

Crashing Through - in 1962

Since the close of World War II the United States Coast Guard has attempted to keep the Illinois River, and the Mississippi between St. Louis and Cairo, open during the long winter months. Each spring, however, one of its ice breakers from the Illinois is withdrawn to speed up the opening of navigation on the Upper Mississippi. In recent years this assignment has been drawn by the United States Coast Guard Cutter *Fern*, a sturdy 900-horsepower craft that had been built at Blair, Nebraska, for buoy-tending work.

In the spring of 1962 two members of the *Des Moines Register* staff, James F. Wilt and Del Borer, boarded the *Fern* at Keokuk for a bone-chilling twenty-five hour trip between the Gate City of Iowa, and Burlington. The *Fern* had a heavy Amsterdam plow attached to her bow which she pushed forward on the ice, breaking it up and creating a channel through which the impatient towboat captains could steer their tow.

The crew of the *Fern* had been hard at work on the Illinois River all winter and were looking forward with keen anticipation to returning to their home port of Dubuque where a number of them resided. But first they must crash through the icy

barrier that King Winter had fastened upon the upper Mississippi. Once in Dubuque, the Amsterdam plow would be removed and the *Fern* made ready for her regular summer work of tending buoys and other aids to navigation between Dubuque and Minneapolis.

It took the *Fern* twenty-five grueling hours to make the forty miles from Keokuk to Burlington, a distance the average large towboat could make in one-fifth the time. Eight, ten, and even fifteen foot ice still bracketed the Mississippi. When twelve and fifteen foot ice was encountered, the *Fern* could only break ice the distance of her own length and would then have to back up for another onslaught. The continual crashing of the Amsterdam plow into the ice jarred everyone aboard the sturdy craft and made sleep virtually impossible. It was with no little relief, perhaps, that the tired newsmen aboard bade Captain J. C. Henthorn adieu at Burlington, and left the *Fern* to continue her battle up the ice-locked Father of Waters.

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