



NEBRASKA STATE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Kansas City Missouri
Office of
Superintendent of Buildings

M. McTERNAN,
SUPERINTENDENT.

Jan 10th 1903.

Mr . A. E. Sheldon, Sec'y,
Nebraska State Historical Society,
Lincoln, Nebraska.

Dear Sir:-

After two weeks visit to St. Louis, I find on my return your kind invitation to be in attendance at your Historical Meeting and booked for a speech on Sailing the Old Missouri. I regret very much that I cannot be with you on this occasion but sickness in my family renders it impossible. As I have nothing prepared, send you a copy of an old interview by a reporter, of my early life as a steamboatman and some short reminiscences on the river. Hoping you will have a successful meeting, I remain,

Very truly yours

James Kennedy

James Kennedy

Nebraska State Historical Society,
Lincoln, Neb.

Along with the cowboy, the prairie schooner and other features of early Western life, the steamboat is rapidly becoming a memory. While the steamboat is by no means a Western institution, still it was on Western waterways that it received the highest developments, and it is here that the river steamer's decline began. In the East, too, river navigation is becoming a thing of the past, and, it is thought, will soon be reckoned as a part of American history. Former "floating palaces" on the rivers of the West are now used as cheap excursion boats about the harbors of St. Louis and other large cities on the Mississippi.

But of the men once engaged in river transportation-of characters once prominent on the Missouri, Mississippi and other Western streams-what has become of them? Like the boats they formerly lived on, many are now gone; others have, like the once great river steamers, engaged in lesser business, while still others have retired with comfortable incomes as a result of their many years of service on the great Western waterways. Of the latter there are few. Among the most prominent of the old river captains now living is Captain James Kennedy, who resides in Kansas City with his family at #2521 East Ninth Street, where he has lived for many years.

Captain Kennedy is one of Missouri's own sons. He was born in Jefferson City, the capital city of the State, in 1836. He probably knows as much about the Missouri river as any living man, as he began service when but twenty years of age, shipping as second clerk on the steamer F.X. Auxbury, and continuing on the water until 1879, with the exception of but four years, which he spent in the Confederate army, 1861-65. The Auxbury was named after the man who made the record-breaking time across the plains on horseback from Independence to Old Mexico in the 40s. Kennedy served on the Auxbury and other boats in the capacity of clerk until 1861, when he enlisted under General Price, in command of the trans-Mississippi department, and served through the war until the surrender of General Price at Freeport, La. The entire army, upon surrendering, went to Baton Rouge on boats, where all were paroled.

Returning to Missouri, Kennedy at once returned to steamboating, going on board the steamer ~~Columbian~~ Glasgow in the spring of 1865. The Columbian was sunk in 1868, but no lives were lost. Steamers on the Missouri in those days generally ran from St. Louis to Fort Benton, Mont., and returned to St. Louis, thence to New Orleans on the Mississippi. During the winter months Kennedy would stay on Southern rivers, the lower Mississippi and the Red, White and Arkansas, as the Missouri was not generally navigable from the latter part of November to April. He secured his license as Captain in 1873, and for several years was engaged in the St. Louis harbor on transfer boats, first on the Lavina Maria, then on the Dunluth, R.H. McMullin, and others. During all these years and later Captain Kennedy was a great friend of Captain Phil E. Chappell, owner and captain of many steamers on the Missouri from the 50s down to a few years ago, and now in business in Kansas City, where he is well known as a gentleman and a man of sterling integrity in all his dealings. Though Captain Kennedy is full of reminiscences of his experiences on the river at all stages of his service, it is of the early days when he was only a clerk, without the cares and responsibilities of a steamer loaded with passengers and valuable merchandise, that he likes best to talk. One day last week the Captain was in a reminiscent mood, and was chatting about the old days.

"Steamboating in the 50s on the Missouri was carried on by side-wheel boats," he said. "No stern wheel boat would be passed by the board of underwriters, as they were considered unsafe, and then pilots could handle the side-wheelers quicker in a close river. The Ohio River at this stage had a number of stern-wheel boats, and they were in many ways inferior to our side-wheelers. They did not cost as much and there was less expense in operating them. I think insurance was refused them to keep Ohio River boats out of the Missouri, as they would have proved formidable competitors to us."

"We carried a cabin full of passengers, and could room about 150 people in the staterooms, while 250 slept on the floor on mattresses. We would spread the beds at night and the passengers tumbled in, side by side. Sometimes we would carry as many as 400 people on a trip up, mostly passengers bound for Kansas. Every boat was crowded with emigrants for Kansas and Nebraska. Prices were from \$10.00 to \$12.00 for cabin, and \$5.00 and \$6.00 on deck. The boats would carry from 500 to 800 tons of freight on an up trip at prices ranging from 50 cents to \$1.00 per hundred weight and we made money.

"There were no restrictions on gambling. Games would be started in the cabin every evening, frequently continuing all night, and anyone could take a hand in the game or bet at will. Ladies frequently played, and for high stakes, too. A few of the boats would forbid gambling, but as a rule the games ran openly.

"The old 'Lightning Line' started in 1856, and ran in connection with the Mo. Pacific R.R. from Jefferson City to Western Missouri, and carried the United States mail and handled the United States express business. Captain Lou Welton was our president. All old river men will recognize the names of these steamers and their captains."

Saying this Captain Kennedy extended a slip of paper on which was written: "Sonora, Captain McMullin; Polar Star, Brierly; F.X. Auxbury, Welton; New Lucy, Conley; Tropic, Marshall, and the Cataract,

"The Cataract burst a steam drum below Glasgow coming up one day," continued the Captain. "The floor was opened up through the length of her cabin. Some of her passengers rushed out in their fright and blinded by steam fell through to the lower deck. Several lost their lives and a number were badly scalded. The steamer Tropic, commanded by Captain "Windy" Marshall, as the boys called him, sank in the bend below Waverly going down the river. She was a total loss, but all the passengers were saved. Loss of life is rare on rivers save in the case of an explosion. The New Lucy was caught near Derritt one winter and was burned, and another boat with her. I was second clerk on the F.X. Auxbury, and we sank in the Kaw bend on an up-trip. She was pumped out and proceeded on her trip, getting back to Jefferson City on time.

"General Jo O. Shelby was one of our largest shippers and often on the boats. This was my first acquaintance with him, at Waverly and Berlin, Missouri, in 1857, and through the war I kept it up, and to-day I hold the old general in high esteem as a gentleman, soldier and citizen above reproach.

"All of the old steamboat captains on this line of boats have passed away. All died natural deaths except Captain McMullin, who, a few years after his Missouri River career, shipped as captain of the St. Nicholas, running from St. Louis to New Orleans. The fate of the St. Nicholas and her passengers was one of the saddest ever recorded. It was in April, 1858, when the boat left St. Louis with a good cabin list of passengers. Her boilers exploded just above Helena, Ark., near the mouth of the St. Francis River, in the middle of the night when the river was full and dark. She caught fire and burned to the waters edge. She had 17 lady passengers and about 40 gentlemen, all of whom were lost save one woman, Miss Ellen Kennedy, my own little sister, and a man whom she heroically rescued. Captain McMullin was asleep in his cabin and was caught by one leg under a beam. Failing in their attempt to pull him from under the beam, which was on fire, in desperation his friends secured an ax and began chopping at his imprisoned leg. Before the limb had been severed the flames got too hot for his would-be-rescuers and they were compelled to abandon him to his fate. The flames soon stilled his screams.

"My sister is Mrs. William C. Ballantine, formerly of Nebraska City. She is the mother of Mrs. William M. Leonard of Lincoln, Nebraska, and Mrs. Lulu McDaniels of Omaha. Her escape was miraculous. She jumped into the water from the lower deck as the flames got too close, and luckily found a projecting spike next to the water under the lower rail. Here she hung for hours while all above were dead, and was finally taken off with an unconscious man whom she had held up by the collar all this time, by an old fisherman, who came past in the early morning. She was taken to Memphis, nursed and recovered with but few bad scars to remind her of her accident.

There are probably few men alive to-day who will remember any of the following boats which ran on the Missouri in the 40s, but Captain Kennedy, whose memory is yet clear, easily recalls them and can relate a little history about each of them; Servis, F.Linn, Brunswick, Wapello, Baloon, Rowena, Algona, Whirlwind, Tobacco Plant, Julia, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, Falcon, Paris, St.Auge, Alice, Alton, Meteor, Sacramento, Tamerline, Maudan, Kit Carson, Live Oak, St.Joe, Bertram, Amelia, St.Croix, Haydee, Mary, Kansas, Eliza Stewart, Wyandotte, Boreas No.3, Lightfoot, War Eagle, Monroe, Julia, and The Saluda. The Saluda blew up in 1852 at Lexington and killed 130 people, including Captain Belt. Only the first clerk was saved.

There were fifty boats running in the Missouri river during the years 1865-68, some as far up as Fort Benton, Montana, and other points from Omaha down to St.Louis. There was plenty of freight and all made money.

Captain Kennedy was a witness of the great race between the steamers Robert E.Lee and the Natchez in 1870, on the Mississippi, the most famous river race ever known. The banks were lined with people at every point of importance all the way from New Orleans to St.Louis. The two boats kept only a few yards apart, and at times were only a few feet apart. At the close the Lee shot ahead and won by a little over six and one-half hours. The race had been talked of so long before it came off that it created a national interest. The start was made at New Orleans Thursday, June 30th, 4:50 o'clock P.M. The Lee landed at St.Louis levee at 11:25 o'clock P.M., July 4th, 6 hours and thirty-six minutes ahead of the Natchez. Time of the Lee from port to port, three days, eighteen hours and fourteen minutes. The Lee was commanded by Captain John W.Cannon; the Natchez by Captain Thomas P.Leathers, both veteran southern boatmen.

A trip taken by Captain Kennedy to the mountains of the Upper Missouri in 1877 is full of interest. He met indians, cowboys and western characters of afterward national renown. His boat, the R.H.Dugan, left St.Louis April 1, for Fort Benton, Montana, which was then called the head of navigation on the Missouri. The distance is 3000 miles. "We had good water on the trip up," said the captain. "It was a good boating season. We had plenty of freight for our fifteen boats in the Upper Missouri that season, carrying the government supplies. This was the year General Miles had his fight with old Sitting Bull of the Sioux and Chief Joseph of the Nez Perces. We transported many of the troops. We were ordered with our boats from Bismarck to the Yellowstone river, expecting to reach the Little Big Horn, where General Miles had established headquarters. We got up the Yellowstone as far as Tongue river and re-shipped our freight. Some of the boats reached the Little Big Horn and discharged their cargo, while the balance of us landed our freight at the mouth of the Tongue river.

The Indians in the Missouri river did not molest the steamboats, saying that they were fighting soldiers. On this trip we had a heavy hail storm while on the Yellowstone, which broke all the glass in our skylight and pilot house. The hail was four inches thick. The crowd of indians were camped on this river, and the hail stampeded their ponies and six hundred head plunged into the river and were drowned.

Most of the boats returned that fall while some wintered in the upper river. Some of the boats got within fifteen miles of where General Custer was massacred. A line of boats ran from Bismarck to Fort Benton in connection with the Northern Pacific R.R., and down as far as Yankton, S.D. They did a big business.

"To-day we have virtually abandoned the upper trade to the railroads," continued the Captain, sadly. "In a short while after the Yellowstone trip the railroads built along the river to Fort Benton and up the Yellowstone, and from Yankton, also, cutting the steamboats out of their trade. Like the lower Missouri, the upper part now has railroads running along her banks and boats are cut out of the river.

"The steamboat, as a carrier in the western waters, is no more. The steamboat men watched the passage of the interstate commerce law in 1887 with great interest, and had the long and short haul clause held good the

river business west of the Alleghanies would have taken a new start, and we would have our western rivers full of steamboats, as of old. A few months after the passage of the interstate commerce law the commission met at Cincinnati and decided to change the law by striking out the long and short haul clause. This practically killed steamboating in the west, as railroads are now allowed to cut rates where river steamers come in competition with them. Steamboats could carry freight much cheaper than the railroads, but river men did not have the capital to fight such carriers. Boat lines were owned by small stockholders, with a capital of from \$50,000 to \$100,000, and to fight railroads worth so many millions would be absurd. Never again can we introduce the steamboat as a competing carrier."

Captain Kennedy came ashore in 1879 and took charge of the Star line at this point. He was the first agent for the line between St. Louis and Kansas City, established by the Kansas City Transportation Bureau, organized for the purpose of protecting rates and to keep the railways from discriminating against Kansas City. This association closed out its business a year ago, having lost two of its boats and become almost bankrupt by poor business. There were three boats—the State of Missouri, the State of Kansas and the A.L. Mason. The Missouri sank below Louisville a year ago, and the Mason went down south of Helena, Arkansas a short time before. The Kansas was sold to the Ohio River Company, and is now running on the Ohio under command of Captain Simms. Thus ended the last attempt to revive navigation on the Big Muddy.