

that reality to be. Perhaps the main change that has taken place over the past century is that rural people have become adroit at manipulating the image urbanites have of them, as even a cursory consideration of the use of the "family farm" image in farm bill debates well illustrates.

Western Rivermen, 1763-1861: Ohio and Mississippi Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse, by Michael Allen. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990. xiii, 261 pp. Illustrations, appendix, glossary, bibliographical essay, index. \$25.00 cloth.

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In an interesting and well-written book, Michael Allen explores the world of western flatboat and keelboat workers during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Allen also analyzes the mythology that surrounded rivermen. He is particularly interested in the myth of the "Alligator Horse," in which rugged rivermen were portrayed as fierce, powerful animals—half alligator, half horse.

Allen's description of life on the western rivers is excellent. Drawing on travel accounts and diaries, he explores the rigors of riverboat work in the pre-steamboat era. Although he is sensitive to the lore associated with the western rivers, he emphasizes the physical demands and the rough-hewn conditions endured by early flatboat workers, explaining that the work was dirty, dangerous, and generally unglamorous.

Allen places the early rivermen in the context of the frontier. He concludes, for example, that the rugged conditions of the West shaped the character of these workers. "Most of the early boatmen," Allen argues, "smoked, swore, gambled, drank to excess, fought, and bought whores, and many of them were deserters, petty criminals, or worse" (135). Living far from "civilization," according to Allen, "it is no wonder, then, that they lived and behaved as they did" (136).

The rise of the steamboat, according to Allen, transformed flatboating, flatboat workers, and attitudes toward river life, particularly after the 1820s. As the steamboat and industrial society invaded the West, these workers became more civilized. River life became safer, and rivermen became "more intelligent," temperate, stable, and law-abiding. But just when the staid rhythms of industrialization redefined river life, writers celebrated the tough, barbaric world that was disappearing. Allen argues that Americans, confronting the complex and regimented society born of industrialization, longed for the

freedom and the challenges of the "vanishing frontier." Thus, they celebrated the myth of the Alligator Horse.

Although Allen's analysis of western rivermen is perceptive, it is not entirely persuasive. First, his attempt to link the celebration of the rough-hewn riverman to the spread of industrial society is not convincing. Neither factories nor industrial life dominated Jacksonian America. Furthermore, few early nineteenth-century workers experienced the "sedentary, routine lives" (217) that Allen associates with "civilized" society. Nor had the frontier, even the midwestern frontier, vanished during the age of Jackson. Moreover, Allen argues that shopkeepers and workers embraced the myth of the Alligator Horse, though he does not attempt to determine who celebrated the legend.

Allen's discussion of the influence of the frontier on the behavior of western rivermen is a bit overdrawn. He argues that the "rough, hard-drinking" behavior of rivermen was a reflection of the "lawless frontier" (126). Labor historians studying eastern workers, however, have identified a strikingly similar masculine, violent, bachelor subculture. Perhaps working-class traditions influenced western rivermen as much as regional forces. Finally, Allen's assessment of behavior is based almost entirely on anecdotal evidence. He argues that early rivermen rejected law and order and led reckless, violent lives. Their successors, however, "buckled under and obeyed the law" (203). But Allen does not examine crime rates. Thus, it is difficult to determine if early rivermen were, in fact, unusually violent or if their successors were more orderly.

Although the lore of the flatboatmen occasionally dominates Allen's examination of the realities of life on the western rivers, this is a very useful book. James Allen has produced a careful analysis of early flatboating and a fascinating discussion of the men who toiled on the rivers of the Far West.

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