

## Low Water in 1864

The summer of 1864 was a memorable one in Mississippi River history. It was the year of low water on the mighty Father of Waters, of water so low it set a record that remained a measuring rod by which all future high and low water stages were recorded. For fully a century, or up to the great flood of 1965, the stage of the Mississippi has been measured from the low water days of 1864.

The Mississippi at flood time has been responsible for the destruction of both life and property. Low water itself could be equally costly to the pioneer economy. Freight and passenger rates soared as the level of the river declined, and tariff frequently doubled. Merchants and grain dealers suffered from the irregularity of river traffic by their inability to either ship out or receive goods. Iowa lumber mills and planing factories were forced to shut down when log rafts from the Northern pine lands were unable to navigate the great river. This timber was badly needed to provide building material for the rapidly growing states of the Upper Mississippi Valley.

The low water of 1864 did not last a few weeks or months; it continued to plague Iowans through



much of the season of navigation. Early in May, editors began chronicling the low stage of the river. On June 3, 1864, the *Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye* declared:

The river is still on the "decline," with a "downward" tendency. It is said that but little snow fell last winter in the Northern mountains, and that vegetation in Northern Minnesota is suffering from long and continued drought; hence we need not look for much of a "June rise."

A fortnight later, on June 20, 1864, the *Muscatine Daily Journal* noted the plight of shippers under the caption — HOW ARE THE MIGHTY FALLEN:

Our great river is shrinking in its bed and moves sluggishly along as if aware that its glory has departed. It is seldom as low as at present, and never before at this season of the year. Boats of the smaller class only can run with safety and regularity. Hastings is now the head of navigation for the Northern Line packets. A formidable sand bar between that point and St. Paul permits only the smallest boats to cross.

Since the stage of the water between St. Louis and St. Paul was a matter of genuine concern to every Iowa river town, it is not surprising that editors would comment almost daily upon the prospects of steamboat navigation. On April 28, 1864, the *Dubuque Daily Times* declared:

Shipping commenced this spring on a low-water tariff of freights; on the prospect of a rise, a high-water tariff was adopted for a season; but the high water did not come, and



there seems no probability of its coming; consequently it has been found necessary to raise the tariff — for of course it is universally understood that this matter works by contraries — the lower the water the higher the tariff.

The first section of the Upper Mississippi, which was closed by low water, was the stretch from the head of Lake Pepin to St. Paul. The editor of the *Dubuque Daily Times* of May 7 revealed that the river above Lake Pepin was quite low and that the steamboat *Itasca* did not plan to make another trip to St. Paul unless a rise occurred. At the same time, he noted the Mississippi between Dubuque and Lake Pepin still had a good navigable stage but was falling slowly.

In contrast, the *St. Paul Press* recorded only three feet of water on the bars between St. Paul and Prescott, at the mouth of the St. Croix. Day by day reports filtered south of the difficulty in navigating this stretch of the river. The steamboat *Milwaukee* had "hard scraping" over the bars on her down stream trip. The *Itasca* reported only thirty inches most of the way above Lake Pepin, forcing steamboats to "crawl" over bars. On May 18 the steamboat *Keokuk* was unable to go farther than Hastings. Two days later it was said that larger boats "cannot possibly make St. Paul more than three or four days longer." Meanwhile, apprehension grew as water on the Rapids was reported "quite shallow" with a mere eight feet in the channel between St. Louis and Keokuk.



On May 24 the *Dubuque Daily Times* noted that the regular packets could go no farther than Hastings. Two days later the *Key City* brought word that the *Northern Belle* and the *Sucker State* were fast aground on Kaposia bar. By May 28 Dubuquers read that passengers and freight, and the mails were being transferred to smaller boats to complete the journey between Hastings and St. Paul.

Meanwhile, all along the Mississippi from Dubuque to Keokuk and beyond, the river continued to decline, usually at the rate of a couple of inches per day. On June 4 the *Daily Times* reported the river falling at every point between St. Paul and the Gulf. Eleven days later, on June 15, the discouraged editor told his readers that the Mississippi was falling "from the north pole to the Gulf of Mexico."

By mid-June the two major packet companies on the Upper Mississippi had established a series of short runs for their steamboats. The largest boats ran between St. Louis and Keokuk, which still enjoyed the best stage of water. At Keokuk (but more often at Montrose) freight and passengers were transferred to medium-sized boats which proceeded upstream as far as they could navigate. Thus, on June 8, the *Canada* arrived at Dubuque with freight which had accumulated at Montrose from the larger boats. On her trip upstream the *Canada* found there was only thirty-two inches of



water on the Lower Rapids and a scant four feet on the bars between the rapids. By June 21 the water on the Upper Rapids was so low that boats running between Dubuque and Davenport had to stop at Port Byron, Illinois, from whence passengers and freight were conveyed on light draft boats to Davenport.

The plight of the river towns was not limited to uncertain and precarious steamboat navigation in 1864. As the water continued to drop, huge sandbars formed along the levees — sandbars so large that some river towns were fearful of becoming inland cities. On July 6, 1864, the editor of the *Dubuque Daily Times* wailed:

If you want to see a discouraging sight go down to the levee and look at the long line of bar which stretches itself above the water from Seventh street nearly to the elevator, not more than eighty feet from the shore. Something will have to be done with it soon, or Dubuque will be an inland city.

A similar view was expressed by the *Muscatine Daily Journal* in commenting on "OUR STEAMBOAT LANDING" on June 27, 1864:

There is some danger of our city becoming an inland point. The extension of the steamboat and ferry levees and the washings from Mad and Pappoose creeks have turned the channel towards the opposite side of the river so far that it now is becoming quite difficult for steamboats to reach the landing in low water. Formerly there was a deep channel close to this shore. . . . During the late freshet, an immense quantity of earth was carried out into the river



at this point, together with about 100 feet of the rip-rap wall which our present city authorities foolishly supposed would prevent a disaster of this kind.

There is only one remedy for this evil, and that is the construction of a dyke on the opposite side of the river to throw the current this side. It is high time some action were taken in this matter.

The failure of vast fleets of logs and lumber to arrive from the North dealt a heavy blow to the economy of Iowa river towns. On July 16, 1864, the *Daily Davenport Democrat* quoted the *Dubuque Herald* as follows:

Two fleets of sawed lumber, containing 900,000 feet, arrived yesterday from Wausau, Wis., and have been three months and four days on the way since leaving the mill. They are the property of Hon. W. D. McIndoe, member of Congress from that District. Twenty-eight dollars per 1,000 was offered here as it lay in the water by our dealers, which was refused, thirty-one dollars having been promised in St. Louis.

Two weeks later, on August 2, 1864, the *Dubuque Daily Times* chronicled the arrival of a raft containing 500,000 feet of lumber at Eagle Point. The arrival of huge rafts, the editor pointed out, was an "every day occurrence" in 1863. "Not so now," he concluded. "Low water causes such an affair to be a matter of congratulation."

Some idea of the low stage of water may be gleaned from the fact that in mid-August the *Dubuque Times* declared the Mississippi was 20' 9" below the high water mark of 1859 and a "foot



or two lower than it has ever been known to be before." The *Daily Democrat* stated the "oldest inhabitants" in Davenport could not remember a year when the Mississippi was so low.

During this period, many boats were grounded for varying lengths of time. The steamboat *Pembina* was aground in the mud for nearly three weeks about ten miles north of Dubuque. On September 1, 1864, the Burlington editor wrote:

The river continues to fall, and the gray sandbars are everywhere protruding their sandy backs above the surface of the water. We are informed by old river men that the Mississippi is lower now than it has been before for years. Still the packets continue their trips and manage to get along by maintaining a vigilant lookout for the channel and avoiding the sandbars. The Dubuque *Herald* says the up-river papers report that the boats have frequently to blow their whistles to drive the cattle out of the channel! and adds further, that the oldest inhabitant, always reliable, does not remember a season when the water was so low.

The month of July began a crucial period as steamboat companies made every effort to respond to demands of shippers. The *Dubuque Daily Times* carried the following item on July 6:

Superintendent Wellington has perfected arrangements which will enable the Northwestern Packet Company to send passengers and freight through to LaCrosse and St. Paul with little or no delay. The Milwaukee, War Eagle and Itasca, which compose the line from here to LaCrosse, will connect there with the small boats, Flora, Mollie Mohler, Young Eagle, Enterprise, G. H. Gray, Mrs. Part-



ington, Pearl and Ocean Wave—these last craft being numerous enough to ensure connection in spite of bars. The increased expense of low water steamboating makes an advance in freight and passenger rates necessary, and a new tariff will go into operation next week.

On July 7, 1864, the same paper noted that the *Savanna* had made her last trip down because of low water. According to her captain, the *Savanna* lost \$500 on the trip. Two days later the *Daily Times* gave evidence of continued shuffling of steamboat schedules.

A new arrangement went into operation between Davenport and Montrose day before yesterday, the Muscatine and Canada having agreed to run between those points. The Muscatine leaves Davenport on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and the Canada on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. A train connects with these boats at Montrose for St. Louis, and the time through to that city will be 48 hours. The new steamer Burlington is completed, and only awaiting a rise of water to take her place in the Northern line.

The size of some representative steamboats on the Upper Mississippi during these low water days may be gleaned from their tonnage as registered by the United States Steamboat Inspectors and W. M. Lytle's *Merchant Steam Vessels of the United States*—the latter indicated by an asterisk.

| <i>Boat</i> | <i>Tons</i> | <i>Boat</i> | <i>Tons</i> | <i>Boat</i>     | <i>Tons</i> |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|
| War Eagle   | 674         | Keokuk      | 301         | *Jennie Whipple | 138         |
| Milwaukee   | 646         | Muscatine   | 299         | Mollie Mohler   | 135         |
| Itasca      | 540         | Pembina     | 273         | Enterprise      | 130         |
| Key City    | 531         | Flora       | 249         | Charles Cheever | 117         |



|                 |     |             |     |              |     |
|-----------------|-----|-------------|-----|--------------|-----|
| Sucker State    | 524 | *Savanna    | 243 | *Ingomar     | 110 |
| Northern Belle  | 498 | *Ocean Wave | 235 | G. H. Gray   | 83  |
| *Jeanie Deans   | 485 | Damsel      | 211 | *Lansing     | 83  |
| *Northern Light | 414 | New Boston  | 205 | *Nevada      | 75  |
| Canada          | 400 | Keithsburg  | 186 | *Eagle       | 70  |
| *Burlington     | 359 | *Emma Boyd  | 172 | Pearl        | 57  |
| Davenport       | 341 |             |     | *Young Eagle | 28  |

Throughout the summer, the *Keokuk Daily Gate City* contained reports from distressed river towns upstream. On May 25, 1864, the *Gate City* carried a dispatch from the *Dubuque Herald* stating that steamboats "have stopped running to St. Paul because they can't get there unless on wheels." In July it reported that the *Emma Boyd* found the rocks "too near the surface" on the Lower Rapids and was forced to return to Keokuk. The circus boat *Ingomar* stuck fast on the Rapids until the *Nevada* came to her rescue and pulled her off. By then the *Ingomar* was so late the circus troupe missed their afternoon performance at Warsaw. Even the light draft ferries at Keokuk and below had difficulty crossing the Mississippi.

Dispatches from various St. Louis dailies were constantly quoted in the *Keokuk Daily Gate City*. These usually carried the stage of the river at various points as far north as St. Paul and noted the boats in the trade. Truly, steamboating was extremely difficult in 1864 and succeeding generations have been reminded of this fact through a century of time as the United States Army Engineers refer to 1864 as the low water year in Upper Mississippi history.