

RIVERBOAT OF THE MISSOURI— THE BERTRAND

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Mrs. Jipp graduated from the Famous Writers School of Westport, Connecticut. In doing research for her article on the Bertrand she had saved and collected many articles on this famous riverboat from the World-Herald and her own weekly Blair paper. She also visited the site of the Bertrand salvage at DeSoto Bend several times and interviewed a member of the staff at the DeSoto Wildlife Refuge.

Among the thrilling events which took place in Iowa and Nebraska's pioneer days is the saga of the steamboat on the Missouri River. Many of these stories will never be recorded in the history of Iowa because the facts have been lost through the passage of time. Some facts about this era, however, are presently evident and more are being turned up all the time. With the discovery of the *Bertrand*, a great deal of information has been uncovered and interest in the early history of the Missouri has soared.

The decade of 1850 to 1860 saw the greatest number of riverboats on the Missouri River. Main landings were at Nebraska City and Omaha, Nebraska, but there were also numerous landings and wood gathering sites along the river. One of these landings was Port LaForce at DeSoto, Nebraska Territory. It was just upriver from here that the *Bertrand* went down April 1, 1865.

The smoke-belching riverboats of that day were exciting but often rough and dangerous. One researcher reported there were nearly 400 boats which sank in the Missouri during the mid-1800's. However, about 10 percent of these were raised, repaired, and continued to be of service. Of those lost, snags claimed the greatest number. Floating ice was a major hazard, destroying twenty-five of the 400. Fire took twenty-five more and submerged rocks collected eleven. Low bridges were often a very real danger to the high-stacked steamboats and wrecked ten. Explosions, storms, treacherous eddies, collisions,

and swampings accounted for most of the others. Fourteen boats on the list of lost boats once carried the terse notation: "Lost. Cause unknown."

In such hazardous waters, the most important member of the crew was the pilot. He had to be a keen, alert, experienced sailor because the fate of the boat and its cargo depended on him. He was extremely well paid for that period. The owners were willing to pay because of the great value of a pilot who could deliver the cargo and return with the boat. In 1850, a St. Louis-Omaha river pilot received \$1,000 per round trip.

The captain ran the crew, sometimes doubled as the pilot, and occasionally he owned the boat. A captain usually received half the pay of a pilot. Pilots of the 1800's were realists who soon learned how mean the Missouri could be. In her overpowering urge to move things around, this mighty river often rearranged channels, piled up sandbars or carved away a bank here and there. Overnight, the river would change. During floods and high water, the mighty Missouri was likely to jump her banks and find an altogether new channel. This unpredictable river was the thing that made steamboating a high-risk business.

The steamship, *Bertrand*, was built at Wheeling, West Virginia, in 1864 by Sweeneys and Co., (Sweeneys was an iron foundry) and was a typical steamboat of her day. She was a twin-stack double piston boat 160 feet long and 30 feet in the beam. Her main structure was oak-timbered with a pine-planked deck and she weighed 251 tons. There is no exact record of what the *Bertrand* looked like except that she was a stern-wheeler. If she resembled other boats built for the Missouri River trade, she would have been of shallow draft, had a hurricane deck, pilot house and tall stacks. She was valued at \$65,000, and reported to be carrying \$4,000 worth of gold and silver specie in her strong box. Accounts vary on the amount of mercury she carried. Indications are that there may have been from 465 to 550 cylinders, each containing seventy-six pounds of the liquid metal. The value of seventy-six pounds of mercury today is in the neighborhood of \$500. Her cargo of quicksilver was to go into mines, where

it was used in a process to extract gold from its crushed ore. There were 5,000 gallons of whiskey in oaken casks reported to be aboard.

Sources vary in regard to ownership of the boat. Posters and newspaper accounts containing the most consistently reliable information identify the *Bertrand*, at the time of debarkation for Montana Territory, as part of the Montana and Idaho Transportation Line headquartered in St. Louis. This firm, offering bills of lading for overland transportation in Montana Territory, was owned (in part at least) by John J. Roe and his son-in-law, John G. Copelin. Roe, a prominent St. Louis businessman, was himself a steamboat captain on the Ohio in earlier years.

The *Bertrand* seems clearly to have been in the charge of Captain James A. Yore when she started off on her maiden voyage. However, one advertisement does cite a man named Oakman as the ship's master. While unclear, it is altogether possible that the latter was the pilot inasmuch as the roles of the captain and pilot were quite indistinct on Missouri steamers of that period. In the same ad, Yore appears as the officer to whom one applied for passage. An Oakman is identified as a captain and pilot on one list of Missouri River steamboat officers during that period.

Besides Oakman there was an additional pilot and two engineers. The *Bertrand* also carried deck officers and crew. There was room for about twenty passengers in staterooms around the deck. Known passengers were Mrs. Millard and children (from Davenport, Iowa); Thomas Owens; H. E. Bixby, Lady and servant; Albert Rowe; and J. C. Burns (these last six were all registered guests at the Herndon House, Omaha, the day after the sinking, April 2, 1865.)

The *Bertrand* cleared St. Louis, Missouri, in mid-March 1865, and chugged slowly through the turbid waters of the Missouri, bound for Fort Benton Territory, Montana. The trip was to take nearly two months from St. Louis to Fort Benton with a few stops for fuel and scattered shipments along the way. If all went well on the journey up the river and also the return trip, the captain and his crew hoped to be home in time to celebrate the Fourth of July. April 1, 1865, April Fools Day, found the boat headed north out of Portage La

Force. The weather was pleasant and warm, but the swollen murky waters of the Missouri (nicknamed The Big Muddy by pioneers) were angrily churning up mud and silt with unusual excessive power that day. Suddenly Captain Yore noticed a once overhanging bank had cut away and fallen into the river to form a dangerous bar. He and the other pilot swung hard apart to avoid the bar, but, alas, his boat struck a large tree member or submerged snag. At once, the *Bertrand's* hull was ripped open. Apparently a cross sectional break in the planking was incised into the ship as it passed over the sharp cutting edge of the snag. Within seconds, the unfortunate boat began to leak an alarming amount of water.

Though passengers began to panic, the captain and his crew worked at top speed sorting things out and at once got the people into life boats. The huge boat sank in ten minutes and newspaper accounts later reported all the passengers and crew managed their way to safety. No lives were lost and personal baggage and effects were reportedly retrieved. Once ashore, the crew alerted the town of DeSoto but most of the townspeople thought it was an April Fool's joke. By the time the landsmen were convinced that the *Bertrand* really did go down, the boat was completely underwater except for its smokestacks.

Information on the actual sinking is scanty. But the following short item from the Council Bluffs *Non Pareil* of Saturday, April 1, 1865, is the most detailed account yet located in newspapers of the day.

Steamer sunk—We learn from Nutt and Co., that the steamer 'Bertrand' of Copelins and Co's., St. Louis and Idaho line was sunk four miles above this city on Saturday evening last (sic.). She struck a snag and sank in ten minutes in 12 feet of water. Boat and cargo valued at \$100,000 total loss. No lives lost.

William Houston Gallagher, traveling up the Missouri aboard the steamer St. Johns, passed the site of the wreck on Sunday, April 9, and recorded the following in his diary:

At 10½ O'clock reached the wreck of the 'Bertrand.' (sic) Badly sunk to cabin floor, total loss except light freight from upper deck which was all taken ashore, and built into shanties for the protection of the crew. Passengers all up at 'Desoto' eight miles above. While laying at the 'Bertrand' Fannie & Annie Campbell came down to the wreck.

Mr. Gallagher also observed crewmen carrying on salvage operations. They had removed the superstructure of the boat and had towed it to shore. The amount of material taken off the *Bertrand* at the time of its sinking and attempted salvage in 1865 is not known, but during the excavation (in 1968 and 1969) it was abundantly clear that most of the driving mechanism — including the pistons, paddle wheel, and steam fittings — had been removed. The *Omaha Weekly Bee*, reporting on July 22, 1896, Page 9, indicated that a small portion of the freight was removed by divers operating for the insurance company a few weeks after the sinking, and just shortly before the mud devoured the boat entirely.

Within that same month of April, another vessel of the same insurance company as the *Bertrand* went down in the DeSoto-Bertrand Bend area. The salvors in the employ of the insurance company were working on the "*Bertrand*" at the time. They left the *Bertrand*, presumably to make haste in recovering what they could from the new wreck, the *Cora II*, before she sank completely. Later that spring, a third ship, the *A. E. Stanard* went down in the vicinity. Old-timers often related that tall stacks were visible for over a year after the sinkings. But no one knows which sunken vessel they belonged to.

In the 1870's the river changed course during a flood thus leaving the wreckage a mile from the main channel. Drifting sand and earth then covered all traces of the ship. Every few years searchers attempted to locate the lost craft. First attempts were crude and many of them laughable. Some searchers tried to locate the *Bertrand* by drilling holes with an earth auger. One man hit a fence post and reported that he had found the *Bertrand*. Later, more sophisticated methods were tried. Divining rods and electronic mine detectors were used but nothing was uncovered until the spring of March 1968, when Sam Corbino and Jesse Pursell, two Omaha, Nebraska men finally found it.

Sam Corbino had always been interested in riverboat treasure as a hobby and eventually he began a research of the *Bertrand*. In 1965, he formed a partnership with Jesse Pursell. They drew up a contract with the General Services

Administration and then received permission to begin searching in January 1968.

From the National Archives in Washington, they obtained a detailed map of the area as it was at the time of the sinking. Then comparing modern aerial photos with historic maps of the DeSoto Bend area, they narrowed the probable location of the wreck to a three-quarter mile length of the old river channel which is now a part of DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge, and administered by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. Plotting the location of the former river channel at the actual site, they spent countless days searching for the treasure trove. Using a fluxgate magnetometer, they detected a dense object of considerable size ten to thirty feet underground inside the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge. A number of test holes with a six-inch auger were made which brought up a variety of items. This provided proof that a boat was there.

Among the materials brought to the surface was a portion of a fruit jar with preserved cherries, fragments of lead, a piece of finished wood of walnut or mahogany, bits of deck-wood, musket balls, a boot sole and also a piece of firebrick. A major question, however, was whether this was the *Bertrand* or one of two other boats which sank in the area, e.g. the *A. E. Stanard* and the *Cora II*. In late fall of 1968, a stern hold yielded a wooden box labeled "Stores Bertrand." This fact made searchers "99 percent sure" that the vessel they were working on was, indeed, the *Bertrand*. The wreckage was the archeological find of the century. The search had to be abandoned at this point for the winter. In the spring, the dredging project was delayed for several months by high water and sand cave-ins. When it resumed again, a dragline was used to dig a hole about ten feet deep in the hopes of reaching some upper part of the boat's structure. The dragline was also used to open the area so that a jetwater probe could be used to help determine the outline of the vessel. In July, 1969, pumping operations exposed a large section of the center of the sunken nineteenth century boat. Workers unearthed a flask of mercury at 9:15 on Monday morning July 14, 1969. By 10 a.m. Tuesday, the number of mercury cylinder finds

totaled seven. It was Corbino's shovel which touched the first 12½-inch tall iron container of mercury in the right forward part of the hull.



Courtesy of John Phipps

Excavation of the BERTRAND at DeSoto Bend

Grudgingly, the ship yielded more historical artifacts. Some of the first items removed from the boat were 800 bottles of Dr. J. Hostetter's Celebrated Stomach Bitters. Later there were twelve bottles of Kelly's Old Cabin Bitters, forty-eight bottles of Drake's Plantation Bitters and twelve bottles of Schroeder Cock-tail Bitters. (The Kelly Bitters, in bottles resembling a log cabin, would be priceless items in any bottle collection.)

Weapons found on the boat, all waterlogged and harmless, included seventy-five black powder kegs, ten cases of fused cannonballs, one grapeshot cannon ball and a box of fusing devices. The Civil War cannon balls were a valuable find as some will be used to complete displays at national battlefields such as Gettysburg.

Other goods were dishes, flannel shirts, long red underwear, hob-nailed black mining boots, a case containing fifty pairs of baby shoes, numerous pint bottles of champagne, several two-gallon bottles of wine, yarn, spools of ribbon,

a box of sewing supplies, buttons, shovels and combs. One hard rubber comb was stamped I. R. Comb Co., Goodyear patent, May 6, 1851.

There were also supplies for homesteading families which included children's toys, silks, trinkets, heirlooms, sodbuster plows, blacksmith equipment, kerosene lamps, and washtubs.

Foods included jars of pickles, red peppers and cherries that looked good enough to eat, two one hundred-pound barrels of butter, two boxes of candy, twenty-four bottles of lemon syrup, thirty pieces of meat, (badly decomposed) two hundred-fifty tins of oysters, one hundred forty-four cans of canned peaches, seventy-two cans of pie fruits, three boxes of raisins, sixty bottles of salad dressing, two hundred cans of canned tomatoes, brandied peaches, boxes of codfish, flour, honey, ketchup, olive oil and peanuts. Small cans of "essence of coffee" are believed to be a Civil War soldier's ration and an early variety of instant coffee.

It is difficult to describe in detail all of the *Bertrand's* contents for individual artifacts may number somewhat short of two million. The items found formed a unique cross section of middle nineteenth-century manufactured items offering unusual opportunities for students studying History of that period.



*Courtesy of the Bureau of
Sport Fisheries & Wildlife*

"Bertrand" Stores

The cargo was recovered following the charting, photography and removal of the decking. The freight, packed in boxes, kegs, barrels or wrapped in burlap, was found tightly sealed in the holds by blue clay which had seeped into the compartments. This blue clay was removed by jet sprays. As items were cleaned and classified by archae-

ologists of the National Park Service, they were stored in a cool moist storage room to await preservation and stabilization. The highly perishable materials include 1,200 cubic feet of textiles, now under refrigeration, 1,800 boots, shoes, and other leather objects and fragments of paper labeling.

The immense task of unloading the cargo gradually changed from a treasure hunt to a major historical and archeological discovery. For nearly a month workers spent hours carefully removing all of the cargo by hand.



Courtesy of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife

Mercury Flasks—all nine that were found

Corbino and Pursell had hoped, of course, to find a buried treasure of gold, mercury and whiskey. Of the prized material they sought, there were nine wrought iron containers of mercury, weighing eighty five to ninety pounds each, all found near the prow. Each container was found to be worth \$497. The General Service's Administration contract limited the salvage for them to sixty percent of any mercury, gold and whiskey found. All other cargo and boat hull were to become

property of the U. S. Government and placed in custody of the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge manager. Up to now, the Pursell party had invested some \$75,000 to \$80,000 in manpower and machinery involved in the search for the *Bertrand*. Even greater expenses have been invested by the United States Department of Interior to properly care for the artifacts after they were removed from the boat. It had been a long search and an old mystery was finally solved.

Research in conservation, preservation and history will continue for a considerable time. The preservation of artifacts which have survived in a submerged, fresh water environment is quite complex and continues to require the assistance of a broad spectrum of experts well trained and experienced in the preservation of wood, textiles, paper, metals and other objects.

Before the winter of 1969 and 1970 set in, the old river freighter had to be re-buried in sand and water. Facilities to preserve and display the boat and its cargo are now in the planning stages. The timbered hull of the 1865 boat will be raised above the water table but will remain in the excavation. A building will probably shelter the 160x30 hull reassembled in a standard museum setting, and also display some of the cargo. Availability of funds will have a major bearing on the decision.

Meanwhile, an insulated temporary steel building has been built at the DeSoto Refuge Headquarters area. This building is forty feet wide and one hundred-twenty feet long. It is being used at the present for the treating and housing of all the *Bertrand* artifacts which must be cared for if they are to be preserved. Three to five years are anticipated to clean and stabilize the artifacts. By the end of July 1970, the building will be open for public viewing.

The discovery of the *Bertrand* is reported to be one of the greatest archeological finds of today. The majority of the items found on the *Bertrand* are irreplaceable and not yet represented in any museum in the country. Rep. William Scherle, Republican Ia., summed it up very well when he stated, "This is the real early America that until now we haven't had a chance to see and touch."

The *Bertrand* represents an era when the ecology of the midwest was practically untouched. Its recovery and preservation will redefine the natural environment of the Missouri River Valley.

References

1. Articles from *Pilot-Tribune* and *The Enterprise*—Blair newspapers—1968 to 1970.
2. Stories and articles from the *Omaha World-Herald*—1968 to 1970.
3. *Nebraskaland Magazine*—December 1966—Article—"The Sunken Fleet."
4. *Magazine of the Midland* (*Sunday Omaha World-Herald*)—Article—"Steamboats on the Mighty Missouri"—December 7, 1969—by Paul Andreas.
5. *Nebraska History*—Spring of 1970—"Uncovering the Steamboat *Bertrand*"—by Jerome E. Petsche—(Editor for the Midwest Archaeological Center, National Park service in Lincoln, Nebraska.)
6. Mr. Jesse L. Pursell (One of two Omaha men who discovered the *Bertrand*) sent me the following papers for references.
 - a. United States Dept. of the Interior—National Park Service, Washington, D. C.
 - b. *Bertrand* Fact Sheet.
 - c. Sunken Steamer Fact Sheet.
 - d. *Bertrand* Data—Historical and/or Otherwise).

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Wayne S. Chord, field use specialist of the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge, has stated that the Refuge will have a small display of *Bertrand* artifacts open to the public from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily until mid-December. Access to the Refuge is gained from the Loveland-DeSoto Bend interchange on Interstate 29 and past refuge headquarters on Highway U. S. 30 half way between Missouri Valley, Iowa and Blair, Nebraska.

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