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EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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Steam Sleighs for Steamboats

A cold wave gripped the mineral region of the upper Mississippi late in the year 1827. Fever River was frozen solid on November 21st. The Mississippi fought stubbornly against the relentless ice gnomes but finally succumbed before their frigid attack. The hardy lead miners, inured to frontier hardships, hovered about the fires in their cabins and shacks that lined both banks of the Fever River and dotted the innumerable pock-marked ravines of the surrounding hinterland. Across the Mississippi in what is now Iowa the tattered Fox Indian village on Catfish Creek shivered under the icy blast.

The close of navigation in 1827 was viewed with both regret and alarm. Winter had set in before a sufficient supply of food had reached Galena. True, the firm of Strader and Thompson had brought a keel-boat of general merchandise from Saint Louis which included a quantity of flour and pork but the entire cargo had been

gobbled up by Francois Bouthillier, a wily French trader, who hoped to profit by the scarcity of food. Although the weather moderated after the first chilly blast, the lead miners could scarcely hope for more food supplies until the opening of navigation the following spring.

Meanwhile Bouthillier portioned out small quantities of his flour to the hungry lead miners. It was sour and hard. Bouthillier chopped it out of the barrels with a hatchet, pounded it, sifted it loosely into other barrels, filling two with the original contents of one, and then sold it at the rate of $30 a barrel. And yet, despite the Frenchman's miserly efforts to stretch his supply, the settlers saw with alarm that there was not enough to last until spring. Hunger and possible starvation faced the mineral region.

As the winter wore on, the weather turned mild and open: but the warm sun brought little internal comfort to the hungry miners. News of the destitute condition of the mineral region eventually reached Saint Louis and Captain James Clark promptly took his steamboat *Josephine* out of winter quarters, loaded her with flour, and steamed slowly upstream in a desperate effort to relieve the stricken region. Warm weather had weakened the ice in the Mississippi but the *Josephine* was forced to pick her way cautiously

through the floating ice pack until she reached the mouth of Fever River where soaking rains had broken up the ice. Even so the *Josephine* experienced no little difficulty but finally succeeded in battering her way to the Galena levee.

A tumultuous reception greeted Captain Clark. Word of the arrival of the *Josephine* spread like wild fire and the entire community, Bouthillier excepted, rushed down to the levee, rejoicing and amazed to see the steamboat loaded with a cargo of precious flour. The day before the arrival of the *Josephine,* Henry Gratiot had offered Bouthillier $25 a barrel for his entire stock of flour, an offer that was promptly refused. When the *Josephine* arrived, Gratiot hastened over to Bouthillier to inquire what price he now demanded for his flour. The irate Frenchman simply sputtered: "Dam! hell! suppose, by gar! What man tinks one steamboat come up Fever River in mid de Wint?"

The unexpected arrival of the *Josephine* in 1828 was a stroke of good fortune for the entire mineral region for it was only on rare occasions that the Mississippi afforded steamboats such an opportunity. Indeed, two days after the arrival of the *Josephine,* the Fever River again froze over and it was not until the middle of March that she was able to escape down stream.

From the beginning of its settlement the Galena mineral region was slow in becoming self-sufficient. Most men had ventured beyond the fringe of settlement to mine lead; only a few turned to farming. Consequently the entire country was dependent upon the Mississippi as the main highway over which the foodstuffs it failed to produce might be transported. When the pioneers swarmed into the Black Hawk Purchase around Dubuque on June 1, 1833, they simply enlarged the area that was dependent upon Saint Louis and the lower Mississippi.

The railroad was still in its infancy and a generation was to pass before the iron horse reached the Mississippi. Clearly some other means of communication must be developed to knit the mineral region together during the long winter months. Fully 425 miles of frozen river intervened between Saint Louis and the Galena-Dubuque region. Sixty-five miles upstream from Dubuque stood Fort Crawford and Prairie du Chien, occupying a dreary stretch of bottomland hemmed in on all sides by towering bluffs. Two hundred miles farther north Fort Snelling kept its lonely vigil on the bleak eminence at the confluence of the Minnesota with the Mississippi. No other settlements existed above Dubuque.

As early as 1828 the editor of the *North*

Western Gazette and Galena Advertiser had fumed about the poor mail and stage connections and lamented the lack of winter communication with the South. By 1835 such complaints had become commonplace but little hope was entertained for immediate relief. Suddenly two enterprising Yankees, J. D. Carson and Jonathan Haines, announced that they had solved the problem of winter transportation and communication. Since early fall they had been experimenting with steam power at Galena with a view to applying it to a sleigh which they had constructed. Carson and Haines planned to run their steam sleigh between Galena, Dubuque, Prairie du Chien, and points north. If their invention proved successful there was no limit to its possible development in those regions where rivers froze over several months each year.

Early in January, 1836, Carson and Haines dragged their steam sleigh out on Fever River for a test run. A knot of curious Galenians gathered about the novel contraption. The *North Western Gazette and Galena Advertiser* of January 30, 1836, was delighted with the strange craft: "The sleigh is not only water-tight, but by having seats, windows, doors and stoves, it will be equally as comfortable as the cabin of a steamboat. By being protected from the inclemencies of the

winter season, the steam sleigh will be far preferable to coaches, ordinary sleighs, &c., the traveller will not only be comfortable while travelling, but the anticipation of a journey will be cheering and partake more of the character of a recreation, than a dread, as in the ordinary method of travelling at this season."

The inventors pointed out that the steam sleigh would involve no more risk than any other mode of transportation. Since the body of the sleigh was "large and strong and water-tight" passengers could feel perfectly safe in case the sled broke through the ice or ran into an airhole. The sleigh would simply float on the surface until it could be extricated by means of a rope with a hook at one end, which could be forced into the ice some distance away. The power of the sleigh's engine would be sufficient to draw it out upon firm ice.

The editor of the Galena paper was convinced that the steam sleigh possessed real merit. In the first place its speed would "far surpass any other mode of conveyance", which was one objective to be attained in traveling. Equally important was the possibility of greatly reducing the cost of transportation. The river also had a distinct advantage over a railroad, because solid ice was strong enough to bear teams, needed no repairs,

and formed one of the most perfect levels. Finally, since the steam sleigh was intended to operate upon those waters upon which upper Mississippi steamboats plied, it would constitute a year-round transportation link. No longer would the mineral region have to fear a plotting Bouthillier and a recurrence of the winter of 1828. The steam sleigh would prevent a corner on the food market with its attendant high prices.

But the settlers around Galena and Dubuque were destined to be disappointed. Although Carson and Haines were able to start their steam engine it proved to be too small and did not have sufficient power to move the sleigh. Captain George W. Girdon and many others present pronounced the demonstration a failure and considered the whole idea infeasible. Seasoned steamboatmen, who knew the vagaries of Old Man River, realized that a dependable road-bed of ice during the winter months was even less likely than a fixed stage of water during the summer. The *Galena Gazette,* on the other hand, maintained the "utility of the steam sleigh must be acknowledged quite as indispensable to the commercial world as steamboats or railroad cars." Although the editor declared that Carson and Haines had secured a patent for their invention their petition was evidently denied for no patent

was granted in Washington. The men planned to build another engine during 1836 and hoped that by the following winter their steam sleigh would work. But the failure of their first experiment seems to have dampened the ardor of the inventors for no steam sleigh appeared in 1837.

Meanwhile, as farmers poured into the mineral region, both Galena and Dubuque became more self-sufficient. An ever increasing number of steamboats during the summer months carried rich cargoes of merchandise that helped to brighten frontier life and make the hardships of pioneering less evident. The steam sleigh was soon forgotten as men became actively engaged in schemes to bring the iron horse to the Mississippi and Iowa. On January 16, 1836, the Illinois legislature incorporated the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad Company. Across the Mississippi in Dubuque another dreamer, John Plumbe, was talking incessantly about a transcontinental railroad. The plans of Carson and Haines were soon forgotten in the busy whirl of life. Resurrected after a hundred years, their novel though unsuccessful scheme is a fitting testimony to the inventive genius and energy of the pioneers on the lead mining frontier.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN