

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## A Century of River Traffic

Churning her way over two treacherous rapids, past a blazing forest fire and across a storm-tossed lake, the first steamboat to navigate the Upper Mississippi above what is now Keokuk reached Fort Snelling on May 10, 1823. Built at Wheeling, now in West Virginia, in 1819, the *Virginia* was a small 109-ton sternwheeler. She had a cabin on deck but no pilot house, being guided by a tiller at the stern.

The *Virginia* required twenty days to make the 664-mile trip from Saint Louis to Fort Snelling. She grounded on a number of sandbars and spent about five days getting over the Des Moines and Rock Island rapids. Wood was burned for fuel and the boat lay over frequently while fresh supplies were cut. Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent at Fort Snelling, Giacomo C. Beltrami, an Italian exile and adventurer, Great Eagle, a Sauk Indian chief, an unnamed woman missionary, and a Kentucky family bound for the

lead mines of Galena were the only passengers known to have been aboard the boat.

The voyage of the *Virginia* established the practicability of navigating the Upper Mississippi by steamboat. In the years that followed, the river became the main artery along which the great waves of immigration moved steadily into the Upper Mississippi Valley. Approximately twenty-seven hundred different vessels are known to have plied the Upper Mississippi since the epoch-making voyage of the *Virginia* in 1823. Hailing from Saint Louis, Louisville, and Cincinnati, from distant New Orleans and Pittsburgh, these steamboats performed yeoman service in developing a mighty inland empire.

A century and a half of waterways transportation had preceded the voyage of the *Virginia* in 1823. The era of the canoe is in many respects the most colorful period in Iowa history. On June 17, 1673, Joliet and Marquette paddled out of the mouth of the Wisconsin into the broad expanse of the Mississippi and began their epoch-making voyage down the Father of Waters. By canoe in 1680 came the courageous Michel Aco, with Louis Hennepin and Antoine Auguel, to explore the Upper Mississippi. Jonathan Carver and Peter Pond, two Connecticut Yankees, both used the canoe to reach the Iowa country on the

eve of the American Revolution. Julien Dubuque skimmed back and forth in his canoe between his lead mines and Saint Louis.

The canoe served as the prime mode of transportation in Iowaland in both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. It was used in a variety of ways by the pioneers. The fur trader and the Indian, the explorer and the missionary, still used the canoe on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and their tributaries for more than a generation following the voyage of the *Virginia* in 1823. In the fall of 1835 Lieut. Albert M. Lea explored the Des Moines River below the Raccoon Fork in a cottonwood canoe. Father Mazuchelli crossed the Mississippi in a leaky dugout canoe to visit the lead miners in the vicinity of Dubuque.

A number of craft of the pre-steamboat era were closely related to the canoe. The bateau and the mackinaw boat were well known to the French fur traders and voyageurs who plied the Fox-Wisconsin route to the Upper Mississippi during the canoe period. The bullboat, a round tub-like craft made of buffalo skins stretched over a circular frame, was common on the Missouri. Such craft persisted on the Mississippi-Missouri system after the white tide broke into Iowaland, but they were not used very often by the land-

seekers who filtered into the Black Hawk Purchase or along the Missouri slope.

The flatboat, the keelboat, and the barge were valuable to the early pioneers, but these were little used in Iowaland because the steamboat had already largely taken over river traffic by 1833 when settlement began in Iowa. The flatboat preceded the barge and the keelboat on the Ohio and Lower Mississippi, but it appears that the latter two craft preceded the flatboat on the Upper Mississippi. This was due to the fact that the flatboat was primarily for downstream traffic, while the barge and the keelboat, together with the steamboat, provided the best mode of upstream travel for settlers and their agricultural equipment.

Lewis and Clark and Zebulon M. Pike used keelboats in their expeditions. In 1823 Moses Meeker brought two score settlers to the Fever River settlement in the keelboat *Colonel Bomford*, a larger number than the steamboat *Virginia* transported the same year on her long upstream voyage. Keelboats were used on the Des Moines and the Iowa-Cedar, but never in large numbers. The advent of the steamboat soon eliminated keels and barges although they were frequently towed by steamboats in the lead trade.

Once the settlers were located on the minor streams of Iowa, such as the Turkey, the Ma-

quoketa, and the Wapsipinicon, they built flatboats to transport their produce downstream to market. "No better evidence of the prosperity of the Territory can be given", the Burlington *Hawkeye* declared on November 19, 1840, "than is seen in the numerous covered flatboats that are daily going down stream, laden with all kinds of produce, animal and vegetable. Upwards of one hundred boats of this description have already passed Burlington."

For forty years prior to the Civil War the steamboat was the emblem of transportation and communication in Iowaland. Although no hard and fast lines definitely divide the history of steamboating on the Upper Mississippi, six distinct periods stand out in fairly bold relief. The lead period embraces the quarter century following the successful trip of the *Virginia* in 1823. More than 472,000,000 pounds of lead valued at over \$14,000,000 were shipped down the Mississippi by steamboat from the Galena-Dubuque mineral region between 1823 and 1848. For almost a decade thereafter lead continued to be an important downstream cargo. The Indian, the fur trader, and the soldier, as well as the immigrant and excursionist, provided important supplementary cargoes during the lead period.

Immigration is characteristic of the second

period which covers the years 1849–1870. Hundreds of settlers, both native and foreign born, jammed Upper Mississippi steamboats for a score of years — the French Icarians to occupy Nauvoo, the Swedes to found New Sweden, the Dutch to settle Pella, the Trappist monks to establish New Melleray, the Luxemburgers to find a new home at St. Donatus, the Germans to settle in Guttenberg and Davenport, and the Mecklenburgers to set up a socialist community at Elkader. The building of the railroads snuffed out a trade from which river captains had reaped their richest returns.

The third period witnessed the shipment of heavy cargoes of grain southward. It extended from 1870 until almost 1890, and is best identified with the old Diamond Jo Line which was founded expressly for the grain trade. East and west railroads, making Chicago and Milwaukee the grain markets instead of Saint Louis and New Orleans, were an important factor in the decline of the river grain trade.

A period of decline had set in by 1890 which culminated in 1910 with the sale of the Diamond Jo Line steamers for a paltry \$175,000. During the next seventeen years the Streckfus Line excursion boats were the only real frequenters of the Upper Mississippi although a few short line pack-

ets managed to pick up a modicum of freight and passengers. The inauguration of the Federal Barge Line service on the Upper Mississippi in 1927, the building of modern terminal facilities at such cities as Burlington, Rock Island, and Dubuque, and the nine-foot channel that resulted from the completion of the twenty-six locks and dams combined to usher in the sixth period, or towboat era. By 1946 the tonnage towed on the Upper Mississippi far surpassed that transported during the heyday of steamboating before the Civil War.

The steamboat *Western Engineer* ascended the Missouri River to present-day Council Bluffs as early as 1819, but there was relatively little steamboating on the Big Muddy above Saint Joseph, Missouri, prior to 1846. The random trips made by such steamboats as the *Yellowstone* and the *Assiniboine* to Fort Union at the mouth of the Yellowstone during the 1830's were spectacular but of little importance when compared with the tonnage engaged in the Upper Mississippi lead traffic. In 1847, for example, the total value of lead mined was \$1,654,077.60 — double the combined value of the Saint Louis fur trade and the commerce of the Sante Fè Trail.

Permanent settlement in western Iowa began with the departure of the red man in 1846. When

Reverend John Todd came to Fremont County in 1848 he found steamboating on the Missouri "slow and dangerous". "Boats passed up at irregular intervals", one pioneer related, "and not infrequently remained for weeks upon sandbars and snags."

The heyday of steamboating along the Missouri slope embraced the twenty years between 1846 and 1866. During the fifties such boats as the *Chippewa*, the *Emigrant*, the *Emilie*, the *Florence*, the *Gus Linn*, the *Spread Eagle*, and the *West Wind*, not to mention the *Des Moine*, the *Omaha*, and the *Sioux City*, were household words along the Big Muddy. The straggling frontier town of Sioux City received its first real impetus in 1856 when the steamboat *Omaha* arrived with a saw-mill, lumber, dry-goods, hardware, and other commodities. It cost \$24,000 to bring this freight, valued at \$70,000, upstream from Saint Louis. Thereafter steamboating became the primary means of transportation and communication between Sioux City and the outside world. Small wonder that the *Nebraska City Advertiser* should boast in 1857 that forty-six steamboats valued at \$1,269,000 were running on the Missouri that year and a dozen new boats were under construction.

The outbreak of guerrilla warfare in Missouri

in 1861 brought steamboating on the Missouri to a standstill, but at the close of the Civil War it revived for a brief spell, playing an especially important rôle in the construction of the Union Pacific railroad west of Omaha. The completion of the railroad to Council Bluffs in 1867 and to Sioux City in 1870 brought to a close a colorful episode in steamboating along the western border of Iowa.

Subsequent efforts to revive traffic on the Missouri above Kansas City met with failure, but in 1939 the first tow of oil was brought to Omaha and in 1940 Sioux City rejoiced when the towboat *Kansas City Socony* brought 400,000 gallons of gasoline to that port. River enthusiasts are hopeful that a fairly permanent stage of water may be maintained in the Missouri when a sufficient supply is impounded behind the great Fort Peck Dam, but even the friends of the Missouri Valley Authority cannot agree on the place of transportation in their plan to harness the Big Muddy.

Transportation on the tributaries of the Upper Mississippi in Iowa, while loudly acclaimed at the time, was more novel than important. The Des Moines River was navigated by the *Hero* and the *Pavilion* in 1837. In the spring of 1843 the *Agatha* carried troops and supplies to the new military post at the Raccoon Fork on the Des

Moines. Approximately thirty steamboats are known to have plied the Des Moines to the Raccoon Fork prior to the Civil War, and one craft, the *Charles Rodgers*, actually squirmed her way to the present site of Fort Dodge, a feat almost comparable in its audacity to the ascent of the Missouri to Fort Benton. The low water of 1860, the use of many steamboats by the Union forces down South, and the arrival of the railroad at Des Moines, Boone, and Fort Dodge quickly snuffed out river traffic and turned the attention of these towns toward other market routes.

Navigation of the Iowa and the Cedar by steamboats was even less impressive, for it was possible only during seasons of high water. The *Ripple*, the *Rock River*, the *Agatha*, the *Maid of Iowa*, the *Emma*, the *Reveille*, and the *Badger State* are known to have ascended the Iowa River to Iowa City and a diminutive craft dubbed the *Iowa City* was actually launched at Iowa City in 1866.

A few more boats are known to have plied the Cedar River. The twenty-nine round trips of the *Black Hawk* between Cedar Rapids and Waterloo during 1859 were, perhaps, outstanding among feats of inland waterways transportation. Although the freight involved was relatively small, the importance of such trips to the pioneers

should not be discounted. The arrival of the railroad at Cedar Rapids and Cedar Falls quickly diverted the attention of these towns to overland transportation.

In 1946 only the Upper Mississippi continues to serve as a highway of commerce. The transportation record of the Upper Mississippi during World War II is impressive, surpassing the fondest hopes and dreams of waterways advocates. Ocean-going war vessels, built at Quincy, at Dubuque, and at Savage on the Minnesota River, were sent downstream to New Orleans. The tonnage transported on the Upper Mississippi almost equalled that of the entire Mississippi system a century before. Moreover, it continued at unheard of levels despite the withdrawal of many Upper Mississippi craft to the Ohio and Lower Mississippi to aid in the movement of oil to the Atlantic seaboard.

The changes that a century has made in river navigation are tremendous. In 1846 there were no costly river terminals, such as one can see at Burlington and Dubuque today. There were no aids to navigation for pilots, no 9-foot channel, no 3000-ton steel barges, no 2200-horsepower craft, no twin and triple screw propeller vessels, no diesel boats, no ice-breakers to hasten the opening of navigation. The side and stern wheel craft of

yesteryears were fast but small and rarely averaged over 200 to 300 tons cargo. A few examples will suffice.

Between 1823 and 1848 approximately 365 different steamboats made about 7,645 trips to the Galena-Dubuque lead mines and carried downstream 236,000 tons of lead. Today the Dubuque-built *Herbert Hoover* can easily transport this entire cargo downstream in a single season, figuring 23 trips with 10,000 tons to a trip. In the five years ending with 1945 a single Dubuque firm, the Interstate Power Company, received 292,000 tons of coal, more than all the lead shipped downstream by steamboat in the thirty-eight years preceding the Civil War. In 1946 three towboats could push as much freight upstream in single trips as the four boats of the Diamond Jo Line averaged annually during the period from 1900 to 1910.

Although some Iowans may lament the "good old days" of steamboating, the towboat era stands in a class by itself when measured in tonnage moved. The second century may witness new developments in inland waterways transportation.

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