

Up the Missouri with Atkinson

The levee at St. Louis bustled with activity on the morning of September 17, 1824. Four companies of the First United States Infantry commanded by Major Stephen Watts Kearny were preparing to leave on the keelboats *Muskrat*, *Mink*, *Racoon*, and *Beaver*. They formed a part of the expedition which Brigadier-General Henry Atkinson was leading to the uppermost reaches of the Missouri River to make treaties with the various Indian tribes and to open the entire country for the American fur trade. Already the leading fur center of the United States, St. Louis was deeply interested in the success of the expedition and a motley gathering of fur traders, trappers, and voyageurs lined the shore.

The keelboats, invented by General Atkinson himself, were the subject of "many remarks and observations" since they constituted an entirely new method of ascending the Missouri without the assistance of oars. According to a contemporary account: "The machinery consists of a shaft, thrown across the centre of the boat, with a water wheel at each end — a five feet cog wheel in the centre of the shaft, and put in motion by another cog wheel, three feet four inches, resting on an

iron shaft, which supports a fly wheel at one end, of eight feet in diameter. The fly and small cog wheel are moved by a crank, projecting from an arm of the fly wheel, with two pitmans, which are impelled by soldiers, seated on from eight to ten benches, four abreast, with a succession of cross bars before each bench, contained in a frame that moves on slides, with a three foot stroke of the crank. The men are comfortably seated under an awning, sheltered from the sun and rain — the labor much lighter than rowing with a common oar, and the boats are propelled with a velocity sufficient to stem the most rapid current of the Missouri."

Finally all was in readiness and the last man scrambled aboard. Major Kearny barked out a sharp command and the curious craft arched gracefully out into the current and moved slowly up the Mississippi. Two miles below the mouth of the Missouri River the expedition halted for the night having gone sixteen miles.

At daybreak the bugle sounded. Shortly after sunrise the little fleet was nosing its way into the muddy Missouri and a few hours later the boats reached Bellefontaine. There some of the freight of the heavily laden boats was removed and "considerable Pork, whiskey, Company baggage, &c." was put aboard. Sixty recruits were also distributed among the crews of the four boats.

St. Charles was reached the following afternoon

and Brigadier-General Henry Atkinson came down to the levee with Senator Thomas H. Benton of Missouri to give Major Kearny final instructions. Some difficulties had already been experienced with the boats. It had been found necessary to rearrange the buckets of the *Beaver* since they dipped too deeply into the water. At St. Charles there was further delay on account of the *Beaver*, and the constant complaints of his officers led Kearny to take the head carpenter along for a few days.

As they plied their way up the Missouri, first one boat was in the lead and then another. Races were frequent. On one occasion the *Beaver* and *Muskrat* collided breaking all the buckets of one wheel of the former. "They were replaced in 40 minutes, after which there was a long and well contested race between the *Beaver* & the *Muskrat* — as well as between the *Raccoon* & the *Muskrat*."

Trouble with the machinery, the presence of snags, sawyers, and sandbars together with the ever-changing channel of the winding Missouri, made progress exceedingly slow. Moreover, wind and adverse weather conditions added to the other hazards of navigation. On October 18th they churned past the mouth of the Nodaway River and three days later the Nemaha. The Tarkio was seen on October 22nd and on the following evening they tied up for the night on a small willow bar about ten miles above the Nishnabotna. A solemn

note pervaded the camp that day for at dinner "Thomas of the Recruits attached to the *Mink* was found Dead." He was "buried with the honors of War."

The expedition was at last approaching the northern boundary of Missouri. A brisk wind prevented the boats from advancing more than a half mile on October 25th. During the following morning, however, the expedition unknowingly passed the point that is now on the southern boundary of Iowa. Snow, swiftly moving ice, and a stiff wind added to the difficulties of navigation. A lost hunter was discovered "starving and worn out." After passing Weeping Water Creek and the mouth of the Platte River they came to "*Pilchers* Trading house" where Kearny observed many "Ottoes."

An accident to one of the keelboats usually held up all the others. According to Kearny's journal, the "*Mink* having for the last week or two, kept so far in the Rear, we, after breakfast sent her 24 men, 8 from each of the other boats, & sent as many of hers to them in order to ascertain whether her slow proceeding was caused from the laziness of her crew, or the Boats fault." Early in the afternoon "*Wells* of Compy B. fell overboard from the *Muskrat* (where he had been sent) & was immediately drowned."

The presence of many military officers at "*Robideaus* Trading house" was an indication that the voyagers were nearing their destination. About

sunset they passed the mouth of the Boyer River and made their first camp on Iowa soil. Daybreak, and the four boats were again on their way. Manuel Lisa's old trading post and the Engineers Cantonment were noted that morning and at one o'clock in the afternoon of November 2, 1824, the *Racoon*, *Beaver*, and *Muskrat* reached Council Bluff. The *Mink* came up a few hours later, having been retarded when her rudder was lost.

It had taken twenty-six days to reach the present site of Kansas City and forty-seven days to make the entire journey of almost seven hundred miles from St. Louis to Council Bluff. Meanwhile one man had died, another had drowned, and a third had cut his throat, not to mention the recruit who had been put in jail at Booneville for stealing cabbages. Desertions were frequent, especially among the volunteers, but many were captured and brought back.

Winter quarters were established at Council Bluff and for six months the drudgery of military life at a frontier post held little sparkle for either officers or men. On May 16, 1825, after many delays, Kearny left Council Bluff with the First United States Infantry aboard the *Beaver*, *Otter*, and *Muskrat*. The Sixth Infantry was assigned to the *Elk*, *Buffaloe*, *White Bear*, and *Racoon*. General Atkinson, Indian Agent Benjamin O'Fallon, and five other commissioners were aboard the *Mink*. Night found the expedition encamped on

the Iowa side of the river about eleven miles above Council Bluff.

Strong currents and hard winds retarded the speed of the flotilla as it proceeded upstream past Soldier River. On May 19th, Kearny jotted down the following: "Put off at daybreak, crossed the River and overtook the other Boats — met with much strong water, & drift wood — stopt on the left bank, for breakfast — the *Otter* after having crossed swung & instead of the 2nd boat in advance, became the last — on her next attempt she struck, so hard against the bank, as to move for four inches, the shaft, & to shake her machinery — after being repaired, she started about 12 & after doubling a difficult point, the men being on the cordell, her bridle broke, & her mast snapt in two, near the deck; the Boats of the 6th. Infy. with the Genl. [Atkinson] had left us, while we were repairing the *Otters* machinery — wrote to the Genl. informing him, of our accident, & the carpenters went into the woods cut down a cotton tree, & commenced a new mast."

Kearny's difficulties were innumerable. Lieutenant William L. Harris of the First Infantry, "having been missing since yesterday" was counted as lost in the woods and two hunters were sent in pursuit of him. The *Muskrat* was left behind with directions to fire her swivel occasionally in the hope of attracting his attention.

As they proceeded upstream the stage of the

river became lower and the men found it much easier to navigate. At noon some of the parties that had been sent in search of Lieutenant Harris returned without finding a trace of him. Night was spent near the "old *Maha* village" not far from Blackbird Hill named in honor of the celebrated Omaha chief buried on the summit. Five good hunters were sent in search of the missing lieutenant on May 26th with instructions to return to the place where he left the boat and to "use all possible endeavors to find him." An early start, coupled with a strong, fair wind advanced the expedition twenty miles and it halted for the night on the Iowa bank two miles above "*Floyds Bluffs, & River.*" As Kearny and his men were about to retire, they "were hailed from the opposite shore, sent a small boat over, & found *Lieut. Harris* nearly worn out."

The following day they ran up to the mouth of the Big Sioux River and remained there for the rest of the day awaiting General Atkinson's arrival with the Sixth Infantry. Strong "head winds & currants" rendered navigation so difficult that they made but one mile on May 28th. At daybreak, however, they departed with a fair wind and paddled twenty-two miles, halting at dark near the "*Iowa River*" (Aowa Creek) near Ponca, Nebraska.

By that time the expedition was well out of the Iowa country. Advancing steadily past the White

Stone River, Chalk Bluff, and Calumet Bluffs, the troops arrived at the "*Puncah Village*" at the mouth of "*White Paint Creek*" on June 8th, where they held a council and made a treaty. On up the Missouri River the strange fleet proceeded. Wherever Atkinson found an Indian village he stopped and made a treaty. By August 24th, the expedition had gone one hundred and twenty miles above the Yellowstone River.

Failing to meet either the Blackfoot or Assiniboine nations they turned back, "each Boats crew, giving 3 hearty cheers." At the mouth of the Yellowstone, General William Ashley and his party of twenty-two traders joined them with several boatloads of pelts which they had brought across the Rocky Mountains. It was August 27, 1825, when the combined parties set out from the Yellowstone.

Wild game was abundant throughout the journey up and down the Missouri. One day they encountered a herd of elk and killed about a dozen. On another occasion "at Sundown a Buffaloe Bull that had been chased from the hills entered our camp & was killed, directly alongside, one of our Boats." Kearny noted in his journal the presence of deer, buffalo, elk, bear, big horn sheep, ducks, turkeys, pigeons, and other wild animal life. On one day as they were approaching the Big Sioux seven black bears were seen and five of them shot. Game, together with fish, formed a hearty diet for

bronzed soldiers whose hands had become calloused and whose muscles were as hard as rope. It was a strenuous life indeed.

After encountering many snags in the strong current of the Missouri, one of which wrecked the *Muskrat* almost beyond repair, Kearny nosed his fleet onto the Iowa shore at the mouth of the Big Sioux. Some passing boats had supplied them with newspapers and the crew of the keelboat *Elk* brought in seven elk that they had shot. The juicy venison must have been doubly appreciated as the men read or listened to the news of the world from which they had been absent a year, lacking only two days.

The following morning, on September 16, 1825, they continued down the Missouri past the old Omaha village and Blackbird Hill and stopped at sundown on a high sand bar on the Iowa side. Throughout the day Kearny saw geese, ducks, and turkeys in abundance.

On September 19, 1825, the expedition reached Council Bluff, one hundred and twenty-five days after they had departed. According to Kearny they had "traveled above 2700 miles — made several stops — Treated with all the Indians, on that part of the River — met with no serious accident, excepting that of the *Muskrat*, which was shortly repaired — & all returned in good health — no lives having been lost."

A few days after their arrival, Major Kearny

was ordered to remain at Council Bluff awaiting directions from the government. The cantonment of Fort Atkinson not being large enough for all the troops of the First Infantry, Kearny determined to "build huts for wintering Quarters near the *Lime Kiln*" and "accordingly started at half past 3 P. M. & reached the Kiln, at 5." There he camped "on a handsome table Land, on the Right bank about 8 miles, (by water) below *Fort Atkinson*" and "built *Can.* Barbour, in less than 4 weeks, spacious & comfortable Quarters Store Houses &c for the 4 Companies, rafting all our Logs across the Missouri, & sawing the Plank by hand."

On May 1, 1826, Major Kearny received an order to return down the Missouri to Bellefontaine with his command. At eight o'clock the following morning he departed in the "*Elk, White Bear & Muskrat* Transport Boats." The Missouri was a mad, swirling torrent and rough weather made navigation extremely dangerous. The "wind blowing strong from the South & the Waves running tolerable high," the *Elk* came "very near being lost" near Lisa's post when she sprang a leak and for a few moments leaned to the starboard so much as to "have the running board, considerable under water & shipping some of it."

High water, hard winds, and various mishaps continued to delay the detachment as they passed the Nishnabotna. On May 5th the "*White Bear*" fell into an Eddy which turned her around like a

top, her larboard side, bent over, she shipped considerable water, & was in much danger of being lost." One of the men was "bitten by a *Pilot Snake* & several of these, & the *Rattle Snakes*, were discovered & killed."

Despite such incidents, however, they continued down the Missouri much more rapidly than they had ascended more than a year and a half before. At dawn on May 10, 1826, they set out on the last stage of the epochal journey, passed St. Charles, and arrived at Bellefontaine at seven o'clock the same morning. Kearny found that cantonment in a "very decayed state" but, being more comfortable than tents, moved into it. There he remained until July 10th, when he moved down the Mississippi to a point four miles below Carondelet and began the erection of Jefferson Barracks.

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