

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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## Voyages of the Black Hawk

The winding Cedar River, with its beautifully wooded bluffs, its valley walls of towering limestone, and its constantly shifting sand-bars was once the scene of a vigorous river traffic. Weekly newspapers of Cedar Rapids, Vinton, and Waterloo, once contained lengthy articles under the heading of "Navigation" in which the editors made casual comments on the weather, the condition of the river, and many other facts and figures relating to the arrival of steamers and the kind and amount of their cargoes. Once the melodious whistle of the steamboat startled the denizens of the timber and brought the settlers to their cabin doors to catch a glimpse of a trim little steamer rounding a bend of the river on a clear summer morning. During the season of high water in the fall of 1858 and the summer of 1859, the steamboat *Export*, later christened the *Black Hawk*, plied the upper Cedar River regularly between Cedar



Rapids and Waterloo, carrying both freight and passengers.

In the decade before the Civil War, when the flood of immigration to Iowa was at its height, the problem of transportation became unusually prominent. Plank roads were built, railroads were projected everywhere, and many extravagant inducements were offered to develop the country. Nor were the inland waterways neglected. Development of river traffic was expected to be a boon to the farmers in marketing their produce. Several of the rivers of eastern Iowa were considered navigable and obstructions such as bridges and dams were prohibited by law.

For a number of years a steamboat operating on the Cedar River as far north as Cedar Rapids had been so successful financially that steamboat traffic on the upper portion of the river was proposed. By transshipping at the dam in Cedar Rapids and by working in conjunction with the Chicago, Iowa and Nebraska Railroad, which was then nearing Cedar Rapids, it was thought that goods could be distributed to north and northwest Iowa at a much cheaper price than if hauled overland.

Early in 1858, T. G. Isherwood set to work to build a steamboat at Cedar Rapids for Freeman Smith. Most of the lumber was sawed from logs cut in Beaver Park. This boat, originally called the *Valley Queen*, but later named the *Export*, was one hundred and twenty-five feet in length, had a beam of nine-



teen feet, and a hold two and one-half feet deep. The engine, equipped with a boiler twelve feet long containing twenty-four flues, two nine-inch cylinders, and with a stroke of three feet, developed sixty horse-power. The craft was propelled by a huge stern wheel twelve feet in diameter.

While the *Export* was being built many people thought that it would never be able to pass under the low bridge at Vinton. Notice was served on the Vinton Bridge Company "requiring that corporation either to construct a suitable draw or abate the bridge", a demand which was entirely proper since the legislature had declared the river to be navigable as far up as Waterloo.

The *Export* made a trial trip on September 30, 1858, with a number of local citizens on board who were much pleased with her performance. On the following day, laden with sixty tons of freight, she set out on her maiden voyage to Waterloo. At noon on October 5, 1858, the little boat steamed up to the landing at Vinton where she was received by a delegation of citizens and a crowd of shouting school children. An anvil salute, ably accompanied by a loud-mouthed cannon, served to emphasize the importance of the occasion. Indeed, the cannon was kept so busy saluting the little steamer that it burst one of its rings and rather seriously injured a young man who was standing near. After discharging part of her cargo, the *Export* passed under the bridge without difficulty and snorted away upstream toward



her ultimate destination where she arrived three days later.

On the day following the arrival at Waterloo, Captain J. J. Snouffer gave a free excursion to all who cared to go. In the evening the citizens returned the compliment with a banquet at Capwell's Hall for the officers of the boat. Many were the speeches, toasts, responses, and congratulations. The good cheer seemed to induce visionary dreams of a custom-house at Waterloo, and direct trade relations with all European ports.

The news of the arrival of the *Export* excited the citizens of Cedar Falls almost as much as it did those at Waterloo. Although the power dam at Waterloo seemed an effectual bar to any further advance up the river, the people of Cedar Falls were ambitious to make their town the head of navigation. The Cedar River, being at that time charted as navigable to a point just below Cedar Falls, some enterprising citizens persuaded Captain Snouffer to make an effort to reach the desired point and even Cedar Falls if possible. They proposed to go to Waterloo and demolish the dam if necessary, claiming that if the river was actually navigable to a point farther upstream, the maintenance of the dam was certainly contrary to the law. The captain tried to proceed, but the boat was unable to reach the dam. Cedar Falls sorrowfully relinquished the pleasant thought of being a port of entry.

During October and November the papers spoke

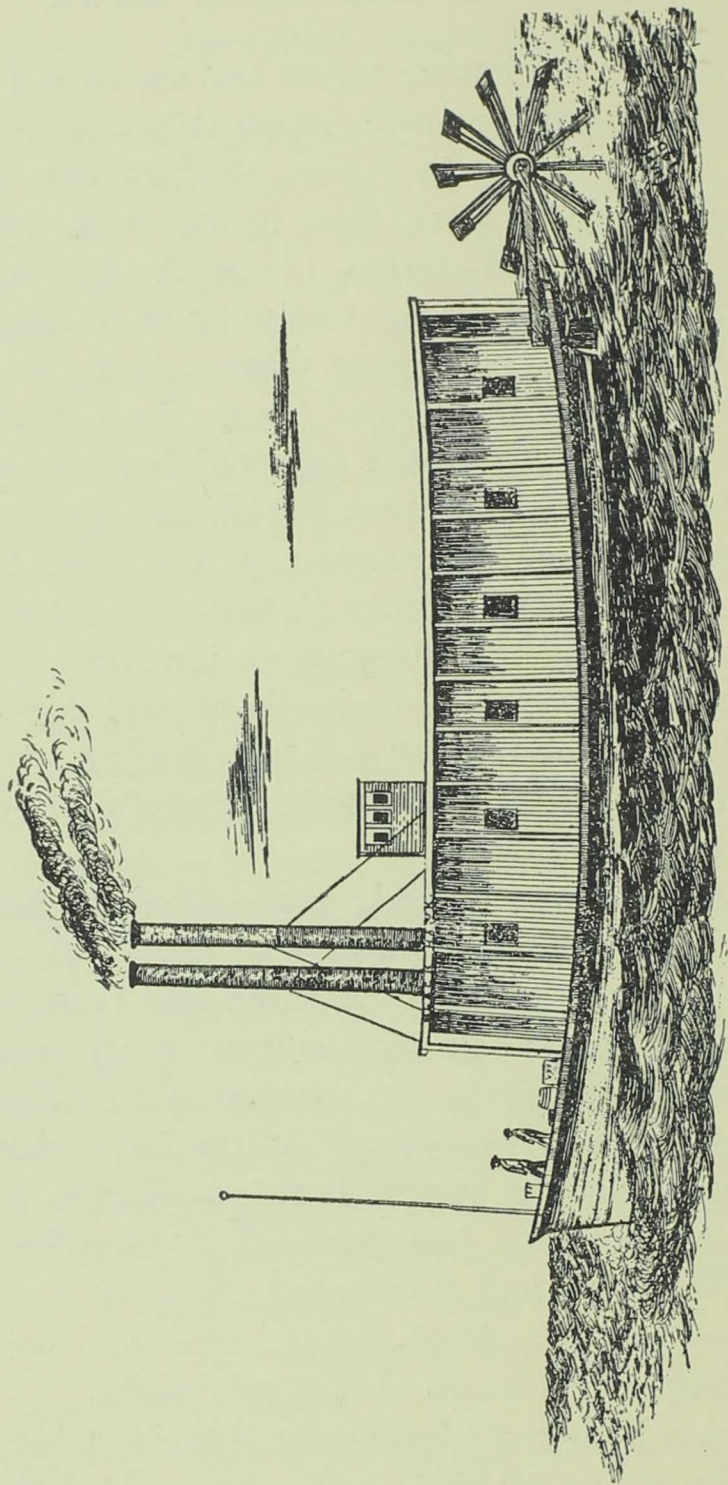


of the *Export* in glowing terms and expressed much satisfaction with the trade which it had stimulated in the towns along its route. Before the season closed the *Export* made four round trips between Cedar Rapids and Waterloo. After the first voyage, which was delayed by the necessity of locating the main channel and removing obstructions, the boat ran regularly and made good time. From Waterloo to Cedar Rapids ordinarily required fourteen hours, while the fifty miles between Vinton and Cedar Rapids was negotiated downstream in about five hours. On November 20th Captain Snouffer declared that there was too much floating ice in the river for any more trips that season, so the boat was docked at Cedar Rapids for repairs and overhauling. On the whole the boat "did a paying business for the short time it was in service."

The *Export* was entirely remodelled during the winter, given a coat of paint, and fitted out on the inside with new quarters. A cabin was built on the deck. She appeared as neat as "any craft upon the large rivers." While the general dimensions remained the same, two rows of berths were added so as to accommodate twenty-four passengers and a crew of seven men. Meanwhile J. J. Snouffer and W. D. Watrous had purchased the boat and rechristened her the *Black Hawk*. She was capable of carrying over a hundred tons of freight.

This busy little craft left Cedar Rapids on her first trip in the spring of 1859 on the sixteenth of March.





FROM A DRAWING BY GEORGE R. KNAPP IN 1904

## THE BLACK HAWK



The crew was composed of J. J. Snouffer, master and clerk; W. D. Watrous, mate; Thomas Stanley, engineer; and W. Vance, pilot. Later George A. Ohler was hired as chief carpenter.

"The steamer *Black Hawk*", wrote the editor of the Vinton *Eagle*, on March 22, 1859, "made her first trip for the season to this place on Wednesday morning last, with a fine list of passengers and freight, and after a few hours' stay, left for Cedar Rapids, with a full cargo of grain, and at a speed of at least 'ten knots' per hour."

Two young men were left behind at Vinton. "How they are to get to Cedar Rapids, unless they await the return of the boat is a question yet to be decided," according to the newspaper. "The roads are in such bad condition that no kind of vehicle can be got through." A significant commentary on the need of river transportation.

It was reported that enough freight awaited shipment at Vinton to keep the boat busy "for half a dozen trips at least," so that Vinton was for a time the head of navigation. Later, however, the *Black Hawk* was scheduled to run regularly between Cedar Rapids and Waterloo, and it was predicted that she would do a good business throughout the season.

On March 22, W. W. Hanford, the editor of the Vinton *Eagle*, "stepped aboard the trim little steamer *Black Hawk*, and in just five hours from the time her lines were taken in," he landed in Cedar Rapids. "Passengers who have the good fortune to take a



trip by boat from Vinton to Cedar Rapids, and do not pronounce it equal in comfort and pleasure to any they ever took, are certainly not capable of appreciating justly all the pleasures of steamboat traveling", thought the editor. The return trip was delayed a day by a high wind, but Mr. Hanford was none the less convinced of the practicability of navigating the Cedar.

Not until Saturday morning, April 2nd, did the *Black Hawk* begin her first voyage to Waterloo. Having tied up all day Sunday, she passed Vinton about ten o'clock on Monday, and finally arrived at Waterloo on the following day. "To-day, at a little past noon," announced the *Waterloo Courier* for April 5th, "our citizens were not a little gratified by the sight of the steamer *Black Hawk*, a short distance below the lower ferry, plowing her way up stream against the stiff current of the Cedar, like a thing of life. She ran up to a point just above Fifth Street, where she made fast to the shore, and was received with hearty cheers by the crowd assembled to witness her first arrival of this season." At Waterloo there was enough freight for at least two trips, and the owners proposed to run the boat regularly thereafter between Cedar Rapids and Waterloo, making two trips a week.

All during the spring and summer the *Black Hawk* plied busily back and forth, carrying much freight and many passengers. She also made numerous excursion trips.



Almost to the minute when she was due the *Black Hawk* could be seen pulling in to the wharf. Early in September, however, she began to have trouble because of the prevailing low water. From then on the trips became very difficult. About the twenty-fifth of November the *Black Hawk* was backed up into a bayou at Cedar Rapids for the winter.

During the season she had made twenty-nine trips, besides numerous excursions. One round trip was made in twenty-seven hours flat. According to a table of distances prepared by the pilot, Palo was fourteen and one-half miles north of Cedar Rapids; Benton City, forty-two miles; Vinton, fifty miles; La Porte, eighty-two miles; and Waterloo, one hundred and thirteen miles. Thus the steamer travelled six or seven thousand miles.

The net profits for the summer's operations amounted to two thousand dollars. Fuel was the chief item of expense, for no less than four cords of wood were required for each trip. Farmers kept the river banks piled with "any kind of wood", for which they received cash.

The *Black Hawk* freight rates were very reasonable. If the goods of a shipper amounted to more than a ton the rate was twenty-five cents per hundred pounds. If the goods totaled less than a ton the rate was advanced to thirty cents. The Chicago, Iowa and Nebraska Railroad brought freight from Chicago to Cedar Rapids at a rate of from forty-two to fifty-four cents per hundred while the steamer *Cedar*



*Rapids* charged only fifty cents per hundred from St. Louis. This made it possible to obtain goods at Waterloo from either St. Louis or Chicago by paying only about seventy-five cents per hundred pounds for transportation charges. The passenger rate was about five cents a mile.

The downstream cargo usually consisted of two or three thousand bushels of grain and other produce such as hides, vegetables, eggs, and butter. On April 28, 1859, the *Cedar Valley Times* lists the down cargo on the *Black Hawk* as follows: "250 bushels corn, 2697 bushels oats, 5 bushels beans, 2 boxes furs, 1 barrel eggs, 9 barrels whiskey, 2 tons household goods, and 10 passengers."

The largest upstream load was shipped in July, 1859. The little steamer on that trip carried thirty barrels of salt and two tons of other goods to Vinton. La Porte City received two tons of merchandise, while the remaining fifty-five tons, composed of groceries, drugs, white lead, flour, hardware, and miscellaneous articles, were consigned to Waterloo. Other commodities often found on the upriver cargo list were building materials (lumber and nails), farm machinery, buggies, leather goods, and oil. There was always a brisk trade in salt and whiskey. Indeed, Waterloo came to be quite a salt center. This much-needed article which had formerly brought eight dollars per barrel now sold for four. Settlers brought their produce from considerable distances to the Cedar River ports and returned with supplies.



During the season Captain Snouffer was able to make many excursion trips from Vinton and Waterloo. The sax horns were always taken along and the "turnout of ladies and gentlemen all had a good time generally". The best single trip, according to Captain Snouffer, was on the fifteenth of June, when he brought one hundred and seven persons from Vinton to Cedar Rapids for the railroad celebration. The fare for the round trip, including board, was five dollars.

Many fine things were said of the crew of the *Black Hawk*. It was the universal verdict that no one could manage the steamer better than Captain Snouffer. He had a reputation for being gentlemanly, accommodating, and prompt in business. Sometimes the passengers published a statement in the newspaper recommending the *Black Hawk* very highly and praising the quality and quantity of food served on the boat.

That the merchants were not slow in taking advantage of the new means of transportation is revealed in their advertisements. "Just arrived by steamboat" headed many a local dealer's weekly announcement in bold, black type. Great emphasis was placed upon the low prices which were made possible by quantity purchases and quick transportation from the great markets. Everything was fresh from St. Louis, New York, and Boston.

Steamboating on the Cedar was not without its troubles, however. The *Black Hawk* had her quota



of accidents and delays. Starting bars were always breaking, cam rods snapped off, and unseen rocks made large dents in the hull as the heavily laden craft bore down the uncharted stream. Once the *Black Hawk* nearly went over the dam at Cedar Rapids. She had been made fast to the shore with five large cables, but the heavy pressure of the current parted four of them and the boat was in a very "ticklish" position. The four or five persons who were on board did not in the least desire to go over the dam. Happily the fifth cable held until the boat was made secure.

On one of the trips the engineer's wife, who was acting as maid, was taken very ill. The captain sent down two doctors who were passengers to attend her. After a hurried examination both came up very much excited, stating that the patient was suffering from "spotted fever" and demanded that the boat be stopped as they wanted to get off at once. But the captain, thinking probably of the consequences, wanted to be sure the woman was really afflicted with the dangerous malady, so he took the husband into the small cabin to investigate for himself. The woman was very much worried and excited. Captain Snouffer rubbed her arms vigorously. Much to their surprise the spots vanished. During the night the dye in her cotton clothing had colored her hands and arms. Her headache was probably due to the stuffy room and extremely warm weather.

In the spring of 1860 the *Black Hawk* was pre-



pared for business, but the new owners, Burley and Durwin, were doomed to great disappointment. She hit a snag on her first voyage and tore a number of planks loose. The river was so low that she could haul only a small cargo of grain even downstream. Every trip that spring was a succession of groundings and lay-ups. The owners at last gave up. About the middle of May the vessel was taken around the dam at Cedar Rapids and placed in service on the lower portion of the Cedar River.

The ownership of the *Black Hawk* changed rapidly thereafter. Captain Snouffer had traded her off for some land and the balance in cash. Once the boat was sold under an attachment for labor for only nineteen dollars. But when the war broke out the government gave the owners the sum of six thousand dollars in cash for the vessel. She was transferred to the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers and served in carrying provisions to the Union soldiers. According to one rumor the *Black Hawk* was later engaged in blockade running on the Mississippi. She finally hit a snag in the river near Memphis and blew up.

RUSSELL C. GRAHAME