



Steamboating on the Missouri River

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STEAMBOATING ON THE MISSOURI RIVER

BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

THE history of the Missouri River,¹ like that of the Upper Mississippi, goes back to the advent of Joliet and Marquette in 1673. It was early in July that these venturesome Frenchmen first saw the Missouri. As they were paddling quietly down the Mississippi below Piasa Rock [Alton, Illinois], Joliet and Marquette suddenly heard the "noise of a rapid" which proved to be the Missouri River. "I have seen nothing more dreadful," Marquette wrote in his journal, as he noted the "accumulation of large and entire trees, branches, and floating islands" issuing from the mouth of the Missouri with "such impetuosity" that the explorers could not "risk passing through it" without great danger. According to Marquette the "agitation" of

¹The following accounts of Missouri River steamboating should prove useful: Hiram M. Chittenden, *History of Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River* (New York, 1903); Joseph M. Hanson, *The Conquest of the Missouri* (Chicago, 1910); Stanley Vestal, *The Missouri* (New York, 1945); William L. Heckman, *Steamboating Sixty-five Years on Missouri's Rivers* (Kansas City, 1950); Phil E. Chappell, "A History of the Missouri River" and "Missouri River Steamboats"; *Kansas Historical Collections*, IX, 237-316; Several authors, "The Missouri River," *Nebraska History Magazine*, VIII, No. 1, 1-64; W. J. McDonald "The Missouri River and Its Victims," *Missouri Historical Review*, XXI, 215-242, 455-480, 581-607; William J. Petersen, "The Log of the Henry Shreve to Fort Benton in 1869," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXI, 537-578; *Iowa—The Rivers of Her Valleys* (Iowa City, 1941) pp. 206-228; John G. Neihardt, *The River and I* (New York, 1927).

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the two streams at their confluence made the water "very muddy" so that it "could not become clear."

The Indians were able to furnish Joliet and Marquette with only fragmentary information about the Pekitanoui River, as the Missouri was called by them because of its muddy water. "Pekitanoui," Marquette recorded, "is a river of Considerable size, coming from the Northwest, from a great Distance; and it discharges into the Mississippi. There are many Villages of savages along this river."²

During the next 130 years relatively little was learned about the mighty Missouri. True, such men as La Salle, Father Zenobius Membre, and Father Gabriel Marest referred briefly to the Missouri in their writings, and cartographers like William Delisle endeavored to delineate its lower course. But the upper reaches of the Missouri still lay shrouded in mystery when Jefferson bought Louisiana from Napoleon in 1803.³

The Lewis and Clark expedition added more information to our knowledge of the Missouri than did all the writers and cartographers from Joliet and Marquette down to the Louisiana Purchase. Although a few venturesome fur traders had ascended the Missouri even before St. Louis was founded in 1764, it was the Lewis and Clark expedition that greatly expanded the traffic in furs and pelts.⁴ The names of Manuel Lisa, Wilson P. Hunt, John C. Luttig, Joseph Robidoux, Alexander Harvey, John Colter, Pierre Charles Cabanne, and Hugh Glass, recall those "laughers at time and space" who plunged so bravely into the Missouri River fur trade.⁵

²Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations*, LIX, 139-143.

³William J. Petersen, *Iowa—The Rivers of Her Valleys* (Iowa City, 1941), pp. 208-210.

⁴Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (New York, 1904). An excellent single volume prepared for the 150th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition is Bernard De Voto, ed., *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* (Boston, 1953). See also William J. Petersen's "The Lewis and Clark Expedition," *The Palimpsest*, XXXV, 357-404.

⁵Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (New York, 1902); George F. Robeson, "The Fur Trade," *The Palimpsest*, VI, 1-41; Mari Sandoz, *The Buffalo Hunters* (New York, 1954).

Prior to the advent of the steamboat, the keelboat and the pirogue were the only vessels capable of carrying a cargo up the turbid Missouri. Both the Lewis and Clark and the Brigadier General Henry Atkinson expeditions used keelboats to ascend the Missouri, but this mode of transportation proved entirely inadequate to stem the snag-infested, sandbar-studded, swiftly flowing stream. Even Manuel Lisa's mad race up the Missouri after the Astorian Expedition in 1812, while appropriately called the "Marathon of the Missouri," did little to prove the practicability of keelboats on the tawny Missouri.⁶ It remained for the steamboat to succeed where all other modes of transportation had failed. And it was largely through the steamboat that the Nebraska country developed at such a phenomenal rate between 1854 and 1867, when statehood finally was achieved.⁷

Steamboating on the Missouri is one of the most colorful and dynamic stories in the development of the Trans-Mississippi West. So great was the contribution of the

⁶William J. Petersen, "Up the Missouri with Atkinson," *The Palimpsest*, XII, 315-325.

⁷Actually the growth of the four Missouri Valley states and Dakota Territory probably surpassed that of the nine western states and territories between 1850 and 1870. Even though many of those recorded on the Pacific Coast arrived by sailing vessel while untold numbers made their way to the Missouri Valley, at first by covered wagon and later by train, the number that arrived in the Kansas-Nebraska-Dakota territories by steamboat (particularly between 1854 and 1867) must have been immense. The following figures show the growth of the two areas:

<i>Population of Missouri Valley and Western States 1850-1870</i>			
<i>Missouri Valley States:</i>			
	1850	1860	1870
Missouri	682,044	1,182,012	1,721,295
Iowa	192,214	674,913	1,194,020
Kansas	.....	107,206	364,399
Nebraska	.....	28,841	122,993
Dakota Territory	.....	4,837	14,181
<i>Western States:</i>			
Colorado	.....	34,277	39,864
Wyoming	.....	.....	9,118
Montana	.....	.....	20,595
Nevada	.....	6,857	42,491
Utah	11,380	40,273	86,786
Idaho	.....	.....	14,999
Washington	.....	11,594	23,955
Oregon	13,294	52,465	90,923
California	92,597	379,994	560,247

steamboat to Missouri Valley history that it deserves equal rank with the covered wagon as a symbol of the westward movement. A study of seven successive frontier lines from 1800 to 1870 quickly reveals how the American pioneer moved down the Ohio and up the Mississippi and Missouri to the Kansas-Nebraska country. This was accomplished by water craft whose speed and tonnage was greatly increased following the invention of the steamboat. Even the thick water of the Missouri, celebrated as it is in song and story, could not be traversed by covered wagons.

Let us consider for a moment the speed of this westward advance. In 1810 the St. Louis-Cairo stretch of the Mississippi was almost linked with the thin belt of settlement filtering down the Ohio to its mouth. By 1820 the frontier of settlement clung precariously to both banks of the Missouri as far as Jefferson City, Boonville, and Old Franklin. By 1830 Glasgow, Waverly, Lexington, and Westport Landing (now Kansas City) served as entrepôts for the rich argosies brought up by steamboats. Westport, located at the junction of the Missouri with the Kansas River, was a famous jumping-off point for the Santa Fe Trail, the fur trade, and the frontier military posts.

Between 1830 and 1850 steamboats gradually extended their sway above Kansas City, but settlement was restricted to the Missouri-Iowa side of the Big Muddy. Thus, in 1840, the St. Joseph area had been reached, but the northern tier of Missouri counties still lay beyond the frontier. By 1850 settlers had pushed up the east bank of the Missouri to present-day Council Bluffs. Meanwhile, the land beyond the wide Missouri awaited the extinction of Indian titles and the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill in 1854. By 1860 settlers had spilled westward over the plains of Kansas and Nebraska and moved upstream past Sioux City to the Yankton area.⁸

The history of steamboating on the Missouri fits neatly into the story of this constantly moving frontier. Indeed, the story of one cannot be told without bringing

⁸Charles O. Paullin, *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States*, Plate 76—C, D, E, F, G, Plate 77—A, B, C. (Baltimore, 1932).

in the other. Thus, the straggling settlements along the Lower Missouri welcomed the first steamboat only two years after the *Zebulon M. Pike* reached St. Louis in 1817. It was May 19, 1819, that the *St. Louis Missouri Intelligencer* announced the departure of the steamboat *Independence* for Franklin and Chariton, Missouri. A week later the same newspaper recorded "with no ordinary sensations of pride and pleasure," the arrival of the *Independence* at Franklin with passengers and a cargo of flour, whiskey, sugar, and iron castings. Cannon roared a salute, and the captain and passengers were regaled with a grand dinner. "At no distant period," the editor of the *Intelligencer* exulted, "may we see the industrious cultivator making his way as high as the *Yellow Stone*, and offering to the enterprising merchant and trader a surplus worthy of the fertile banks of the Missouri, yielding wealth to industry and enterprise."⁹

But this enthusiasm was short lived; the Missouri River was not yet conquered. In June, 1819, a fleet of five steamboats—the *Johnson*, the *Calhoun*, the *Expedition*, the *Jefferson*, and the *Western Engineer*—endeavored to stem the swift current of the Big Muddy as far as the site of the Lewis and Clark encampment at Council Bluff. Only one of these boats, the *Western Engineer*, actually ascended the Missouri above what is now Kansas City and succeeded in reaching its objective—modern Omaha.¹⁰

Between 1820 and 1840 a steadily increasing number of steamboats plied the Lower Missouri—the 390 miles from Kansas City to the mouth of the Big Muddy. The Santa Fe trade, the transportation of troops and supplies, the traffic in furs and pelts, and the Indian trade served to augment the commerce of such squatter settlements as St. Charles, Boonville, Franklin, Chariton, Jefferson, Glasgow, and Westport Landing. When Charles Augustus Murray

⁹*Missouri Intelligencer* (St. Louis), May 21, 28, June 4, 1819, quoted in William J. Petersen, *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi* (Iowa City, 1937), pp. 81-83.

¹⁰Thwaites, *Early Western Travels* (Cleveland, 1905), XIV, 121-221; J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Saint Louis* (Philadelphia, 1883), II, 1100, 1101; William J. Petersen, *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi*, pp. 83-89.

steamed up the Missouri in 1835, he found settlements in this area so numerous that deer rarely could be seen along the banks. Land prices on both sides of the river ranged from \$1.50 to \$5.00 per acre. Murray described Boonville as a "deserving" place, but he thought most settlements had unhealthy locations. At that time Liberty was the "last western village in the United States."¹¹

The activity of steamboats on the Lower Missouri was recorded in Missouri newspapers. Sixteen boats were operating in the spring of 1837—the *Dart*, the *Howard*, the *Chariton*, the *Boonville*, the *Glasgow*, the *St. Lawrence*, the *Bridgewater*, the *Kansas*, the *Astoria*, the *Wilmington*, the *American*, the *Emerald*, the *St. Peters*, the *Fayette*, the *A. M. Phillips*, and the *Belle of Missouri*. New boats were constantly entering the trade, but they were unable to meet the demands of the fast-growing country. Freight and passenger rates were high in 1837, and all steamboats seemed to be doing a lucrative business.¹²

Four years later, in 1841, twenty-six steamboats were engaged in the Lower Missouri trade. Glasgow chronicled 312 steamboat arrivals that year, the regular packet *Iatan* making twenty-four weekly trips between that port and St. Louis. It was estimated that 46,000 tons of freight were transported by steam craft on the Missouri in 1841. Impressed by such activity, a Missouri editor pointed out that for years the Big Muddy had been considered scarcely navigable for keelboats whereas in 1841 "splendid" steamboats ran "night and day."¹³

Meanwhile, the 381-mile stretch between Kansas City and Sioux City began attracting an ever-increasing number of steamboats. This section included such flourishing modern towns as Fort Leavenworth, St. Joseph, Council Bluffs, and Omaha, but between 1850 and 1870 it gave rise to a score of thriving river towns—such as Bellevue, Ne-

¹¹Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America* (London 1839), I, 240-247.

¹²*Iowa News* (Dubuque), June 3, 1837.

¹³*Columbia* (Missouri) *Patriot*, March 19, 1842, quoted in the *Missouri Historical Review*, XXVIII, 168.



A WRECK ON THE MISSOURI



The JENNIE BROWN
"for Fort Benton," arrives at Omaha, September 26, 1868

braska City, and Brownville—that played a stellar role in the westward movement.¹⁴

When Rev. John Todd came to Fremont County, Iowa, in 1848, he found steamboating on the Missouri “slow and dangerous.” The kindly preacher made a “temporary settlement” near the southern boundary of Iowa five miles above the present site of Nebraska City. “Boats passed up only at irregular intervals,” the Rev. Mr. Todd relates, “and not unfrequently remained for weeks upon sandbars and snags.”¹⁵ Fortunately for these river towns a dramatic change occurred in their economic status when the Forty Niners began streaming westward across Missouri and Iowa. The enterprising towns along the Missouri River served as spring boards for the Santa Fe Trail, the Oregon Trail, and the Mormon Trail, and loud did each editor scream about the prowess of his town.

In 1857, for example, the *Nebraska Advertiser* declared no trade in the United States, and possibly in the world, employed as many steamboats as the Missouri River. Forty-six steamboats measuring 29,300 tons and valued at

¹⁴The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, the admission of Minnesota in 1858, and the rapid settlement of Western Iowa during the 1850's, each served as a tremendous impetus to steamboating on the Missouri prior to the Civil War. Augmenting this regular traffic was the trade accruing from the hordes of immigrants who used the towns from Kansas City to Sioux City as jumping-off points for the West. The following growth was registered by these towns between 1850 and 1870:

Town	1860	1870
Missouri		
*Kansas City	4,418	32,260
**St. Joseph	8,932	19,565
Kansas		
Kansas City (Wyandotte)	1,920	2,940
Leavenworth	7,429	17,873
Nebraska		
Brownville	425	1,305
Nebraska City	1,922	6,050
Omaha	1,883	16,083
Iowa		
Council Bluffs	2,011	10,020
Sioux City	767	3,401
South Dakota		
Yankton	458	737

*Population 2,529 in 1850

**Population 936 in 1846

¹⁵*History of Fremont County, Iowa* (1881), pp. 593, 594.

\$1,267,000 were running on the Missouri that year, and a dozen new boats were under construction. Furthermore, the editor pointed out, officers and crews on Missouri River steamboats received higher wages than were paid steamboatmen on other streams.¹⁶

One did not have to visit a large river town to discover activity. By July 1, 1857, fully 130 steamboats had docked at the Brownville wharf, usually landing both passengers and freight at almost every arrival.¹⁷ The amount of freight discharged at these bustling river towns sometimes exceeded the most sanguine dreams of an editor. On July 28, 1856, the *Nebraska Advertiser* noted that the steamboat *Edinburg* left the largest lot of goods of the season at the Brownville wharf. One firm, Hoblitzell & Co., had received their second supply of the season, the freight bill amounting to over one thousand dollars for this single company!

When the local trade was augmented by traffic arising from the Forty Niners, the Pike's Peak gold rush, or the hosts moving westward over the Oregon and Mormon trails, river towns became a veritable bedlam of activity. An eastern traveler has left us the following impression of St. Joseph at the opening of the Pike's Peak gold rush:

St. Joseph is a perfect jam, with "Peakers" and sharpers "takin' 'em in," horses, mules, oxen, men, women, children, wagons, wheelbarrows, hand-carts, auctioneers, runners, stool pigeons, greenhorns, and everything else you can imagine, and a thousand other things your imagination will fail to conceive.—Every thing is very high; board at a "one horse" hotel \$2.00 per day, and little rats of mules \$150. The folks think the whole United States will be here in a few days. Ten days ago a man could fit out here at a reasonable rate. There are hundreds starting from here, but they are the poorest of creation. I would not have believed it, but it is a fact, that there are hundreds now starting on foot, with nothing but a cotton sack and a few pounds of crackers and meat, and many with hand carts and wheelbarrows.

There are expresses going nearly every day; but such expresses! Four little mules to one common Chicago wagon.—They take one hundred pounds of baggage apiece for twelve men, and charge them \$50 apiece for

¹⁶*Nebraska Advertiser* (Brownville), September 3, 1857.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, July 2, 1857.

the privilege of wading after the wagon and pulling it out of the mud.

I have done nothing yet but stand and look at the fun. I like to be here where everybody is going with a rush, not knowing where or what for. That's fun.

If I was home, with my present experience and feelings I think I would stay there till better satisfied: and you need not be surprised if I should bring this letter myself. I have not yet seen the first thing to serve as an anchor to the hope within!

NIMROD

P.S.—I have just seen butter sold at 75cts per pound.—That's a specimen of the way we are gouged.¹⁸

There was a backwash of traffic accruing to steamboat captains and owners from these mining stampedes which has not been recorded by river historians. This arose from transporting those unfortunate souls back home because of ill health, lack of strength, flagging determination, or insufficient financial resources. "Nimrod" illustrates a Pike's Peak enthusiast about to return. A St. Louis editor records a similar situation with some Forty Niners:

Yesterday morning, the steamer "Kansas" arrived from St. Joseph. She had on board, as passengers, some ten or twelve persons who are just in from the encampments of the emigrants now crossing the plains for California. Some of these persons went as far as three hundred miles out, when, becoming discouraged from the fatigue and hardships of the journey they gave up the trip, and are now on their way back to their friends. Two or three are from the vicinity of Chicago, others reside in Ohio and Kentucky, and they all agree that the undertaking was more than they could conveniently stand. They also give anything but a flattering account of the health and harmony prevailing in the different companies, and seem to think that large numbers will be returning before the main body gets beyond Fort Laramie. These rumors, however, are to be taken with some degree of allowance as the dissatisfied ones now coming back may view matters in a worse condition than really exists.¹⁹

In addition to Forty Niners and Pike's Peakers thousands of Mormons came upstream by steamboat to Omaha, bought their equipment and supplies, and headed westward

¹⁸*The Chicago Press & Tribune*, quoted in *The Franklin* (Iowa) *Record*, April 18, 1859. See also the *Sioux City Eagle*, April 2, 1859.

¹⁹*St. Louis Republican*, June 15, 1849.

across the Nebraska prairies for the State of Deseret. This Mormon trek across Nebraska had begun in 1847 and was nurtured by Missouri River steamboats until the completion of the Union Pacific snuffed out the trade. The arrival of the iron horse at St. Joseph did not eliminate the use of steamboats, for the Mormons still came upstream to historic Florence to begin their overland trek. The *Sioux City Eagle* of June 4, 1859, records the following:

We venture the assertion that the Railroad packet St. Mary left for Omaha Saturday night with the largest passenger list ever before crowded on any steamer on the Western waters. She has nine hundred passengers aboard, seven hundred and thirty-five were Mormons on the lower decks. But very few of the Mormons took cabin passage, probably less than fifty, but the decks were one living mass of human beings. What a fearful responsibility rested on the pilot and engineer. Just think! Nine hundred souls entrusted to their care.

The following year the *Nebraska City News* of May 12, 1860, declared: "The *Emilie* brought up, on Thursday over four hundred Mormons destined for Salt Lake City. They passed on up to Florence to rendezvous for a few weeks. There were a fine lot of girls among them." On July 7, 1860, the *Omaha Nebraskian* noted the arrival of 580 Mormons at Florence who were destined to go out to Salt Lake City in small parties. The following week the steamboat *Omaha* brought up five hundred Mormons and the *West Wind* about six hundred more. About twelve hundred Mormons were estimated to be encamped at Florence awaiting transportation to Utah. Such reports were common in the Nebraska newspapers of that period.²⁰

The value of the Utah trade was not overlooked by enterprising Nebraskans. On April 30, 1859, the *Nebraska City News* recorded the following with smug satisfaction:

Messrs. Windsor, Lytton & Ewing shipped over fifty tons of freight on the *Isabella*, to this city, to be conveyed thence to Utah. These gentlemen are large transporters of freight, have been engaged in the business for years, are thoroughly conversant with the best routes across the plains, if any men can be. Their busi-

²⁰*Nebraska City News*, July 13, 1861.

ness has been done at Leavenworth. It will, in the future, be done at Nebraska City.—This is the right sort of testimony in favor of the Central Route from Nebraska City, to the mines, and of Nebraska City as an outfitting and shipping point. This is the way the testimony rolls in, without any flaming circulars, or runners, in favor of the Nebraska City route.

Phil E. Chappell, who served as a steamboat clerk on the Missouri from 1856 to 1860, considered the following boats among the finest on the river in 1858, the banner year of Missouri River steamboating: *Admiral*, *Alonzo Child*, *Asa Wilgus*, *Clara*, *C. W. Sombart*, *David Tatum*, *D. S. Carter*, *E. A. Ogden*, *Edinburgh*, *Emigrant*, *Empire State*, *F. X. Aubrey*, *Isabella*, *James H. Lucas*, *John D. Perry*, *Kate Howard*, *Meteor*, *Minnehaha*, *Peerless*, *Platte Valley*, *Polar Star*, *South Western*, *Spread Eagle*, *Thomas E. Tutt*, *Twilight*, *War Eagle*, and *White Cloud*.

According to Chappell the crew of a first-class steamboat ran from seventy-five to ninety people. It included a captain, two pilots, two clerks, four engineers, two mates, a watchman, a lamplighter, a porter, a carpenter, and a painter. In addition to these, there were four cooks, a steward, two chambermaids, a deck crew of about forty men, and a cabin crew, generally colored, of about twenty. There were also a barber and a barkeeper, for a bar was always an indispensable attachment to a first-class western steamboat. He wrote:

The wages paid were commensurate with the size of the boat, the labor, and danger, as well as the profits of the business. Captains received about \$200 per month; clerks, \$150; mates, \$125; engineers about the same as mates. Of course, these wages included board.

It was the pilot, however, who divided the profits with the owner, and sometimes received the larger share. He was the autocrat of the boat and absolutely controlled her navigation. It was for him to determine when the boat should run at night and when she should lay by. He received princely wages, sometimes as much as \$1200 per month, and he spent it like a thoroughbred. These exorbitant wages were demanded and paid as a result of a combination among the pilots called the "Pilots' Benevolent Association." It controlled the number of apprentices, and, as no man could "learn the river," as it was called, without "being shown," it absolutely controlled the number of pilots. It had a "dead-sure cinch," and in compactness, in rigid enforcement

of rules, and in keeping wages at high-water mark it was a complete success, and continued to maintain its organization as long as steamboating was profitable.²¹

It should be pointed out that pilots who confined their work to the St. Louis-Kansas City run were likely to receive less than those who were required to learn the river all the way up to Omaha and Sioux City. And those hardy souls whose lot it was to pilot a boat all the way up to Fort Benton commanded the highest salaries of all. In 1866 the *St. Louis Missouri Republican* listed the salaries of officers in the Fort Benton trade as follows: masters, \$200; clerks, \$150; mates, \$125; engineers, \$125; and pilots, \$1,000.²²

But such salaries and profits did not always prevail. The Civil War virtually snuffed out steamboating on the Missouri. Many boats were commandeered by the Union forces to be used as troopships, hospital ships, and gun boats. Guerrillas plundered those vessels that ventured upstream, frequently firing on the passengers and setting fire to the boats. In September of 1861 the *Des Moines*, *Iatan*, *White Cloud*, and the *War Eagle* ascended the Missouri with the 38th Indiana Regiment and succeeded in capturing the *Sunshine*, which had been actively engaged in serving Confederate forces. Newspapers were constantly filled with stories of depredations. In the fall of 1863 the *Marcella* was plundered by Confederate sympathizers who removed large quantities of U. S. Government freight destined for the forts on the Upper Missouri. The following June the *Sunshine* and the *Prairie Rose* were fired into near Waverly and in July the *Glasgow*, *Sunshine*, *Welcome*, and three other packets were set on fire by "dreaded Rebel Steamboat Burners" while they lay at the levee.²³

From the start the federal government took strong measures to curb such activities. But the introduction of

²¹ Phil E. Chappell, "A History of the Missouri River," *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, IX (1905-1906), 284-294.

²² *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), quoted in the *Captain Wooldridge Manuscript* (Memphis, Tennessee).

²³ *Missouri Republican*, September 22, 1861; September 15, 1863; June 6, July 15, 1864.

Federal troops caused some editors to let off a wail of protest. In June of 1861 the *St. Joseph Gazette* declared:

Business.—It is just folly to speak of business in this city—there is no trade—everything is dead and dried up. We are now experiencing the effects of having troops among us. No man wants to come here to buy or sell, for he will not feel that his person and property are safe in a city where troops have to be stationed to keep, as it alleged, the lawless citizens from committing depredations. There are very few here now who are not praying for just such times and quiet as were witnessed here one week ago. Experience is the only school in which some men will acquire knowledge.

The Council Bluffs *Nonpareil*, which reprinted the above, commented as follows: "It will appear from the organ of the secessionists at St. Joseph, that our Missouri neighbors are just now beginning to reap the fruits of their treason."²⁴

The effect of a Missouri River closed to trade was recognized by all. On July 27, 1861, the *Sioux City Register* declared:

The conflict which is going on between the Federal and rebel forces in Missouri is having a bad effect upon the interests and business of the upper Missouri country—inasmuch as the navigation of the river by steamboats is seriously if not entirely impeded. At present steamboats are not allowed to leave St. Louis, and as a necessary consequence the means of receiving goods and of shipping their surplus products are denied to the people of the Missouri river country. It is to be hoped that this state of things will not continue long. The interests of the people demand the free navigation of the Missouri and if this right is denied them, they will be under the necessity of employing the services of the "great Missouri river opener"—Senator Grimes.

Three months later, in October, 1861, the same editor declared:

The Missouri river is effectually blockaded by the secessionists in Missouri, consequently we need not look for another boat at this place this fall. Our merchants are too poorly supplied with goods for the coming winter to supply the wants of the large scope of country depend-

²⁴*St. Joseph (Missouri) Gazette*, quoted in the Council Bluffs *Nonpareil*, June 22, 1861.

²⁵*Sioux City Register*, October 5, 1861.

ing upon Sioux City for merchandise. If they do not replenish their stocks from some other source, we fear we will be put on short rations before spring.²⁵

Despite such hardships a Sioux City editor could not help writing the following eulogy:

There is not a more desirable region in the West than this Upper Missouri. Fertile in production—genial in climate—favored in locality—and settled by an industrious—high-toned population, it gives reliable promise of a prosperous and important future. We leave with reluctance, and shall always cherish with fond pride our frontier experience and associations.²⁶

The discovery of gold in Montana in 1862 served as a magnet in attracting steamboats to Fort Benton. Unfortunately, the Civil War proved a retarding factor, for only the *Emilie*, the *Shreveport*, the *Key West No. 2*, and the *Spread Eagle* were recorded at Fort Benton in 1862. Two boats reached the vicinity of that remote outpost in 1863, while four vessels put in an appearance in 1864. Despite the desperate need for food, merchandise, and mining machinery, the number of arrivals did not increase appreciably in 1865.²⁷

The year 1866 opened up the golden era of steamboating on the Upper Missouri. Thirty-one steamboat arrivals were chronicled at Fort Benton, or half again as many as had been recorded in the previous seven years. The *St. Johns* and the *Deer Lodge* opened the season of navigation on May 18. The *Deer Lodge* returned to Fort Benton from St. Louis on July 13, the first steamboat to make two round trips between those points during the same season. On June 11 soldiers and civilians saw seven boats lying at the Fort Benton levee, and many doubtless forecast the end of costly and cumbersome ox trails overland from Utah. By the time the last boat had departed on July 19, a total of 4,686 tons of freight (exclusive of government supplies) had been discharged at Fort Benton from the far-famed mountain boats that formed the Northwestern Transportation Company.

²⁶Sioux City Register, November 15, 1862.

²⁷"Steamboat Arrivals at Fort Benton, Montana, and Vicinity," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, I, 317-325.

During the next three years the Fort Benton levee exhibited the same bustle and activity. Thirty-seven steamboats docked at Fort Benton in 1867, and two others, the *Imperial* and the *Huntsville*, came as far as Cow Island. Thirty-five arrivals were chronicled in 1868 and twenty-four in 1869. Although fewer different steamboats were recorded in 1869 there was more double-tripping, so that the total number of arrivals actually exceeded those of 1867 or 1868. Furthermore, the steamboats apparently carried heavier cargoes in 1869, for they discharged 4,870 tons of freight—the heaviest tonnage on record. Government freight was not included in these figures. A precipitate decline in steamboat arrivals occurred after 1869, the advent of the iron horse being a decisive factor. The completion of the Union Pacific was itself important, but the tapping of such points as Sioux City, Yankton, Pierre, and Bismarck by the railroad hastened the withdrawal of the mountain boats from the Upper Missouri, just as it had caused the withdrawal of steamboats from the Lower and Middle Missouri.²⁸

Hurricane winds sometimes held steamboats to the bank for hours; on other occasions moonless nights made piloting impossible. Saw-toothed snags and hidden sandbars added to the dangers. Insurance rates were so high that captains rarely had enough to protect themselves against the loss of boat and cargo. Newspapers invariably recorded that a sunken vessel was only partially covered by insurance. In 1866 insurance rates on sidewheel boats were 6½ per cent while sternwheel boats paid 8 per cent. Thus, a tremendous initial outlay had to be paid on a boat and cargo valued at from \$50,000 to \$100,000.²⁹

²⁸William J. Petersen, "The Log of the Henry M. Shreve to Fort Benton in 1869," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXI, 537-578.

²⁹Chappell, *op. cit.*, p. 291. Underwriters themselves had to be careful. On September 17, 1859, the Sioux City *Eagle* declared: "The steamer St. Mary was sunk a week or ten days since near Brownville, Nebraska. No lives lost, and most of the freight was saved, as we learn that it was principally placed above deck, where it could readily be gotten off, the officers probably thinking the boat *might* sink, as she was an old tub and was loaded down with heavy insurance. We have heard of boats being sunk when too heavily insured."

Such rates were not out of order, since the Big Muddy proved a veritable steamboat graveyard. Captain W. J. McDonald has compiled a list of 441 vessels sunk or damaged between 1819 and 1925, involving a property loss of \$8,823,500. Snags accounted for 240 of these victims, while ice damaged or destroyed seventy-nine more. Forty-nine steamboats were destroyed by fire. Seventeen others were wrecked by bridges. It should be pointed out that the Kansas City bridge was completed in 1869 and the Omaha bridge in 1872. Only ten steamboats were victims of explosions, a small number compared with the losses from other causes.³⁰

There could be a note of finality in a steamboat explosion—both for steamboat and passengers. Thus, on April 9, 1852, the *Saluda* exploded near Lexington, Missouri, with such tremendous force that "the cabin and all the wood-work forward of the wheel-house were completely demolished, and not a piece of timber was left above the guards. The boat sank within a few minutes. The books were all lost, and the names of all the passengers who were killed in the explosion or who sank with the boat could not be ascertained. The number of those who perished was estimated at one hundred."³¹

The danger of Indian attack in the Dakotas and Montana was always very real. This danger, coupled with the hardships and risks of the long journey, prevented all but the most venturesome captains from entering the mountain trade. Of the eighty-five different steamboats that reached Fort Benton between 1860 and 1869, a mere handful could be counted regulars in the trade. The veteran of the trade was the *Deer Lodge*, with five consecutive seasons to her credit by 1869. Three boats—the *Huntsville*, the *Miner*, and the *Only Chance*—had plied four years in the mountain trade. Seven others—the *Benton*, the *Big Horn*, the *Cora*, the *Mountaineer*, the *St. Johns*, the *Tom*

³⁰W. J. McDonald, "The Missouri River and Its Victims," *Missouri Historical Review* (Columbia), XXI, 215-242, 455-480, 581-607.

³¹E. W. Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi* (St. Louis, 1889), pp. 478, 479.

Stevens, and the *Viola Belle*—had engaged in the St. Louis-Fort Benton trade three seasons. Most of these boats had operated between 1866 and 1869, and the *Deer Lodge* and *Viola Belle* were destined to return to Fort Benton in 1870. Over half of the eighty-five boats made but one trip to Fort Benton and never ventured to return.

The average mountain boat was light of draft, sturdy of hull, and equipped with powerful engines to buck the swift current of the Missouri. It was smaller and lacked the costly gingerbread and trappings of Lower Mississippi packets. Only three of those engaging in the mountain trade in 1869 measured over five hundred tons—the *Peter Balen*, the *Henry M. Shreve*, and the *Mountaineer*. In contrast, six measured less than three hundred tons, ranging from the 207-ton *Andrew Ackley* to the 299-ton *Miner*. The more typical mountain boats ranged from the 358-ton *Huntsville* to the 493-ton *Deer Lodge*, the average tonnage being 390. The amount of freight carried varied with the size of the steamboat; in 1866 the average cargo of through freight was estimated to be 290 tons at \$12.50 per hundred pounds. Since cabin fare cost \$300 that year it is not surprising that the 545-ton *Peter Balen* showed receipts of \$102,690 and a net profit of \$70,690, one of the most profitable trips ever recorded.³²

The mountain boats were important to Nebraska outfitting towns because a considerable amount of upriver as well as downstream trade sprang up from their presence on the Big Muddy. But the major emphasis must be placed upon those craft that plied on the Lower and Middle Missouri between the advent of the *Western Engineer* in 1819 and the arrival of the iron horse at Council Bluffs in 1867, a year that very significantly coincides with the admission of Nebraska into the Union. The contribution of Missouri River steamboats did much to hasten statehood for Nebraska.

For the average passenger, steamboating on the Missouri was filled with many interesting adventures. The

³²Petersen, "The Log of the Henry M. Shreve to Fort Benton in 1869," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXI, 541, 542.

opening and closing of navigation, the process of wooding up, the colorful array of passengers who jammed steamboats from stem to stern, the presence of blacklegs and gamblers, steamboat accidents and steamboat races, the fine foods served in abundance, the exciting dances held each evening in the cabins of the more palatial boats, all elicited comments from passengers. The experiences of one passenger—the gifted Englishman, Charles Augustus Murray—must suffice.

I found the river much lower than when I had passed up it in June, and the navigation infinitely more dangerous; the huge black snags were in some places as thick as the trees of the forest, and as I stood on the deck and looked at their serried ranks, upon which we were bearing down at twelve or fourteen miles an hour, with all the united force of current and steam, I could not trace with my eye any course or channel by which our craft could make good her way: but being a sufficiently old traveller to believe that "everybody knows his own business best;" and seeing that the captain and owners were neither intoxicated nor mad, it was rather with curiosity and admiration than alarm, that I saw our pilot charge gallantly down upon this forest of snags. His name was Baptiste, and he is one of the most celebrated pilots on the western waters; his countenance was calm and grave, and his quiet piercing eye seemed to calculate the number and position of the giant palisades through which he was to force a passage. On we went, now rubbing on the starboard, now scraping on the larboard side, but always avoiding a direct collision. Our course, though serpentine, was extremely rapid, and in a few minutes the forest of snags lay in our rear.

Soon afterwards, we struck the bottom, so hard as to shake all the chairs in the cabin, and to affect considerably the vertical position of their respective tenants! In Britian, every soul would have rushed to the deck; but I saw everybody else remain perfectly quiet, and I did not see why I should give myself any more uneasiness than my neighbours. I soon found out that, if a person feels any objection to such an occurrence, he had better not descend the Missouri in September, as we grounded frequently for a few minutes, and rubbed our keel against the bed of the river half a dozen times in the course of every hour...

It was extremely painful to remark the wan and unhealthy appearance of all the settlers on the banks of the Missouri, between the Fort and St. Louis. I must have landed twenty times, and I did not see a single family where the fever and ague had not "chased the native colour from their cheeks..."

To return to the steam-boat:—There is nothing in America that strikes a foreigner so much as the real

republican equality existing in the Western States, which border on the wilderness; while that of the Eastern States is being daily infringed on and modified...the distinctions of rank and station are now as much observed in Philadelphia and Boston, as they are in London; indeed, I am inclined to believe they are more so, only with this difference, that being, as it were, illegal and unsanctioned by public opinion, they are adhered to with secret pertinacity, and owe their origin and strength principally to wealth; but in the Far West, where society is in its infancy, where all are engaged in making money by bringing into cultivation waste lands, or raising minerals,—where men of leisure are unknown, and the arm of the law is feeble in protecting life and property,—where the tone of manners, conversation, and accomplishment, is necessarily much lower than in states and cities longer established,—here it is that true republican equality exists, and here only can it exist. This may be illustrated by the narration of simple and apparently trifling facts: for instance, I have seen the clerk of a steam-boat, and a grocer in a small village on the Missouri, sit down to take grog or play at cards with a member of Congress and an officer in the army; laughing together, swearing together, and the names of Bill, Dick, and Harry, passing familiarly between them!

I confess I was much astonished at the gambling on board; the parties were French traders and others engaged in different branches of business up the Missouri. I remember seeing 600 dollars staked on a single card!³³

One cannot close without saying a few words about the freight carried on these indomitable little craft. In 1858 the *Florence* churned up to the Brownville wharf with a number of passengers and their household goods, several small lots of freight, and five thousand fruit trees. That same year the steamboat *Hannibal* arrived at Nebraska City with 109 wagons for Russell, Majors, & Waddell.³⁴

Once the agriculturist had broken the rich Nebraska soil he began to produce abundant crops that found a ready market downstream. Thus, in 1859 the *Nebraska Advertiser* chronicled the departure of the *Peerless* with one thousand sacks of corn while the *Emma* went downstream with another seven thousand sacks.³⁵ A few weeks later the editor of the *Omaha Nebraskian* observed that the *Omaha* had

³³Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America*, II, 82, 86.

³⁴*Nebraska Advertiser*, April 22, 1858; *Nebraska City News*, June 4, 1859.

³⁵*Nebraska Advertiser*, June 23, 1859.

passed down with 5,250 sacks of corn taken aboard at points above Omaha.³⁶

Even Nebraska potatoes were plentiful in 1859. The *St. Joseph Journal* complained that a shipment of potatoes by steamboat from Omaha had brought the price of potatoes down from 50c to 40c a bushel. "How potatoes can be raised in Nebraska Territory and then shipped down here on a steamboat and sold 10 cents cheaper than those in our immediate vicinity can afford to sell them, we are free to confess that we cannot just now understand," the editor complained. He must have gained little comfort from the explanation in the *Nebraska City News* that they had an "everlasting pile" of potatoes that were selling for only 25c a bushel there.³⁷

Few streams have been so universally maligned as the Muddy Missouri. In a letter to the *New York Tribune* in 1866, Bayard Taylor wrote:

Even when one reaches the Missouri, there is little in that ugliest of all rivers to divert one's attention. A single picture of the swift tide of liquid yellow mud, with its dull, green walls of cottonwood trees beyond, is equivalent to a panorama of the whole stream. For the seventy or eighty miles during which we skirted it, the turbid surface was unrelieved by a sail, unbroken by the paddles of a single steamer. Deserted, monotonous, hideous, treacherous, with its forever shifting sands and snags, it almost seems to repel settlement, even as it repels poetry and art.³⁸

On September 14, 1867, a writer penned the following letter from Nebraska City to the *Weekly Oskaloosa* (Iowa) *Herald*:

A few lines from the banks of the Missouri may not be amiss—that is, if they are not like that river—very muddy. The truth is, the Missouri has no beauty

³⁶Quoted in the *Nebraska City News*, July 16, 1859.

This trade continued for more than a decade and did not decline until the arrival of the railroad. On July 1, 1868, the *Nebraska City News* noted the departure of the *Sunset*, "loaded to the guards" with corn belonging to Morrison, Tomlin & Co., bound upstream for Omaha. Three months later, the same paper declared jubilantly that Nebraska was the "best grain growing State in the Union" and that Nebraska City was the "best grain mart" in Nebraska.

³⁷*Nebraska City News*, November 6, 1858.

³⁸Quoted in the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, July 21, 1866.

in it; it is wild and furious in the spring, a terror to the honest yeomanry upon its banks—and in summer, as now, low, crooked and ragged with stumps and trees, now rooting and robbing from Iowa, and then stealing from Nebraska, only to bestow its ill-gotten gain in the shape of a sand-bar upon the river to the terror of the river pilots. Still, if "sermons are in freaks," I suppose the Missouri should afford some lesson for a weary preacher, and for all lovers of streams and rivers.—It breaks at least the monotony of prairie life.

The flourishing cities and towns in Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa are the best answer the historian can give to these humorous albeit shortsighted commentaries. For, despite destructive flood and frightful erosion, the Missouri has proven itself to be one of the most valuable assets in the great valley that bears its name.