways Journal* (St. Louis), Feb. 13, 1965: 11. A verbatim typescript of the Mokler article is in the E. B. Trail Collection, folder 149, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri/University of Missouri Library, Columbia.

³⁴ Frederick Way, Jr., comp., *Way's Packet Directory, 1848–1983: Passenger Steamboats of the Mississippi River System Since the Advent of Photography in Mid-Continent America* (Athens: Ohio University, 1983), x–xi, 143.

³⁵ C. Bradford Mitchell, ed., *Supplement Number 3 to Merchant Steam Vessels of the United States, 1790–1868: "The Lytle-Holdcamper List,"* (Providence R. I.: Steamship Historical Society of America, 1984), [8]; Annalies Corbin, *The Material Culture of Steamboat Passengers: Archaeological Evidence from the Missouri River* (New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 170.