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Article Summary: Wyman quotes colorful details about daily life aboard crowded steamboats in the 1850s. Dangers included swindlers, illness, and sandbars. Even boarding and disembarking from the boats along levees swarming with workers and onlookers exposed passengers to additional risks.

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Missouri River Steamboatin'

WALKER D. WYMAN

In the period of the great overland emigration to the Trans-Missouri region, river life on the Missouri reached its greatest peak. For in those years, especially the eighteen-fifties, the river, which one editor said could not float a duck without having sand-bar trouble, was a great carrier of commerce. A Council Bluffs, Iowa, newspaper said of this river and its traffic in 1857:

There is no trade in the United States, if there be in the world, that employs as many steamboats as does that of the Missouri River; nor is there a river in which as good, staunch built, and fine boats are required. . .nor is there a river where as high prices for freight and passage are paid. Steamboat officers and their crews are better paid in the Missouri than in any other river, and boats that run it make more money than they could anywhere else. . .¹

Whether this be entirely true or not matters little; but that the West was like a gigantic funnel and that the Missouri River was the opening to it through which coursed Mormons, miners, soldiers, fur traders, and goods for all of them—that made the Missouri famous. However, of this much has been written; but of the life lived by those who used the steamboat, that daily existence on deck or in the hold, not so much has been said.

The eastern emigrant enroute to make his fortune boarded the Missouri steamboat at St. Louis. In the days of the heaviest emigration, upon arrival many sought refuge on the boat, for hotels were full and rooming houses uninviting even if not engaged. Amid wagons, trunks, and other articles possessed by those

¹ *Council Bluffs Bugle*, August 19, 1857.

emigrating companies who left home well equipped, passengers jostled each other as the boat proceeded up the river to one of the depots from which embarkation for the West was made.

If one boarded a boat from some point above St. Louis he was fortunate should he get a stateroom with a berth. More often he lodged on the deck among the sleepers who, on mattresses, pillows, or the bare floor, periodically and alternately sang, laughed, or swore. A California emigrant of 1850 recorded in his diary his wearying experiences:

Owing to the crowded state of the boat, I had not got a berth when I took passage, but slept upon the cabin floor, with about fifty others. I again attempted to get a berth, but could not, so was compelled to 'chew the cud of sweet and bitter fancy' alone. Today I succeeded in getting a berth of one of the passengers, in which I took a refreshing sleep, took some quinine, and now begin to feel better. . .²

To promenade was dangerous lest one stumble on a fellow-passenger. One traveler thus described the human cargo.

Here are young men and young married couples from eastern and middle states . . . Here is the youthful Missourian with slouched hat, whose red flannel shirt is decorated with black anchors and glorious scarlet braid; the sallow, nervous merchant with his summer stock of goods; the well-to-do planter, tall and portly, with large, brunette wife, and two or three white-eyed, coal-headed Topseys . . . Mingling with them are the young missionary in solemn black, and white cravat; the irrespressible agent of a new Kansas town proving incontestably by statistics and diagrams that his will become the largest city west of New York; the eager-eyed speculator bound for the land sales, with wonderful stories of his uncle who became a millionaire from Chicago investments . . . ; the enthusiastic German whose blue eyes sparkle as they catch a gleam of a golden future, or grow tender in the subduing moonlight, as he talks of his boyhood's home on the Rhine.³

² R. W. G. Vail (ed.), *Journal of a Trip to California* (New York, The Cadmus Book-Shop Inc., 1920), pp. 14-16. Quoted by permission.

³ A. D. Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi* (Hartford, Connecticut, 1867), pp. 23-24.

This heterogeneous group became acquainted after a day or two of travel, so card-playing, dancing, or the spinning of yarns helped to pass the time away. Some wrote letters home telling of the wonders of steamboating; others strolled about pausing to pass the time of day, read the business cards hung up in the cabin, or studied the inspection certificates and the directions to pilots; some borrowed a "yaller kivered" novel from the cabin boy — and many (some estimated as many as one-third) just played poker. Many could tell of losing needed funds in an innocent game with strangers when small bets and wins for the innocent developed into large bets and losses. All steamboat officers knew of the existence of such fleecing activities, but apparently did nothing to protect the novice enroute to riches. It is small wonder that one found solace in his religion. In his unpublished diary he wrote in 1852:

It is now Sunday Evening about 4 o'clock & am completely Disgusted at the wicked practices prevalent on Board The Boats — Viz — Gambling; Stealing; Swearing; Drinking carous-ing etc. My heart Swells with grat-itude To my Parents for Their Moral Training; & To God for his pard-oning Mercy Toward me . . . This day I feel To Put my Trust & confidence more fully in *Christ* — for I feel That He alone Through Grace hath kept me from The Snares & Temptations which surround me . . . *

Every boat seemed to have one or more swindlers aboard. Many an emigrant could testify that he bought express tickets to some western mining camp, only to learn later that such a stage line did not exist. River towns seeking the patronage of emigrants sent representatives on board most boats, and there these men painted in bold strokes the advantages possessed by their towns as outfitting places. Perhaps these men could not properly be called swindlers, for they only used the arts applied in successful and justifiable advertising.

During the days of the great rushes to the mines it would seem that every boat had a dandy aboard. Dressed in the garb

⁴ Taken from a diary by J. D. Randall; given to the writer by Dr. Lyle Mantor, Nebraska State Teachers College, Kearney.

an eastern haberdasher intent on doing a good job had sold him, he gave much amusement to the passengers and to those who came to the wharf at the towns enroute.

With what a defiant air does he pace the upper deck of the steamer that is fortunate enough to secure his passage, or strike an attitude when the boat touches at a landing, to be admired by the natives who congregate on the shore. They behold with amazement this formidable looking individual, as he stands there in his majesty, with a heroic quid of solace on the concave side of the cheek, and occasionally ejecting his saliva with lordly grace . . . We warrant he will be crying for his mother in less than a week.⁵

Routine was broken by occasional miscalculations of the pilot which caused the boat to land on a sandbar. Since the Missouri River has been compared to a woman in that it frequently changes its course, this peculiarity not only confounded the highly skilled and highly paid pilot, but was a source of worry to the owners of the vessel and one which caused some emigrants to run the scale of emotions.

Biology effected a change of routine on more than one trip upstream. On one such occasion when a child was born a meeting of passengers was called at which the name "Nebraska Emigrant" was conferred, a purse of \$25 was presented to the mother, the family was officially welcomed to Nebraska, and the minutes of the meeting were kept for the newspaper.

Bursting boilers caused much less trouble in the fifties and sixties than they did in an earlier period. It was customary, when some record had been broken or a new boat had served the passengers well, for them to pass resolutions telling not only the captain but the world the virtues of that particular craft and that it had "surpassed . . . fullest expectations."⁶

Although it seldom occurred, mutiny fights between the deckhands and negro cooks broke the monotony of Missouri

⁵ *Daily Kansas City (Missouri) Journal of Commerce*, March 13, 1860.

⁶ Reference to the resolutions may be seen occasionally in the border newspapers. The resolutions complimenting the "Alonzo Child" are given in the Leavenworth, Kansas Territory, *Weekly Kansas Herald*, May 30, 1857.

River travel.⁷ That oxen jumped overboard or emigrants lost their balance and plunged into the Missouri is a matter of record.

The arrival of a boat at a river town was an event of importance before traffic became so heavy that such was no longer news. The inhabitants flocked down to the landing for there would come their friends or relatives, mail, or goods. It was their chief contact with the outside world until the advent of the locomotive. It may be pure speculation but it would seem that while the business men were swelling with pride at the number of arrivals at their wharf, at heart they hated these Missouri River contraptions—hated them for their dependence upon them, for the high freight charges and irregular service, for the long winters without communication. That is why the business men talked and fought for railroads, and when those railroads came it was believed that at last the town "had arrived", for national significance was attached when a Missouri River town became the depot of a pair of rails stretching in the general direction of the Pacific.

When the expedition of 1819 ascended the river in keel boats denizens of the few towns on the lower Missouri flocked to the levees and gave demonstrations of pride and joy when greeted by the firing of the swivel guns. In 1859 the captain of the steamboat "Omaha" when making the first spring trip up the river to Omaha, Nebraska, was greeted "with a salute of ten rousing guns from a six-pounder, stationed on the brow of the hill overlooking the river, which was returned in good earnest from the boat."⁸ Even as late as 1868 an editor devoted some space to the first arrival of the season.

On Monday last, about one o'clock, the cry of "Steamboat" was started by those who were on watch for the 'first arrival'. It was taken up by the boys, and the cry, Steamboat! Steamboat! resounded through the streets, reverberated from Black Snake Hill and hollows, and deafened every ear. Like a fire-bell at night it broke upon the startled com-

⁷ *The St. Joseph (Missouri) Morning Herald*, June 17, 1864, tells of fights among the crews on the "Paragon" and the "Montana." Whether this was so common an occurrence that the papers failed to notice it is unknown, but it could easily be concluded from these two articles in the same issue.

⁸ *Council Bluffs Weekly Nonpareil*, April 2, 1859.

munity, and the motly crowd rushed to the scene of excitement . . . The census man didn't attend or he might have taken the census of our entire male population . . . We bet on the Polar Star being the first boat — and lost.⁹

The arrival of a boat never became an entirely commonplace event. Young people looked forward to it, for it oftentimes gave them the opportunity to dance on board to the blaring cacophany of sound. One writer was moved to comment in 1858 that:

The Missouri river is now the most musical stream in the world. From St. Louis to St. Joseph a continual strain of harmony. The 'Union Line' of packets, consisting of some twelve boats, making regular weekly trips, all carry full brass bands, that discourse sweet music as they land at every place . . .¹⁰

Not all boats carried special bands. In many the negro deckhands served in the dual capacity of musicians and menials. At least one boat, the "Twilight", knew the way to the river town heart when it steamed up the river past the gaping populace to the levees with calliope going full blast.¹¹

Levee life was interesting when the boat swung into the river town port. The rope was thrown over, the boat tied. Before the gang plank had fairly touched the wharf the hotel "runners" leaped aboard shouting the virtues of their wares. Passengers must have been alternately amused and perplexed when they could hear, as one man did at Kansas City,

a little fat man with a peculiarly amusing accent . . . crying Eldridge House gentlemen, best house in the city; regularly scald the bed bugs thrice a week, four stories high — river rises put you in the fourth story. Opposition runner cried in thunder [ous] tone, Union — but the little fat man stole his thunder, though I think they yelled in concert best hotel in city. A third party cried out that the

⁹ St. Joseph *Cycle*, quoted in the *Council Bluffs Chronotype*, March 21, 1868.

¹⁰ *Council Bluffs Bugle*, May 5, 1858. This packet line received much notice. See also Kansas City, *Journal of Commerce*, April 27, 1858.

¹¹ Atchison, Kansas Territory, *Freedom's Champion*, July 10, 1858.

Eldridge House was a little hole sixty feet back in the ground with six little rooms. Gentlemen, screamed [*sic*] the fat man, had I a wife, or a sister, or a daughter who would enter the Union House, I would forever disown her.¹²

If the traveler wished to land, and had successfully resisted the attacks made on his person and baggage by the hotel agents, he still faced an ominous danger in getting down the gang plank. A number of gold-seekers lost their fever in the muddy waters of the Missouri after being crowded off by the importunate activities like those of "dollar day" bargain-hunters. A forty-niner records the incident of an "old Dutchman" who when crowded off, rescued, but chilled to the bone, exclaimed, "Mine Gott! I wish I vas at home."¹³

Greeted by the townsmen the traveler had some time to himself while the boat was being unloaded and loaded. Here on the wharf could be seen wagons, mules, oxen, flour sacks, mackerel barrels — everything from apples to church bells. The mate became busy ordering the disposition of the goods, while the clerk with his pencil and paper stood by. The wharf master, an employee of the river town government, was not only one of the most important people in town, but was an important personage when the steamboat docked. He collected the wharfage fee, allocated space, ordered removal of goods, and was a god in the little kingdom at the wharf. One of our most discerning chroniclers of frontier life, Frank A. Root, was much impressed by the levee life. Of this he wrote:

While a boat would be lying at the levee discharging freight, it was often quite amusing to the crowd of lookers-on eagerly watching every movement of the laborers. As the gang of deckhands, made up mostly from plantation darkeys, were carrying hams, bacon, dry hides, sacks of coffee, sugar, potatoes, dried apples and peaches, flour, meal, beans, etc. from the steamer and piling them up in front of the warehouse on the levee, sometimes the most ludicrous scenes of

¹² St. Louis *Missouri Republican*, quoted in *Journal of Commerce*, September 11, 1858.

¹³ G. W. Thissell, *Crossing the Plains in '49* (Oakland, California, 1903), pp. 10-11.

wild excitement followed. More often than otherwise, things would go wrong and greatly annoy the captain and mates . . . From long hours of labor some of the deck-hands naturally would be completely played out, and this seemed to exasperate the officers in charge. Apparently they had no mercy for the worn-out toilers. It didn't take much to annoy the first or second mate of a Missouri river steamboat, and if in an unpleasant mood they would let off a volley of cuss-words, addressing the fellow as '———lazy, lousy son of a gun', or something worse, and reminding him that if he didn't 'get a move on himself' he would 'take a slippery-elm club and maul the life out of him'. This was the commonest talk . . ., but the darkeys finally became so used to it that they appeared not to mind it much.¹⁴

Boarding a boat required not only patience but skill during the years of the heavy emigration. Since the boats were always crowded, the prospective passengers, carpet sacks in hand, thronged to the levee like sheep, in an attempt to get aboard first in order to get a berth. Eventually they would be hustled over the plank, and even though they may have lost part of their clothing, were glad to escape the "maddening throng." An early Nebraskan recalled years later an incident when a trading post clerk, well intoxicated, stripped to pants and leggins, buckled on a pair of revolvers, got on a pony, gave two war-whoops, and made for the river. The gang-way was opened, and pony and rider went up the flight of stairs to the saloon. After ordering a drink for the pony, he commanded the bystanders to " 'drink to the health of Billy [the pony] and the President of the United States.' "¹⁵

If the steward, bakers, deckhands and others had not become too intoxicated and engaged in too many fistic affairs of honor, the boat got under way soon after the heavy freight had been handled. "Wooding up" was necessary, and that was done both in port and at places along the river where wood-cutters were engaged by the steamboat lines. Here where the wood was piled on the boat profanity and cracked skulls were common, according to a soldier of the sixties.

¹⁴ Frank A. Root (assisted by W. S. Connelley), *The Overland Stage to California* (Topeka, Kansas, 1901), pp. 305-306.

¹⁵ Captain S. T. Sterling, "Personal Recollections of Early Days in Decatur, Nebraska," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XV, 79.

the captain would take one gangway and his mate the other, and the moment the first stick of wood was grabbed the mate started up a song, —some camp-meeting or other negro melody, but never slow music, always something lively, — and it was a delight to see the negro laborers hump themselves. They had to run in order to keep time with the music — and they could sing.¹⁶

Not all people who died on Missouri River steamboats died because of delirium tremens — although some of them did — or accidents. Particularly in 1849 and 1850 cholera caused great devastation in the ranks of the emigrants and consternation at the levee when a boat came into port. Some boats were refused the right to land even to bury the dead, consequently obscure landings were made where the mate superintended the lonely burials. Whole towns were deserted (not including the more populous settlements, of course). Fear rode high. Descriptions of the boat life during the epidemic must of necessity come from emigrants, for the newspapers of the towns competing for emigrant business failed to report at great length on the cholera epidemic, unless it was to show that other towns were more affected than they. A Quaker gold-seeker of 1849 noted in his diary the following:

The Deck and Hurricane roof were covered with their Wagons, many of them occupied by Cholera Patients. As a number of these seemed to have no Friends or Companions to take care of them, I devoted much of my time to waiting on them . . . [One man who had deserted his fellow-traveler was threatened with being thrown over-board, but the threat was not carried out.]

. . . [At one stop for burial the] Captain . . . sent all Passengers on shore, and thoroughly fumigated the Boat with Chlorate of Lime and Sulphur; but his efforts were of little avail . . . and when we arrived in Kansas City we had buried sixty persons . . .

From Kansas City to Leavenworth we lost five more Patients. Thus far not a single soul that was stricken with the disease had recovered. Now our burly Mate was taken

¹⁶ A. B. Ostrander, *An Army Boy of the Sixties* (Chicago, 1924), pp. 67-68. Edited by Howard Driggs.

sick, and a worse frightened man I never set my eyes upon. He kept half the Crew rubbing him and applying Mustard Plasters. . . .

About this time an interesting Young Lady on the Boat took the Cholera. An old Emigrant on board had obtained from a Physician in St. Louis a recipe for a powerful Anodyne, and had procured a half-gallon jug of the mixture (but he had not disclosed this fact). . . . But now, as we were nearing the end of our Journey and the number of Passengers was greatly reduced, the selfish old Curmudgeon opened his heart and presented a vial of it to the stricken Young Woman. It acted like a charm, and in a short time she was easy, and recovered. The Passengers insisted that the Old Man should furnish the other Patients also. . . . Disgusted with his meanness, the Passengers forcibly seized his jug, filled a pint flask for him, and portioned out the balance to all who desired it. It cured all the new Patients, and we did not have a death on the Boat afterwards. . . .¹⁷

The treatment of emigrants—even those without cholera—received criticism during the days of the California rush. It seems to have been launched first by crusading editors along the Mississippi River in 1849, and was taken up in a mild way by St. Joseph and Kaneshville (Council Bluffs) newspapers that year. In 1850 the leading paper of St. Louis called upon Congress to act, for not only certain boats at certain seasons of the year during the epidemics but

all boats are over-crowded with deck passengers, breeding among themselves infections and dangerous diseases. . . .

In the manner of morals, a more corrupt and abandoned place cannot be found than the deck of a steamboat, crowded with from three to six hundred passengers, men, women, and children, thrown promiscuously together, and indulging in excesses of almost every kind. It is admitted, that these unfortunate people, thus crowded together, are accommodated with even less care than the animals placed alongside of them on the same vessel. . . .

. . . Let us protect those who are least able to protect themselves from the sordid selfishness of the Emigrant-brokers. . . .¹⁸

¹⁷ A. P. Hannum (ed.), *A Quaker 49er* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1930), pp. 174-77. Quoted by permission.

¹⁸ *Missouri Republican*, May 10, 1850.

This agitation wore away as the number of steamboats increased in the fifties. City papers were then more prone than ever to call attention to the improvements made in this system of transportation. However, at the time, some emigrants wrote their complaints in their diaries, called the deck-hands desperadoes whose gashed faces showed their true character, spoke unkindly of the unwashed steerage emigrants, of thefts, immorality, the crowded and poor sleeping accommodations, and all.

There is a decided contrast in the impressions of the traveler of the late eighteen forties with those of the sixties. T. S. Kenderine in his *A California Tramp* wrote scathingly of everything about steamboating. He had contempt for his fellow-steerage companions, of their fried bacon and hard tack; of the envied cabin passengers who occasionally came down to the "purgatory to see the possibility of endurance" there; of the mile-wide river with its driftwood, caving banks, and shabby towns; of the vulgar crew—these nauseated this early gold-seeker.

A New Yorker in the sixties wrote not of discomforts but of the beauty of the river.

Only in the day's full glare is the stream revolting. Morning twilight, while the east is silvery, late evening when the west is blood-red, and moonlight, all mellow and idealize it. . . ; and the night pictures of the despised Missouri, rival in beauty those of the familiar Hudson, and the far, stupendous Columbia.¹⁹

Mark Twain, enroute to Nevada, in the early sixties, wrote that the trip was so dull that he had no impressions of it at all. A passenger of 1858 stated that he could

find no gallant captains, gentlemenly clerks, stewards, *a la Soyler*; bar keepers all smiles and hospitaity; pilots with eyes like Argus and a nerve like lightning rod—nothing of the kind. I merely see a captain on the roof, that I never talk to, a clerk in the office who takes my money, and says there is no more room on the boat when a half dozen are unoccupied, kept for the sake of some barkeeper, fancy man, or

¹⁹ Richardson. *op. cit.* p. 20.

travelling gambler. . ., and stewards who superintend the commissary department, and niggers, who will wait on you, provided you compel them to do so.²⁰

It does seem certain that by the sixties, the decade in which the railroad nearly destroyed the river traffic, the trials of Missouri River steamboatin' were mitigated in comparison to those of former years. It must be granted that not all was high adventure on the waters of the muddy Missouri.

²⁰ Correspondent "V. H." writing from the steamboat "H. H. Dickey," July 16, 1858, appearing in the *Journal of Commerce*, July 24, 1858.