

THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER THROUGH MANY EYES¹

BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

Mark Twain once said: "The Mississippi is well worth reading about."² Having delivered himself of this dictum, the versatile Clemens thereupon wrote a book about it. The millions of people who have chuckled over this book — *Life on the Mississippi* — must readily agree that Old Man River afforded Clemens a real challenge. Nowhere else can one find so vivid a picture of the hectic tribulations of a cub pilot on a Mississippi steamboat.

Who does not recall the advice of Pilot Horace Bixby to the young cub by his side? "My boy, you must get a little memorandum-book, and every time I tell you a thing, put it down right away. There's only one way to be a pilot, and that is to get this entire river by heart. You have to know it just like A B C." The youthful Clemens quickly learned that few professions require more exacting knowledge. "A clear starlight night," Bixby pointed out, "throws such heavy shadows that if you didn't know the shape of a shore perfectly . . . you would be getting scared to death every fifteen minutes by the watch. . . . Then there's your gray mist . . . when . . . there isn't *any* particular shape to a shore. A gray mist would tangle the head of the oldest man that ever lived. Well, then, different kinds of *moonlight* change the shape of the river different ways." Awed by the immensity of his problem, Twain concluded: "Two things seemed pretty apparent to me. One was, that in order to be a pilot a man had got to learn more than any

¹ This paper was read before the Prairie Club of Des Moines on March 25, 1939.

² Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (Boston, 1883), 21.

one man ought to be allowed to know; and the other was, that he must learn it all over again in a different way every twenty-four hours."³

Although the whole thing seemed hopeless in 1857, Mark Twain stuck to his post and studied hard, remaining on the river until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Two score years after his *Life on the Mississippi* appeared, scholars were still questioning the authentic realism of Mark Twain's descriptions of piloting. Not a scrap of evidence had been discovered to prove that Samuel Clemens had ever secured a pilot's license. Then, in 1928, Twain's pilot's license, issued by the United States Steamboat Inspectors at St. Louis on April 9, 1859, was discovered.⁴ The license indicated that Samuel Clemens was a "suitable and safe person to be intrusted with the powers and duties" of piloting between St. Louis and New Orleans. Photostatic copies were immediately placed in the archives of the various historical societies of the Upper Mississippi Valley.

Few voyagers are fortunate enough to view Old Man River from such a favorable perch as the pilot house. The pilot served as the eyes for the steamboat: from his position as steersman he presided over the safety of passengers and freight. Some pilots have viewed the Great River through the period of half a century or more: such men have drunk deep of the life of the Father of Waters. But at best their knowledge was limited; they generally knew only a segment of the mighty stream, such as the Upper or Lower Mississippi. They knew nothing about the Great River above the Falls of St. Anthony. They had but scant knowledge about the duties of the engineer, the fireman, the clerk, or the steward. They knew little of tariff rates and

³ *Ibid.*, 87-8; 103-104; 105.

⁴ This license was found by the author in 1928 at the St. Louis office of the United States Steamboat Inspectors.

nothing of the geology, the archeology, or the history of the majestic waterway that flows for twenty-five hundred miles through the heart of a continent. What then could they be expected to know of the fifty-four navigable tributary streams that drain the richest empire on the face of the globe?

Admitting that the duties of a Mississippi pilot are many and onerous, the labors of a Mississippi River historian are even more arduous. In the first place he must be familiar with the works of every traveler from the Spanish conquistadors to the present. This material is not restricted to books of travel alone: rich and frequently untapped sources are found in the myriad government documents that have been published, in the contemporary magazines and periodicals, in the various learned historical journals of the Mississippi Valley, in the scattered manuscript collections, and in the scores of yellowed newspaper files of yesteryears. These are his eye-witnesses, from whom he endeavors to extract and retell the story.

A few illustrations of the complexities of the various problems presented by Old Man River will suffice. Geologists have long placed the age of the Mississippi back some 60 million years, or long before the glacial period. Some recent studies indicate that the Father of Waters is not nearly so old; the birth of the Great River dates back only a million years to the beginnings of the Pleistocene period when the elephant, the mastodon, and the mammoth grazed along the lush banks of the Mississippi. The sloth, the beaver, and the saber-toothed tiger were also eye-witnesses when the Mississippi was born.

During ensuing epochs each glacier roughly buffeted the Mississippi about — so that its course was nowhere near where it is today. Once it actually flowed west of Mason City and Waterloo and just east of Des Moines, joining the

Des Moines River a short distance below Ottumwa. Thence it debouched into its present channel at Keokuk. And yet, although geologists have devoted much attention to the problem, the exact geological story of the Mississippi still has many unwritten chapters — chapters as baffling as the channel of Old Man River was to Mark Twain.⁵

The story of ancient man is equally as intriguing, and equally as perplexing. Two generations of archeologists have searched for and located earthworks of great antiquity along the Mississippi. Mounds dot the Great River of the Ojibways from its source in Lake Itasca to historic New Orleans, at Wabasha in Minnesota, at Lansing and McGregor in Iowa, and at Cahokia in Illinois, to mention a few. Only recently Dr. Charles R. Keyes found one culture superimposed upon another near the mouth of the Upper Iowa River. It was the first discovery of its kind in Iowa. It is to be hoped that ultimately the complete story will be wrested from these mute and elusive eye-witnesses.⁶

Moving swiftly up to the dawn of historic times, we find the first white explorers encountering many Indians. More than a hundred tribes are intimately associated with the history of the Great River. Their presence is attested by the rich Indian nomenclature displayed in the names of such river towns as Red Wing, Wabasha, and Minneiska; Wyalusing, Muscatine, and Keokuk; Oquawka, Cahokia,

⁵ The writer is indebted to Professors Arthur C. Trowbridge and A. K. Miller for the latest information and references on the geology of the Mississippi. See also Frank Leverett, "Old Channels of the Mississippi in Southeastern Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* (3), V (April, 1901), 38-51; Frank Leverett, "Shiftings of the Mississippi River in Relation to Glaciation," *Bulletin Geological Society of America*, LIII (1942), 1283-98; *Ninth Annual Field Conference, The Kansas Geological Society . . . Upper Mississippi Valley . . .* (Wichita, 1935).

⁶ See Henry Clyde Shetrone, *The Mound-Builders . . .* (New York, 1930); John R. Swanton, *Indian Tribes of the Lower Mississippi Valley and Adjacent Coast of the Gulf of Mexico* [Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 43.] (Washington, 1911).

and Kaskaskia; Osceola, Arkansas City, and Natchez. Even the river itself was named by the red man. It was the fierce Ojibway Indians who called this waterway the *Missi Sebi* which means Great River. This name, at first used only in reference to the headwaters of the Great River, was passed on by various Algonquian tribes to the French fur traders and missionaries, who in turn applied it to the river as it coursed southward. In time the name Mississippi displaced the various Indian names in use along the lower river. The exact location and history of many of the tribes is still shrouded in mystery.

An accurate and readable book on Indian legends of the Mississippi from its source to its mouth is yet to be published. The tears of the Indian maiden Itasca falling to form the source of the Mississippi, picturesque Maiden Rock at the head of Lake Pepin with its romantic story of the Indian princess Winona, spirit places such as Painted Rock and Rock Island, the numerous legends associated with the Grand Tower region — these and many more must some day be brought together. At least one legend is worth recalling at this time, that of Piasa Rock just above the city of Alton.

This noted landmark invariably drew the attention of passersby. Marquette first recorded the "two painted monsters" upon which the "boldest savages" dared not long rest their eyes. "They are as large as a calf," Marquette observes, "they have Horns on their heads Like those of deer, a horrible look, red eyes, a beard Like a tiger's, a face somewhat like a man's, a body Covered with scales, and so Long A tail that it winds all around the Body, passing above the head and going back between the legs, ending in a Fish's tail. Green, red, and black are the three colors composing the Picture. Moreover, these 2 monsters are so well painted that we cannot believe that any savage is their

author; for good painters in France would find it difficult to paint so well,— and, besides, they are so high up on the rock that it is difficult to reach the place conveniently to paint them.”⁷

One of the best accounts of the Piasa legend has been left by John T. Kingston, an early settler in Wisconsin. The Piasa, Kingston was told, was a fierce bird of enormous size capable of carrying off men and women with ease. Its home was in a cave of the cliff where the painting was made. Every morning when the sun rose the Piasa would soar away in search of its prey. Almost every day an Indian victim was carried to the cave, and in a short time the bones only were left to tell the tale. Although they fled many miles away, the Indians could not escape the flight of the dreaded Piasa. Every stratagem that they could invent was resorted to but without avail. One night the Great Spirit appeared before the Chief in a dream, and told him to take his station before dawn on the highest point of the cliff where the Piasa made its usual appearance. The Chief was instructed to place twelve of his bravest warriors in ambush close by, with bows and poisoned arrows, ready to shoot the moment the Piasa swooped down upon him. The Chief did exactly as he was instructed. “Just as the sun was seen rising in the east,” Kingston relates, “the Piasa appeared, soared up, and circling around high up in the heavens, made the fatal swoop for the chief, but just before he struck him with his talons, the concealed Indians let fly their arrows, and the Piasa fell dead, pierced through the heart.”⁸

A list of those who described or told the legend of Piasa Rock would contain the names of some of the greatest men in Mississippi Valley history. For example, Major Amos

⁷ Reuben Gold Thwaites (ed.), *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (73 vols., Cleveland, 1900), LIX, 139, 141.

⁸ John T. Kingston, “Early Western Days,” *Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, VII (1876), 318.

Stoddard, who received Upper Louisiana from the French in 1804, declared in his *Sketches of Louisiana* that the picture of the "Piasa" still remained in a good state of preservation.⁹ Henry Lewis painted a picture of Indians firing their guns at the Piasa in his panorama of the Mississippi in 1846. Most of the rock had been quarried away when Francis Parkman visited the spot in 1867 but the tradition still remained.

Many doubtless lament that more Indian nomenclature has not been preserved: they simply echo the feelings of Jacob Ferris when he visited Minnehaha Falls in the 1850's. In his book, *The Great West*, published in 1856, Ferris declares:

But some egotistical "cuss," who deserves flinging over the cataract for his impudence, has stuck the name of his own "ugly mug" upon the picturesque locality, and called it "Brown's Falls." Let the public all unite in the spicy protest of the indignant tourist, who, upon the banks of the Minnehaha, in view of the "Laughing Waters," and of "Brown's" desecration of them, thus proclaimed aloud: "In the name of common-sense, and all that is poetic and pleasing in human nature, let us solemnly protest against those desecrations which rob our beautiful lakes, rivers, and cascades, of their charming and significant Indian names; and no longer allow every Brown, Smith, Snooks, and Fizzle who happens to be the first to see some beautiful creation of Nature, with dull eyes which have no appreciation for any thing more sentimental than a lump of lead, a buffalo-hide, or a catfish, to perpetuate his cognomen at the expense of good taste and common honesty."¹⁰

Let us turn now to the Mississippi River as seen through the white man's eyes. Many colorful names are linked with the discovery and exploration of the Father of Waters. First on the scene was the swash-buckling De Soto who left

⁹ Major Amos Stoddard, *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive, of Louisiana* (Philadelphia, 1812), 17.

¹⁰ Jacob Ferris, *The States and Territories of The Great West . . .* (New York, 1856), 264-5.

Havana in 1539 on the expedition which led to the discovery of the Lower Mississippi. Hacking his way through tangled woods, skirting treacherous bayous, fighting off the ravages of hunger and disease, warding off the stealthy assault of Indians, De Soto and his tattered army of Spanish conquistadors first viewed the Mississippi on May 8, 1541. A member of the expedition has left what is perhaps the earliest recorded description of the Mississippi:

The River was almost halfe a league broad. If a man stood still on the other side, it could not be discerned whether he were a man or no. The River was of great depth, and of a strong current; the water was alwaies muddie; there came downe the River continually many trees and timber.¹¹

Historic times on the Upper Mississippi begin with the advent of Joliet and Marquette on June 17, 1673. Joyfully Marquette exclaims:

Here we are, then, on this so renowned River [which] takes its rise in various lakes in the country of the Northern nations. It is narrow at the place where Miskous [Wisconsin] empties; its Current, which flows southward, is slow and gentle. To the right is a large Chain of very high Mountains, and to the left are beautiful lands; the stream is Divided by Islands.¹²

At the close of the French and Indian War, in 1762, France ceded New Orleans and the land west of the Mississippi to Spain. The following year France surrendered all claims to the land east of the Father of Waters to England. The first Englishman to describe the Mississippi, Jonathan Carver, has taken on a new, albeit unsavory, lease on life with the publication of *Northwest Passage* by Kenneth Roberts. A veteran of the French and Indian Wars and a loyal subject of George III, Carver set out from Boston in

¹¹ Edward Gaylord Bourne, *Spain in America, 1450-1580* (New York, 1906), 165-6.

¹² Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations . . .*, LIX, 109.

June, 1766, to explore the wilderness beyond the Great Lakes and acquire a "knowledge that promised to be so useful" to both his King and his country. On October 15, 1766, he "entered that extensive river the Mississippi" with a party of fur traders. He is the first man to use the present spelling of the word Mississippi. Paddling upstream, Carver wintered among the Sioux Indians on the Minnesota River. The following spring he returned to the Falls of St. Anthony to secure supplies to enable him to continue to Oregon. When these failed to arrive, he returned to Prairie du Chien, in May, 1767, and subsequently explored the "Chipeway" River country. Sailing to London, Carver published in 1778 his *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America*.¹³ Probably no book on America was more widely read during the eighteenth century; over thirty editions were published in four languages.

At the close of the Revolutionary War the Americans began to penetrate the wilderness George Rogers Clark had wrested from the British. In 1796 George Washington sent Andrew Ellicott (who had just surveyed the site and revised L'Enfant's designs for the national capital) to determine the boundary between the United States and Florida. Crossing the Alleghenies, the venturesome surveyor set out down the Ohio, making a careful study of the Lower Mississippi below the mouth of the Ohio. Modestly he writes: "To say any thing new respecting this river, whose magnitude and importance has for more than a century past, employed the pens of some of the ablest historians, philosophers and geographers of most nations in Europe, as well as in our own country, is not to be expected from me."¹⁴

Andrew Ellicott was a serious man and undoubtedly be-

¹³ J. Carver, Esq., *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North-America, in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768* (London, 1778).

¹⁴ *The Journal of Andrew Ellicott* . . . (Philadelphia, 1803), 118.

lieved that too much had already been written about the Mississippi. If he could return today and scan a well-stocked library of Mississippiana he would gasp at the literature printed following the Louisiana Purchase. In a single decade of the nineteenth century more books concerning the Mississippi were produced than had been previously published. Soldier-explorers like Zebulon Pike or Stephen H. Long, artists like George Catlin and Henry Lewis, adventurers like G. C. Beltrami or Charles Augustus Murray, ornithologists like Audubon, and geologists like David Dale Owen, all have left a record of their westward wanderings. The Mississippi Valley was the land flowing with milk and honey to which hungry settlers swarmed, armed with one or more of the scores of gazetteers, emigrant guides, and maps that were being published. Zadok Cramer's *Navigator*, which went through many editions, showed the main channel and all the islands of the Ohio-Mississippi rivers. It also contained much first-hand information about the towns and countryside along the way.

The newspaper was the chief eye-witness and chronicler of river history. Study, if you will, the spread of newspapers down the Ohio and you have a perfect index to settlement. The first newspaper west of the Alleghenies was established at Pittsburgh in 1786. Cincinnati could boast its first newspaper in 1793, Louisville in 1807, and Shawneetown in 1818. The Mississippi River affords a similar barometer to newspaper history and population growth. The *Monitor* was printed at New Orleans in 1794, the *Mississippi Gazette* at Natchez in 1800, the *Missouri Gazette* at St. Louis in 1808, the *Miner's Journal* at Galena in 1828, the *Visitor* at Dubuque in 1836, and the *Minnesota Pioneer* at St. Paul in 1849. It is significant that the first newspapers in Louisiana, Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota were established on the Father of Waters.

These newspapers recorded more than a passing trip on the Mississippi: they chronicled the opening and closing of navigation, the daily arrival of steamboats, and the stage of the water. They bitterly editorialized on the ever-changing freight and passenger tariff rates and denounced cut-throat competition. Riots, explosions, accidents, excursions, fast trips, races, gambling, strikes; in fact, every element of life along the Great River was faithfully tabulated in the column devoted to river news.

Having indicated a few of the historian's eye-witnesses, let us take a voyage up the Mississippi from the Gulf of Mexico to Keokuk.

We are plowing through the Gulf of Mexico approaching the mouth of the Mississippi with Louis F. Tasistro, author of *Random Shots and Southern Breezes*, a book published by Harpers in 1842. "Soon after breakfast [*sic*] this morning," Tasistro relates, "we reached the Balize, when three of those watery pandemoniums, called high-pressure steamboats, started to meet us." Our impulsive narrator had always entertained a "very strong hatred" for that "self-willed machine" called a low-pressure steamboat, believing it "a most atrocious invention, and fit for nothing but to transport condemned souls across the Styx." It was the high-pressure steamboat, however, which particularly enraged him. With biting sarcasm Tasistro writes: "To see a huge, noisy monstrosity like this, breathing fire and smoke, snorting like a wounded elephant, trundling itself insolently up the Mississippi, and treating all one's feelings, fancies, and associations, past, present, and to come, with contempt, is intolerable, and ought to be forbidden by act of Congress."¹⁵

A. Levasseur, Lafayette's private secretary, visited the

¹⁵ Louis F. Tasistro, *Random Shots and Southern Breezes* . . . (2 vols., New York, 1842), I, 52.

United States in 1824-1825. Levasseur wrote a two-volume work in 1829 under the title, *Lafayette in America*. Of the Mississippi above the Balize Levasseur writes:

A certain degree of emotion at the sight of this noble stream cannot be repressed. Its rapid course and tremendous size seem rather to announce a conqueror. . . . Its waves repel . . . the waters of the sea and throw . . . upon the islands at its mouth, . . . thousands of prodigious trees, which after having lived for ages near the frozen pole, come here to die under the excessive heat of Mexico. . . . Enormous alligators, with their sinister looks and heavy motions, lying on trunks of floating trees, threaten the passenger, and seem about to dispute with him the entrance of the river.¹⁶

A little over one hundred miles of boggy waste land, whose dreary monotony impressed all travelers, separates the Balize from New Orleans. The reactions of J. H. Ingraham, who published *The South-West: By a Yankee* in 1835, are typical:

The low, flat, and interminable marshes, through the heart of which we are rapidly advancing—the ocean-like horizon, unrelieved by the slightest prominence—the sullen, turbid waves around us, which yield but slowly and heavily to the irresistible power of steam—all familiar characteristics of this river—would alone assure me I am on the Mississippi.¹⁷

As one proceeded upstream the land improved only slightly. The gloomy Tasistro saw for leagues about him “one uninterrupted range of cotton plantations, on which nothing animate is to be seen but slovenly negroes, with occasionally a few lean, dirty-looking hogs, tantalizing their appetites by nibbling at the dry turf.”¹⁸

The New Orleans water front, with its polyglot popula-

¹⁶ August Levasseur, *Lafayette in America 1824 and 1825* . . . (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1829), II, 98-9.

¹⁷ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South West: By a Yankee* . . . (2 vols., New York, 1835), I, 64-5.

¹⁸ Tasistro, *Random Shots* . . . , I, 53.

tion drawn from the four corners of the globe, served as a magnet for visitors. S. A. Ferrall believed the port of New Orleans presented the "most extraordinary medley of any port in the world." The Crescent City fairly pulsates with life in Ferrall's *A Ramble of Six Thousand Miles through the United States*, published in 1832:

Craft of every possible variety may be seen moored along the leveés, and the markets and adjacent streets [are] crowded with people of almost every nation in Europe, Africa, and America, who create a frightful confusion of tongues. A particular part of the quay is appropriated to each description of craft, and a penalty is enforced for any deviation from port regulations. The upper part is occupied with flat-boats, arks, peeroges [*sic*], rafts, keel-boats, canoes, and steam-boats; and below these are stationed schooners, cutters, brigs, ships, &c., in regular succession. The leveé is almost constantly filled with merchandise; and the scene of bustle and confusion . . . fully proves the large amount of commercial intercourse which this city enjoys.¹⁹

Few travelers have left a more dismal account of New Orleans than G. W. Featherstonhaugh, whose book, *Excursion through the Slave States*, appeared in 1844. Featherstonhaugh described the population of the Crescent City as a medley of Spaniards, Brazilians, West Indians, French Creoles, all generously intermixed with Negro stock. "I . . . never met one person without a cigar in his mouth," Featherstonhaugh asserts, "and certainly, taking it altogether, I never saw such a piratical-looking population before. Dark, swarthy, thin, whiskered, smoking, dirty, reckless-looking men; and filthy, ragged, screaming negroes and mulattoes." Featherstonhaugh remained in New Orleans only long enough to gratify his curiosity: "I took leave of New Orleans — a city where all agree in the worship of mammon, and where the undertaker looks with as much

¹⁹ S. A. Ferrall, Esq., *A Ramble of Six Thousand Miles through the United States of America* (London, 1832), 190-191.

periodical anxiety to the season of his harvest as the speculator in cotton does to his."²⁰

Were such vicious attacks on New Orleans in any way justified? Was Ole Rynning, the noted Norwegian observer, fair when he declared in 1838 that New Orleans harbored the "worst people in the United States"?²¹ The following genteel Sunday sport recorded by H. B. Fearon in his book, *Sketches of America*, may prove enlightening. Fearon was appalled by an advertisement of an "'extraordinary fight of *Furious Animals*'" expressly staged for the enjoyment of New Orleans citizens.

"1st Fight — A strong Attakapas Bull, attacked and subdued by six of the strongest dogs of the country.

2nd Fight — Six Bull-dogs against a Canadian Bear.

3rd Fight — A beautiful Tiger against a black Bear.

4th Fight — Twelve dogs against a strong and furious Opelousas Bull."

Lest these combats should fail to attract the sadistic New Orleans throng, the management offered the following additional inducements: "'If the Tiger is not vanquished in his fight with the Bear, he will be sent alone against the last Bull; and if the latter conquers all his enemies, several pieces of fire-works will be placed on his back, which will produce a very entertaining amusement.'"²²

New Orleans was not without its staunch defenders, however. The Italian adventurer Beltrami, who was aboard the *Virginia* in 1823 on the first steamboat voyage between St.

²⁰ G. W. Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion through the Slave States* . . . (New York, 1844), 140, 142.

²¹ Theodore C. Blegen (ed.), *Ole Rynning's True Account of America* [Travel and Description Series, Vol. I, Norwegian-American Historical Assn.] (Minneapolis, 1926), 98.

²² Henry Bradshaw Fearon, *Sketches of America. A Narrative of Five Thousand Miles through the Eastern and Western States of America* . . . (2nd edition, London, 1818), 274.

Louis and Fort Snelling, considered New Orleans the most "brilliant" American city he had seen. "It contains," he declared, "about forty-five thousand inhabitants; a prodigious population for a place which may be said to have just emerged from a swamp, and where the yellow fever and the natural insalubrity of the climate every year effect deplorable ravages." Beltrami was delighted with the "well-lighted" streets along which handsome carriages moved swiftly in every direction. "It is astonishing," the voluble Italian concluded, "that a place which may be said to be only just stepping out of its infancy, should already exhibit in the department of amusements, a number of those attractions which are displayed in the capitals of Europe. Horse-races, dramatic representations, concerts, balls, and gaming *academies* of every description . . . more in fact than exist in Paris."²³

New Orleans must always be remembered as the starting point of the greatest steamboat race in history — the contest between the *Robert E. Lee* and the *Natchez*.²⁴ Nor was this the only example of this favorite sport. One could hardly travel upstream from the Crescent City without engaging in several brushes with opposition boats. In Augustus E. Silliman's book — *A Gallop Among American Scenery* — we find the following:

It so happened that I left New Orleans, in the season when duels and yellow fever were becoming rife, in one of the fastest steamers out of that port. The usually monotonous voyage up was enlivened with an occasional race with some boat ahead, in which all the

²³ Giacomo Constantino Beltrami, *A Pilgrimage in Europe and America* . . . (2 vols., London, 1828), II, 523-4.

²⁴ For accounts of famous races, see E. W. Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi* . . . (St. Louis, 1889), 536-8; Herbert and Edward Quick, *Mississippi Steamboatin'. A History of Steamboating on the Mississippi and Its Tributaries* (New York, 1926), 227-30. See also, William J. Petersen, *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi* . . . (Iowa City, 1937), Chap. 43, for the race of the *Grey Eagle* and the *Itasca*.

spare bacon and hams among the freight were thrown into the furnaces to feed the boilers, while to save unnecessary trouble the firemen lashed down the safety valves. Indeed, in our case we might be said to be especially favored, for even in the absence of the excitement of the race we could always recur to the fact that we had four hundred kegs of gunpowder, marked "buckwheat," stowed in interesting proximity to the furnace, which at any instant might, by sending us among the stars, leave it a matter of doubt in our minds whether the boilers did or did not give way at exactly four hundred atmospheres.²⁵

From the *Iowa Territorial Gazette* of 1838 comes the following widely-quoted story.

A lady took her passage on board a steamboat at New Orleans to go to St. Louis, but hearing that the Captain intended running a race, declined going unless assurances were given that such would not be the case. The master pledged his honor to refrain from the contest, and the boat got under way; the rival boat pursuing soon after, neared him fast, and the passengers becoming excited, requested him to put on more steam, which was refused, for the reason above given. The lady was applied to, but would not yield. She was then requested to come on deck, and view the other boat, which at the time, was nearly along side, and fast gaining. Her feelings were immediately enlisted, and she too, urged an increase of speed, which was attempted, but not succeeding as well as his passengers desired they suggested that he should use bacon, to make the wood more inflammable. The answer was, that having pledged his word not to race, he had not provided himself with the article. "Never mind, Captain," said the lady, "you have some on board as freight, use it, my dear sir, use it — *I will pay all expenses if you beat that boat.*"²⁶

Alexander Mackay tells of a race between the *Niobe* and the *Lafayette* in his book, *The Western World*, published in 1849. Mackay was aboard the *Niobe*, bound upstream in pursuit of the *Lafayette*. The two boats were soon running

²⁵ Augustus E. Silliman, *A Gallop among American Scenery* . . . (New York, 1881), 274.

²⁶ *Iowa Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser*, July 21, 1838.

along evenly under a full head of steam. According to Mackay,

. . . the negroes became almost frantic in their efforts to generate the steam; so much so that at one time I thought that from throwing wood into the furnaces, they would have taken to throwing in one another. But a short time before upwards of two hundred human beings had been hurried into eternity by the explosion of a boiler; but the fearful incident seemed for the moment to be forgotten, or its warnings to be disregarded, in the eagerness with which passengers and crew pressed forward to witness the race. I must confess I yielded to the infection, and was as anxious a spectator of the contest as any on board. There were a few timid elderly gentlemen and ladies who kept aloof; but with this exception, the captain of each boat had the moral strength of his cargo with him. For many minutes the two vessels kept neck and neck, and so close to each other, that an explosion on board either would have calamitously affected the other.²⁷

The captain of the *Niobe* finally resorted to the ruse of forcing the *Lafayette* either to break her speed or run upon a snag. Being thus fairly jockeyed out of her position, the *Lafayette* dropped astern and the *Niobe* won the race. "There are certainly laws against this species of racing," Mackay declared, "but the Mississippi runs through so many jurisdictions that it is not easy to put them in force. Besides, it was evident to me, from what I then saw, that, in most cases, passengers and crew are equally *participes criminis*."²⁸

Scenic descriptions of the Sugar Coast, rather than steamboat races, employed the pens of most travelers. When J. H. Ingraham left the Crescent City he was thrilled by the "dense forest of masts" through which his steamboat glided. Stately sugar plantations unfolded in a never-ending panorama.

²⁷ Alex. Mackay, Esq., *The Western World; or, Travels in the United States in 1846-47* . . . (3 vols., London, 1849), III, 48-9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

The banks are lined and ornamented with elegant mansions, displaying, in their richly adorned grounds, the wealth and taste of their possessors; while the river now moving onward like a golden flood, reflecting the mellow rays of the setting sun, is full of life. Vessels of every size are gliding in all directions over its waveless bosom, while graceful skiffs dart merrily about like white-winged birds. Huge steamers are dashing and thundering by, leaving long trains of wreathing smoke in their rear. Carriages filled with ladies and attended by gallant horsemen, enliven the smooth road along the Levee; while the green banks of the Levee itself are covered with gay promenaders. A glimpse through the trees now and then, as we move rapidly past the numerous villas, detects the piazzas, filled with the young, beautiful, and aged of the family, enjoying the rich beauty of the evening.

Night did not blot out the spell of the Sugar Coast: even Ingraham's cold Yankee blood warmed to the beauties about him as the steamboat puffed proudly upstream.

The moon rides high in the east, while the western star hangs trembling in the path of the sun. Innumerable lights twinkle along the shores, or flash out from some vessel as we glide rapidly past. How exhilarating to be upon the water by moonlight! . . . Quiet and romance are lost in sublimity, if not in grandeur. The great noise of rushing-waters — the deep-toned booming of the steamer — the fearful rapidity with which we are borne past the half-observed objects on shore and in the stream — the huge columns of black smoke rolling from the mouths of the gigantic chimneys, and spangled with showers of sparks, flying like trains of meteors shooting through the air; while a proud consciousness of the power of the dark hull beneath your feet, which plunges, thundering onward . . . adds to the majesty and wonder of the time.²⁹

Steamboats plying between New Orleans and St. Louis were usually the largest and most finely appointed on "Western Waters," as the Mississippi River system was commonly called. The denser population, the rich cargoes which they carried from the Upper Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Ohio, together with the deep channel below

²⁹ Ingraham, *The South West* . . . , I, 245-7.

Cairo, all combined to make Lower Mississippi steamboating profitable. Here is J. L. Peyton's description of a Lower Mississippi steamboat as recorded in his book, *Over the Alleghanies*.

The saloon was decorated in a tasteful and expensive manner, and furnished with Brussels carpets, ornamented lamps, silk curtains, pianos, sofas, chairs, and French mirrors, in fact a profusion of gilding, glass and mahogany. Plenty of books of a sensational description were circulated among the passengers by a Connecticut boy, who had absconded from his home the year before, as he said, to fabricate his own fortunes. There were card and loo tables, and numerous other appliances for passing the time, not only agreeably, but improvingly. All kinds of "American drinks," as they are called, were dispensed from the bar, the river furnished excellent fish, and the market towns on the western bank, poultry, fresh meat and vegetables. The accommodations were on such an extensive scale, that there were separate apartments for the ladies with female servants to attend them; also a private saloon or parlour in which gentlemen were not permitted to intrude unless specially invited by the fair occupants. In this society, which was as polite, well dressed and well instructed as you would find in any portion of the world, I anticipated a delightful passage.³⁰

As we proceed upstream let us take an inventory of our fellow passengers. In his book, *A Journey Through Texas*, Frederick Law Olmstead describes the life of passengers aboard the steamboat *Sultana* in the decade before the Civil War.

Day after day, you sit down to the same table with the same company, changing slightly its faces as guests come and go. . . . The life, especially in the tame Mississippi scenery, is monotonous, but . . . the monotony is of a kind you are not sorry to experience once in a lifetime. With long sleeps, necessitated by nocturnal interruptions from landings and woodings, long meals, long up and down walks, and long conversations, duly interlarded with letters and books, time passes, and space. With the Southern passengers,

³⁰ John Lewis Peyton, *Over the Alleghanies and Across the Prairies* . . . (London, 1869), 43-4.

books are a small resource, *cards* fill every vacuum. Several times we were expostulated with, and by several persons inquiries were made, with deep curiosity, as to how the deuce we possibly managed to pass our time, always refusing to join in a game of poker, which was the only comprehensible method of steaming along. The card parties, begun after tea, frequently broke up only at dawn of day, and loud and vehement disputes, as to this or that, occupied not only the players, but, per force, the adjacent sleepers. Much money was lost and won with more or less gaiety or bitterness, and whatever pigeons were on board were duly plucked and left to shiver.³¹

J. L. Peyton found a motley array of pioneers aboard his boat.

These were the men of the West *par excellence*, those silent, gloomy men who have so often attracted the notice of the observant foreigner, and who are generally absorbed with their business and tobacco, pushing one, chewing the other. These are the men who . . . eat their meals with silent energy and remarkable dispatch. During the entire day, they left the saloon to the guardianship of the ladies, adjourning to the deck to pass their time among bales and boxes. . . . Such are the frontier men of the West — men full of the quick, hard intelligence of the New Englander, and his indomitable pluck and perseverance . . . men of deeds rather than of words. They care little for the courtesies of life, and are only intent upon their pursuits, which they follow with industry, intelligence, and self-confidence, and in which they rarely fail. Though of unprepossessing social habits, with little education, they preserve a manly dignity in their character and conduct, which cannot fail to elicit our respect. Unquestionably, they are a little uncouth in their manners and appearance, but they have the spirit and enterprise necessary to subdue a new country. Any other men would be out of place on the frontier. Of such materials only are a free State and a great country made.³²

Charles Dickens encountered just such a resourceful western character bound for the mineral region of Missouri. "He carries the village — that is to be — with him; a few

³¹ Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey through Texas* . . . (New York, 1860), 38-9.

³² Peyton, *Over the Alleghanies* . . ., 60-62.

frame-cottages, and an apparatus for smelting the coppery. He carries its people, too. They are partly American, and partly Irish, and herd together on the lower deck, where they amused themselves last evening, till the night was pretty far advanced, by alternately firing off pistols and singing hymns."³³

In his book, *Wanderings of a Vagabond*, John Morris reveals the varied life aboard a steamboat.

Passengers were privileged to amuse themselves just as they pleased, so long as they did not infringe upon the rights of others, or interfere in any respect with the duties of the officers or crew. This latitude sometimes led to some rather strong contrasts; for instance, there might frequently be seen in the ladies' cabin a group of the godly praying and singing psalms, while in the dining-saloon, from which the tables had been removed, another party were [*sic*] dancing merrily to the music of a fiddle, while farther along, in the social hall, might be heard the loud laughter of jolly carousers around the drinking bar, and occasionally chiming in with the sound of the revelry, the rattling of money and checks, and the sound of voices at the card-tables.³⁴

The daily routine of a woman passenger was not omitted from Harriet Martineau's journal.

We rose at five or a little later, the early morning being delicious. Breakfast was ready at seven, and after it I apparently went to my stateroom for the morning. . . . I took no notice of the summons to luncheon at eleven, and found that dinner, at half past one, came far too soon. We all thought it our duty to be sociable in the afternoon, and therefore, took our seats in the gallery on the other side of the boat, where we were daily introduced to members of our society who before were strangers, and spent two or three hours in conversation . . . far from lively, consisting chiefly of complaints of the heat or the glare; of the children or of the dulness of the river; varied by mutual interrogation about where everybody was

³³ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (Boston, 1867), 82.

³⁴ John Morris [pseud. for John O'Connor], *Wanderings of a Vagabond. An Autobiography* (New York, 1873), 422-3.

going. . . . When the heat began to decline, we went to the hurricane deck . . . and watched the glories of the night, till the deck passengers appeared with their blankets and compelled us to go down.

The indifference of most women to the scenery surprised Miss Martineau. All morning the women "sat in their own cabin, working collars, netting purses, or doing nothing; all the evening they amused themselves in the other cabin dancing or talking. And such scenery as we were passing! I was in perpetual amazement that, with all that has been said of the grandeur of this mighty river, so little testimony has been borne of its beauty."³⁵

Fredrika Bremer tells of a quiet journey on the *Asia* with the "uneasy companionship" of four-and-twenty children ranging in age from a few months to ten years. She thought herself "well-off if only a third of the number were not crying at once. There were also some passengers of the second or third sort, ladies who smoked their pipes and blew their noses in their fingers, and then came and asked how one liked America. Ugh! There are no greater contrasts than exist between the cultivated and the uncultivated ladies of this country."³⁶

Charles Dickens slumbered uneasily as the "hoarse, sullen" boat steamed on, "venting at every revolution of the paddles a loud, high-pressure blast."³⁷ Harriet Martineau complained of squawling children and the noise of trampling feet overhead. "Many of the deck passengers," she records, "had to sleep in the open air, on the hurricane deck, from their being no room for them below; and, till

³⁵ Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (2 vols., London, 1838), II, 10-11.

³⁶ Frederika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World* (2 vols., New York, 1853), II, 96-7.

³⁷ Dickens, *American Notes* . . . , 83.

they had settled themselves, sleep was out of the question for those whose staterooms were immediately beneath."³⁸

Forced to sleep on the cabin floor, William Ferguson was still tired when awakened in the morning.

I do believe, if we had got berths we should have gone to bed at breakfast time, we were so tired. I fell asleep several times during the forenoon; and no sooner was tea over at seven, than, stretched on three chairs, I went off sound as a top. About ten, beds were made on the floor. Such a scene! Through the whole length of the saloon, a number of chairs were placed upside down in a row, and against the slope formed by the inverted backs mattresses were placed. The turn-up of the mattresses at one end, against the chair, was all the pillow there was. Thin sheets were spread over them, two sheets to three mattresses. It was a huge joint-stock sleeping company,—not at all to our taste. It might be said to be one continuous bed, with fifty occupants. . . . There was not much rest in it, and one rose satisfied that they had a spine, for the mattress was thin, and the floor hard.³⁹

On one occasion, in the 1840's, a crowded packet arrived at the New Orleans levee with an immense throng of Mardi Gras visitors, many of whom had been picked up at Natchez, Vidalia, and intermediate landings. A New Orleans paper declared that it had been utterly impossible for all to secure sleeping accommodations. The berths were all occupied at an early hour, many being made to "carry double" on this occasion, and the cabin floor was piled deep with passengers.

When the card tables broke up, there remained just ten who could find lodging room no where. They had left off "bragging" and "poking," and now peeped into every state room, and tumbled around in every corner of the cabin and social hall, but not a space of four feet by six inches could they find anywhere; to be useful in some manner, they constituted themselves a mysterious committee, or grand "Council of Ten," for the purpose of guard-

³⁸ Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, II, 8-9.

³⁹ William Ferguson, *America by River and Rail* . . . (London, 1856), 291-2.

ing the slumbers of those who had gone to bed. Striking their sticks upon the cabin floor, and making a prodigious clatter, they told them all to go to sleep, giving, at the same time, serious assurances that *nobody should be disturbed*.

One of these "Watchmen of the night" created a tremendous racket by slapping his cane lengthwise against a state-room door. People lifted their heads up all around the cabin, and the occupants of the state rooms opened their doors.

"What is the matter?" inquired a personage in a night cap.

"Nothing! nothing!" said the watchman; "I only wish to tell you to go to sleep — *nobody shall disturb you.*"

Muttering many maledictions, the passengers composed themselves again; but in a few moments another outrageous clatter arose.

"What is the matter?" inquired several voices. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Let me beg of you all to compose yourselves," said the watchman, in a tone as loud as his lungs could reach. "Go to sleep, and *nobody shall disturb you.*"

One or two more ludicrous experiments of the same nature followed, and then a recumbent individual demanded to know "What in thunder was the meaning of the rumpus?"

"Don't be uneasy," exclaimed the watchman; "we are here on duty, and wish you to keep yourselves comfortable. Shut up and go to sleep — *nobody will disturb you!*"

The Council of Ten walked up and down among the sleepers upon the floor, planting their sticks indiscriminately every where, and eliciting every sort of nocturnal [*sic*] sounds from the oblivious people around, as if sheep, calves, cats, dogs, &c. were breathing their innocent ejaculations of unhappiness.

"What do I *want?*" said the watchman.

"Yes, sir; what do you want?"

"I want you, my friend, to go to sleep; I am here on guard, and *nobody shall disturb you.*"

"We shan't be disturbed, eh?"

"You shan't."

"I'd like to know what you call disturbance, stranger. Can't you go to bed and be quiet?"

Another of the council found the pole with which the clerk measured wood, and picking out a fat pursey individual snoring away

upon the floor, straightway commenced "stirring him up" pricking him in the side.

"What's the matter *now*?" said the fat man, half rising upon his right elbow, while with his left hand he shaded his eyes and peered into the face of the disturber with earnest scrutiny.

"Nothing," said the mad wag. "I was only going to tell you not to disturb yourself. Go to sleep — I mean nothing."

"*Nothing!* you be d——d. Punch a man in the ribs with a long pole, and call that *nothing*. Why don't you go to bed?"

"I'm going — don't disturb yourself." After hearing this consoling advice, the fat man turned over on his side and again composed himself to sleep.

Silence now reigned for the space of some ten minutes, but it was not destined to be of long continuance; for one of the merry wights caught a glimpse of the breakfast bell quietly resting on the table. This was just the thing and *ting-a-ling! ting-a-ling!* soon resounded from one end of the boat to the other.

Everybody jumped from bed, anxious to be prepared early for the great festival of the Twenty-second; and no sooner were a sufficient number of berths vacated than the mischievous "Council of Ten" quietly took them for their own special purposes and were soon enjoying a freshening morning nap.⁴⁰

Churning up the muddy current past Donaldsonville, Plaquemine, Baton Rouge, and Bayou Sara, our steamboat makes a short stop at Angola to discharge freight and passengers for the Red River. The boat has stopped frequently at woodyards along the way, much time being lost during the process of wooding up. At Natchez, 269 miles above New Orleans, we pause for a short visit. Settled by the French in 1729, Natchez could boast almost 5,000 inhabitants when Beltrami arrived in 1823. Cotton was the chief export commodity and three-masted ocean-going vessels were regular visitors.

Natchez was divided into two parts — Natchez-under-the-

⁴⁰ *The Spirit of the Times*, XIV (April 27, 1844), 106. The writer is indebted to Franklin J. Meine of Chicago for the generous use of his file of this rare and valuable magazine.

Hill and Natchez-on-the-Hill. So vile a place was Natchez-under-the-Hill that many of the passengers were afraid to pass through it in order to visit the respectable section on the green-crested bluff. And well might they hesitate. When A. E. Silliman stepped down the gangplank he found Natchez a place "where the bowie-knife and pistol are the arbiters in all disputes, where a pack of cards is the only Bible, and the demand, 'Stranger, will you drink or fight?' was the first salutation."⁴¹ Another visitor described the town as a "land of fevers, alligators, niggers, and cotton bales . . . where to refuse grog before breakfast would degrade you below the brute creation . . . where bears, the size of young jack-asses, are fondled in lieu of pet dogs; and knives, the length of a barber's pole, usurp the place of toothpicks."⁴² Small wonder that Ingraham should find Natchez celebrated "in wretched rhyme and viler story."⁴³

Even the Sabbath did not arrest the bacchanalian revels of the highly-rouged females, sailors, Kentucky boatmen, Negroes, Negresses, and mulattoes encountered on the streets. H. B. Fearon had never before encountered such a degree of "open profligacy" in the United States. It was the traffic in human lives, however, that left an indelible impression on Fearon. Observing a great many Negroes, particularly females, aboard some flatboats, Fearon concluded that they were emigrants. Investigation proved that fourteen of the twenty-five flats were freighted with human beings for sale. According to Fearon "They had been collected in the several States by slave-dealers, and shipped from Kentucky for a market. They were dressed up to the

⁴¹ Silliman, *A Gallop Among American Scenery* . . . , 274

⁴² Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine, *Mike Fink: King of Mississippi Keelboatmen* (New York, 1933), 56.

⁴³ Ingraham, *The South West* . . . , II, 19.

best advantage, on the same principle that jockeys do horses upon sale."⁴⁴

Leaving pestilential Natchez, our steamboat proceeds to Vicksburg, 105 miles upstream. When James Stuart visited Vicksburg in the 1830's he discovered a "very thriving" city located on the "side of a hill."⁴⁵ Most travelers after 1835 listened with awe to the story of how Vicksburg drove the gamblers from its gates: five men were hanged in a mass execution before the hordes of blacklegs departed. We of today think of the heroic siege and defense of Vicksburg during the Civil War: it was around Vicksburg's famous Walnut Hills that the remorseless Ulysses S. Grant forged his ring of steel that split the Confederacy in twain and doomed the cause of the South.

Seventy miles above Vicksburg our steamboat passes the Louisiana-Arkansas state line. Brief stops are made at Greenville and Arkansas City. The exploits of Joliet and Marquette are recalled as the boat glides past the mouth of the Arkansas River. Lovely Helena, nestled at the foot of Crowleys Ridge, soon disappears from view. Eighty miles farther on, and picturesque Memphis is reached, situated on the fourth Chickasaw Bluff, just below the mouth of Wolf River.

Memphis is famous in song and story. Here, in historic times, De Soto first viewed the Mississippi. Here Fort Assumption was erected by the French two centuries ago to protect the country from the warlike Chickasaw. Here, in modern times, William C. Handy composed his "Beale Street Blues."

When Beltrami reached Memphis in 1823 he described it as an "inconsiderable village" displaying "nothing of the

⁴⁴ Fearon, *Sketches of America* . . . , 268.

⁴⁵ James Stuart, Esq., *Three Years in North America* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1833), II, 265.

ancient, nor the progress of the modern."⁴⁶ Despite the fact that inundations annually threatened to destroy her, Memphis had doubled in size since coming into the possession of the United States. Conclin's *New River Guide*, published in 1853, tells of the immense quantities of cotton carted into Memphis, the principal mart and shipping point for the interior. Fully 120,000 bales of cotton were shipped from Memphis annually. In the early fifties the town contained "six churches, an academy, two medical colleges, a number of private schools, a large number of stores, some of them doing an extensive business, an office of the Magnetic Telegraph, and a population of 12,000."⁴⁷

When Archibald Sutter visited Memphis in 1881 he formed a poor opinion of the wretched town with its 33,593 inhabitants. "Memphis does not look healthy," Sutter notes, "and it is the first town I have seen in America with a broken-down appearance. Many windows were cracked, the slates and shingles are half stripped off the houses, and the brick houses look green and mouldy like Stilton cheese."⁴⁸

Just as Vicksburg must always be remembered for its heroic siege, so Memphis must forever be associated with the worst marine disaster on inland waters:—1,450 lives were lost when the steamboat *Sultana* exploded seven miles above the town. Most of the victims were exchanged Union prisoners who were returning home at the close of the Civil War. Only the wreck of the *Titanic* exceeded this catastrophe in the number of lives lost.

Of steamboat disasters, Memphis had more than its share. Two incidents will suffice. In June of 1858, the steamboat *Pennsylvania* exploded her boiler while wooding

⁴⁶ Beltrami, *Pilgrimage to America* . . . , II, 503-504.

⁴⁷ Conclin's *New River Guide* . . . (Cincinnati, 1853), 94.

⁴⁸ Archibald Sutter, *American Notes 1881* (Edinburgh, 1882), 61.

up at Ship Island, sixty miles below Memphis. Among the three hundred human beings who perished in the fearful disaster was Henry Clemens, the younger brother of Samuel Clemens. Mark Twain fairly worshipped the ground on which Henry stood. To his sister Mollie the grief-stricken Clemens wrote:

Henry was asleep — was blown up — then fell back on the hot boilers, and I suppose that rubbish fell on him, for he is injured internally. He got into the water and swam to shore, and got into the flatboat with the other survivors. He had nothing on but his wet shirt, and he lay there burning up with a southern sun and freezing in the wind till the Kate Frisbee came along. His wounds were not dressed till he got to Memphis, 15 hours after the explosion. He was senseless and motionless for 12 hours after that. But may God bless Memphis, the noblest city on the face of the earth. She has done her duty by these poor afflicted creatures — especially Henry, for he has had five — aye, ten, fifteen, *twenty* times the care and attention that any one else has had. Dr. Peyton, the best physician in Memphis (he is exactly like the portraits of Webster,) sat by him for 36 hours. There are 32 scalded men in that room, and you would know Dr. Peyton better than I can describe him, if you could follow him around and hear each man murmur as he passes — “May the God of Heaven bless you, Doctor!” The ladies have done well, too. Our second Mate, a handsome, noble hearted young fellow, will die. Yesterday a beautiful girl of 15 stooped timidly down by his side and handed him a pretty bouquet. The poor suffering boy’s eyes kindled, his lips quivered out a gentle “God bless you, Miss,” and he burst into tears. He made them write her name on a card for him, that he might not forget it.⁴⁹

Simon Ferrall records a different scene in his book, *A Ramble of Six Thousand Miles Through the United States*, printed in 1832. The steamboat on which he was traveling had just reached the Memphis levee, and Ferrall and a number of fellow passengers were regaling themselves with a substantial breakfast. All at once a boiler exploded with

⁴⁹ Albert Bigelow Paine (ed.), *Mark Twain’s Letters* (2 vols., New York, 1917), I, 41.

terrific force, throwing passengers and crew in wild confusion. As Ferrall relates,

Between fifty and sixty persons were killed and wounded. The scene was the most horrifying that can be imagined — the dead were shattered to pieces, covering the decks with blood; and the dying suffered the most excruciating tortures, being scalded from head to foot. Many died within the hour; whilst others lingered until evening, shrieking in the most piteous manner. The persons assembled on shore displayed the most disgusting want of sympathy; and most of the gentlemen passengers took care to secure their luggage before rendering any assistance to the unfortunates.

The lone physician aboard attended with “unremitting care on all the wounded without distinction. A collection was made by the cabin passengers, for the surviving sufferers. The wretch who furnished oil on the occasion, hearing of the collection, had the conscience to make a charge of sixty dollars, when the quantity furnished could not possibly have amounted to a third of that sum.”⁵⁰

The callous indifference of the Americans to human suffering and loss of life is attested by innumerable instances. Fredrika Bremer, after whom Bremer County in Iowa is named, tells of a sturdy Westerner standing on the shore of the Mississippi when a steamboat exploded with terrific force, throwing mangled bodies in all directions. Thrilled by the sight the pioneer exclaimed: “By God! the Americans are a great people!” Such a remark, Miss Bremer relates, was a “common exclamation in the Great West on every occasion.”⁵¹

Above Memphis our steamboat winds its way through a fertile land nearly on a dead level with the river. Beautiful bluffs occasionally break the monotony of the scene. Archi-

⁵⁰ Ferrall, *A Ramble of Six Thousand Miles . . .*, 219-20.

⁵¹ Bremer, *Homes of the New World*, II, 110-111.

bald Sutter saw many ill-built, wooden farmhouses with untidy enclosures. Negroes were always in evidence. According to Sutter: "The children are half naked, and are to be envied; for clothes feel an abomination now. . . . Ice is essential to existence, and an umbrella and a fan are the only clothing necessary."⁵²

Just above Fulton, Tennessee, stands the towering bluff from which Fort Pillow dominated the Mississippi during the Civil War. Twenty-five miles farther on, the steamboat glides past Reelfoot Lake, formed by the New Madrid earthquake in 1811. Soon New Madrid itself appears, hidden away behind its mighty levee in mortal fear of floods. Hickman, Columbus, Belmont, Wickliffe; then the mouth of the Ohio comes in view. Our gallant steamboat has churned 975 miles upstream from New Orleans.

For some travelers the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi was the journey's end; for virtually all it meant the crossroads of their western wanderings. At Cairo immigrants who came down the Ohio could either continue down the Mississippi to New Orleans, ascend the Upper Mississippi or Missouri rivers, or cross over into Missouri. Few there were who elected to sojourn at Cairo. The reason is not difficult to find.

Charles Dickens is usually singled out as one of those many unhappy Englishmen who speculated to their sorrow in Cairo real estate. In his *American Notes* Dickens gives a description of Cairo that can scarcely be called flattering.

At length, upon the morning of the third day, we arrived at a spot so much more desolate than any we had yet beheld, that the forlornest places we had passed were, in comparison with it, full of interest. At the junction of the two rivers, on ground so flat and low and marshy, that at certain seasons of the year it is inundated to the house-tops, lies a breeding-place of fever, ague, and death;

⁵² Sutter, *American Notes* 1881, 61.

vaunted in England as a mine of Golden Hope, and speculated in, on the faith of monstrous representations, to many people's ruin. A dismal swamp, on which the half-built houses rot away; cleared here and there for the space of a few yards; and teeming, then, with rank, unwholesome vegetation, in whose baleful shade the wretched wanderers who are tempted hither droop, and die, and lay their bones; the hateful Mississippi circling and eddying before it, and turning off upon its southern course, a slimy monster hideous to behold; a hotbed of disease, an ugly sepulchre, a grave uncheered by any gleam of promise; a place without one single quality, in earth or air or water, to commend it; such is this dismal Cairo.⁵³

Even though this description may be prejudiced, two score travelers could be called upon to sustain the indictment. Edmund Flagg described the confluence of the Ohio with the Mississippi as the "dullest, dreariest, most uninviting region imaginable."⁵⁴ John Morris resented the few moments that his boat spent at "that classic mud-hole denominated Cairo."⁵⁵ J. L. Peyton was equally uncomplimentary in his book, *Over the Alleghanies*:

A word as to Cairo. It is a miserable — the most miserable place I ever saw . . . an abominable sink of filth, fever and disease . . . log huts, erected upon boat bottoms, were anchored or secured by iron cables to the trunks of trees, as a security against an unexpected rise in the river, and a trip towards the gulf. Surrounded by the stumps of trees which had been recently felled, and which were now corded on the river banks, ready for passing steamers, the appearance of these log cabins was solitary and forlorn to the last degree.⁵⁶

Leaving Cairo sitting in its marshy frog pond, we steam once more up the Mississippi toward St. Louis, distant 180

⁵³ Dickens, *American Notes* . . ., 88.

⁵⁴ [Edmund Flagg], *The Far West: or, a Tour Beyond the Mountains* . . . (2 vols., New York, 1838), I, 48.

⁵⁵ Morris, *Wanderings of a Vagabond*.

⁵⁶ Peyton, *Over the Alleghanies* . . ., 119.

miles. In his book, *Three Years in North America*, James Stuart described the fine French plantations and rich countryside. Imposing bluffs on the western shore delighted the eye, Cape Girardeau making a particularly neat appearance. Our steamboat experiences considerable difficulty ascending the swiftly flowing Mississippi at Hanging-Dog Island and Grand Tower, but she finally squirms through. At the mouth of the Kaskaskia River, ninety miles above the Ohio, we reach a fruitful region, known as the American Bottoms, which invariably won the praise of travelers. In 1838 the *Missouri Argus* described this area as one of the "most fertile bodies of land in the world." "This tract," our St. Louis editor asserts, ". . . commences near Alton, Illinois, and extends along the Mississippi river to the mouth of the Kaskaskia, with a width of from two to six miles. . . . No soil can exceed this in point of fertility, many parts of it having been under cultivation for more than a century without the least apparent deterioration."⁵⁷

Historic Ste. Genevieve is located a short distance above the mouth of the Kaskaskia River on the western shore. Founded in 1735, Ste. Genevieve claims to be the oldest white settlement west of the Mississippi in the Louisiana Purchase. Six hours more and our boat noses gently into the St. Louis levee.

St. Louis was already old when the first steamboat arrived in 1817. Founded as a trading post by Pierre Laclède Liguist in 1764, St. Louis is rich in historic lore. During the American Revolution it was St. Louis that beat off a superior force of British and their Indian allies. In 1804 her citizens witnessed the transfer of Upper Louisiana to the United States. In 1806 they welcomed Zebulon M. Pike upon his return from the Upper Mississippi; and they

⁵⁷ St. Louis *Missouri Argus*, May 24, 1838. Reprinted in *Missouri Historical Review*, XXVII (July, 1933), 382.

cheered Lewis and Clark when those two trail-blazers returned from their conquest of the Missouri. After 1840 steamboats lined the St. Louis levee for more than a mile — twenty-three steamboats were destroyed in the great St. Louis fire of 1849. From St. Louis went the freight and passengers which helped to settle the Upper Mississippi and Des Moines valleys.

Let us set out once more on an Upper Mississippi steamboat for Keokuk — 180 miles distant. The most outstanding feature of the entire journey is the confluence of the Missouri with the Mississippi, about sixteen miles above St. Louis. Those passengers who have wondered how the Lower Mississippi could be so dirty have their question answered when they see the Big Muddy oozing into the clear current of the Father of Waters.

Cabin passengers were appalled at the muddy liquid through which their boat glided. From the advent of De Soto to the opening of white settlement, or long before deforestation and soil cultivation were blamed, the muddy Mississippi had been the subject of frequent comment. Thus, Captain Philip Pittman, who published a thick volume on the Lower Mississippi in 1770, filled a half-pint tumbler with water and “found a sediment of two inches of slime.” Notwithstanding this, Pittman considered the water “extremely wholesome and well tasted, and very cool in the hottest seasons of the year.”⁵⁸

Later travelers left similar accounts. A Frenchman declared the waters of the Lower Mississippi were the healthiest in the world. Old settlers told Zadok Cramer the Mississippi contained “medicinal qualities” that “performed cures for most cutaneous diseases, operating on some as a powerful cathartick, and as a purifier of the blood” for

⁵⁸ Captain Philip Pittman, *The Present State of the European Settlements on the Mississippi* . . . (reprint of 1770 edition, Cleveland, 1906), 34-5.

many pioneers.⁵⁹ In 1829 Caleb Atwater observed that citizens of St. Louis preferred the "dirty water of the Mississippi" to spring water, using it "for drink and culinary purposes." This same eye-witness found old settlers "almost superstitious about this water, believing that while they use it, they will enjoy their health."⁶⁰ "We drank the muddy water of this river while we were upon it," Charles Dickens records. "It is considered wholesome by the natives, and is something more opaque than gruel. I have seen water like it at the Filter shops, but nowhere else."⁶¹

On a hot July day in the year 1840, Mrs. Eliza Steele boarded a steamboat bound downstream from St. Louis. The thermometer on board the boat stood at 96° and Mrs. Steele and the other occupants of the ladies' cabin were hard put to keep comfortable. In her book, *A Summer Journey in the West*, Mrs. Steele records:

As thirsty as I was, I hesitated to drink the thick muddy water, for while standing in our tumblers, a sediment is precipitated of half an inch. Oh how I longed for a draught of cool spring water, or a lump of Rockland lake ice! While drinking, one of the ladies advanced for the same purpose. "Dear me! what insipid water!" she said, "it has been standing too long. I like it right thick." I looked at her in surprise. "Do you prefer it muddy to clear?" I asked. "Certainly I do," she replied, "I like the sweet clayey taste, and when it settles it is insipid. Here Juno!" calling to the black chambermaid who was busy ironing, "get me some water fresh out of the river, with the true Mississippi relish."⁶²

When Mark Twain returned to the Mississippi after an

⁵⁹ [Zadok Cramer], *The Navigator: Containing Directions for Navigating the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers . . .* (7th ed., Pittsburgh, 1811), 149.

⁶⁰ Caleb Atwater, *Remarks Made on a Tour to Prairie du Chien; Thence to Washington City in 1829* (Columbus, Ohio, 1831), 44.

⁶¹ Dickens, *American Notes . . .*, 89.

⁶² Mrs. [Eliza R.] Steele, *A Summer Journey in the West* (New York, 1841), 210-11.

absence of twenty years he found at least one thing had not changed — the water's mulatto complexion. Since Twain undoubtedly heard many tall tales about the muddy Mississippi, it is not surprising that he should tell his own story. According to Twain:

It comes out of the turbulent, bank-caving Missouri, and every tumblerful of it holds nearly an acre of land in solution. I got this fact from the bishop of the diocese. If you will let your glass stand half an hour, you can separate the land from the water as easy as Genesis; and then you will find them both good: the one good to eat, the other good to drink. The land is very nourishing, the water is thoroughly wholesome. The one appeases hunger; the other, thirst. But the natives do not take them separately, but together, as nature mixed them. When they find an inch of mud in the bottom of a glass, they stir it up, and then take the draught as they would gruel. It is difficult for a stranger to get use to this batter, but once used to it he will prefer it to water. This is really the case. It is good for steamboating, and good to drink; but it is worthless for all other purposes, except baptizing.⁶³

Once above the mouth of the Missouri, steamboat passengers had clearer water but invariably poorer steamboats, at least before 1850. Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Cunynghame, who wrote a book entitled, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, was annoyed at accommodations aboard the *Lucy Bertram*, which plied between St. Louis and Keokuk. Cunynghame found the *Lucy Bertram* staterooms had no basins or other washing apparatus. Passengers were supposed to use a common washroom near the paddle box fitted up with a wooden scullery sink. Three small tin basins were placed near this trough and two jack-towels stretched on rollers hung nearby.

Here, all the passengers, amounting to fifty or more, the officers of the ship, the black stewards and waiters, washed themselves *slightly*, and had the choice of either of the two towels. Moreover,

⁶³ Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 252.

through the benevolent provision of the owners of the "Lucy Bertram," a hair-brush and comb, and one tooth-brush also, were not omitted, and were daily in frequent requisition by both passengers and crew on board this vessel, and during the morning were kindly passed from hand to hand. Nor did I escape the glances of offended democracy for the aristocratic preference of my own towel, sponge, and brushes.⁶⁴

It should be pointed out that the furnishings of the *Lucy Bertram* were by no means the worst on the Upper Mississippi. As for the public toothbrush attached to a brass chain above the sink, these were not infrequently seen in hotels and aboard steamboats throughout the West.

Churning boldly up the Mississippi, our steamboat passes Clarksville, Louisiana, Hannibal, and Quincy, arriving at Keokuk in time to catch a packet up the Des Moines River. We are particularly glad not to stay over in Keokuk; at least the Keokuk that Charles Augustus Murray visited in 1835. In his book, *Travels in North America*, Murray writes:

This village of Keokuk is the lowest and most blackguard place that I have yet visited: its population is composed chiefly of the watermen who assist in loading and unloading the keel-boats, and in towing them up when the rapids are too strong for the steam-engines. They are a coarse and ferocious caricature of the London bargemen, and their chief occupation seems to consist in drinking, fighting, and gambling.⁶⁵

Unhappily for Keokuk, Murray wrote this account before he had visited Natchez, otherwise he probably would not have bothered to comment on the rough characters he encountered in Keokuk.

Steamboating on the Des Moines River had begun as

⁶⁴ Lieut.-Col. Arthur Cunynhame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic* (London, 1851), 139-40.

⁶⁵ Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America during the Years 1834, 1835, & 1836 . . .* (2 vols., London, 1839), II, 96.

early as 1837 when the steamboat *Science*, commanded by S. B. Clarke, stemmed the current as far as Keosauqua. She carried a cargo of flour, meal, pork, groceries, and whisky. Six years later the *Agatha* arrived at present day Des Moines with a cargo of troops and military supplies. Prior to the Civil War more than two score craft were engaged in navigating the tortuous bends of the winding Des Moines. The names of such boats as the *Caleb Cope*, the *Add Hine*, the *De Moine Belle*, the *Charley Rodgers*, the *Flora Temple*, the *Maid of Iowa*, and the *Little Morgan* are writ large in the history of transportation in the Des Moines Valley. Undoubtedly the greatest feat was the ascent of the *Charley Rodgers* to Fort Dodge in 1859.⁶⁶ During the fifties, when our own phantom boat docks at the Port of Des Moines, high hopes were still held for regular steamboat navigation between Keokuk and the capital of Iowa.

And so we take leave of our Mississippi River which washes the eastern border of Iowa for 250 miles. As we glance back over the long list of eye-witnesses who have contributed their part toward the painting of this picture, we can be sure that all of them would subscribe to the words of C. D. Arfwedson, a Swede who visited the United States during the 1830's. Arfwedson devoted much space in his two-volume book to the Father of Waters.

I was repeatedly told in America that none can form a correct idea of the Mississippi, who has only visited it once. I doubted the truth of this assertion, until I had an opportunity of personally surveying this immense river. A few weeks' acquaintance with it, soon convinced me that its appearance in spring, when the banks overflow, is very different from what it is in autumn. Trees, which in summer and autumn raise their aged heads far above the surface of the water, are hardly visible during the rest of the year, and

⁶⁶ See William J. Petersen, *Iowa, The Rivers of Her Valleys* (Iowa City, 1941), Chap. 15.

resemble immense forests growing at the bottom of an extensive lake. One is even led to believe that it requires a man's life time to examine and to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of this river. Individuals who inhabit its shores, are often struck with amazement at the sudden changes produced in a single night; in the course of the Mississippi, by its increased width and extraordinary ravages; how then is it possible for a traveller who only sees it once, to come to any correct conclusion? He may be astonished at its length — judge by the depth of tributary streams, of its immense mass of water — tremble at the violence of the waves — contemplate with surprise the turbid water which follows him, when land is out of sight — still he knows nothing of the Mississippi, till the evening of a long life, commenced, passed, and concluded on its shores.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ *Niles' Weekly Register*, XLVIII (June 6, 1835), 241.