

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. VII

ISSUED IN DECEMBER 1926

NO. 12

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River Towns

Much has been said and written about frontier life in Iowa. The grim battles waged by the pioneer against droughts, locusts, prairie fires, and blizzards have long been a favorite topic with the historians, but the rôle of the Mississippi River has been curiously neglected. Of course the stories of Dubuque, Davenport, Tesson, and Le Claire are well known, but they belong more to the soil of Iowa than to its great river.

Along the western banks of the Mississippi are little towns that have been made and broken by the river. Many are quaint, old-fashioned villages hugging the banks of the river and sheltered by high bluffs from the cold winds that often sweep across the outlying prairies. Quiet and serene, they give the impression of being quite content with their situation, with never a dream of expanding inland. They have an air of permanence, these old river

towns. Other settlements may be tentative communities of transient pioneers, but the present inhabitants of the little river towns are the grandchildren of the founders. Facing the river, they seem to belong to it, having no desire to climb the bluffs and live on the prairie beyond. Uneven sidewalks of flagstones, abandoned sawmills, warehouses gauntly fronting the river and slowly sinking into decay, the faint trace of a boat yard, an old boat landing now overgrown with weeds and willows — are all mute evidences of a past that was part of the great river. Drowsing away, living much in the past, these towns seem to be awaiting the whistle of the long silent raft-boat which will arouse them to activity once more.

Rambling old houses of nondescript architecture line the streets that parallel the river or cling to the steep hillsides of the diagonal coulee. Since lumber was cheap, only the best material was used in the mansions of a generation ago, and the rafts yielded their choicest logs for the homes of the river men. Doors with transoms above and kitchens finished like a steamboat cabin are eloquent reminders of the owner's occupation. Occasionally the pilot house or the cabin of an old boat was the beginning of a comfortable residence of later days.

These are not typical country towns, for the farmer and the river man had very little in common. The farmers came to trade and sell their produce, but they were really outsiders, on-lookers at the

various activities that filled the lives of the river folk. A certain dash, an air of sophistication and worldly experience born of many trips to New Orleans and St. Louis distinguished the dwellers of these towns from their rural neighbors.

Transportation of both freight and passengers was made by boat. As late as 1900, several towns in Scott County boasted no railroad connections with the outside world. A "hack" made daily trips of fifteen or more miles from Le Claire to Davenport during the winter months and steamboats served in the open season. The mail, carried by rail to Illinois towns opposite, was ferried across to the Iowa shore. And crossing the Mississippi in an open boat when the ice breaks up in the spring is no enviable task.

The river man was a type. Just as the sea captain was devoted to his ship, so was the river man devoted to the river and its traditions. An aristocracy of the river was the natural product of the golden age on the Mississippi. The names of captains, pilots, and lumbermen were known from New Orleans to St. Paul. Sons followed in their father's wake and, learning river lore from childhood, they often served apprenticeships as "cub" pilots under men who had been associates of Mark Twain.

After the ice went out in the spring every able-bodied man was ready "to go on" a boat, and he stayed until the "fleet" laid up in October or November. (To-day it may be only a government boat engaged in surveying, dredging, or marking the

river.) With their season's earnings captains, pilots, deck hands, and stokers all settled down to a comfortable and idle winter. Of course, it can be truthfully said that many of these families who enjoyed beefsteak in the fall probably ate liver in the spring. But merchants were lenient in advancing credit, so why bother about bills? No river man of the old school found employment elsewhere when off the river for he knew no other trade or business.

Saloons, gambling rooms, billiard parlors, dances, and other social activities provided entertainment and recreation during the long winter months. Show boats, which have recently found a place in American literature, visited these river towns regularly. Just as the circus band drew small boys to the tent, so did the calliope draw them to the river bank. The saloon flourished above all other places of business, drink being the greatest weakness of the river man. A town of about two thousand inhabitants at one time boasted of thirteen saloons! Tying up for the night at a town was the signal for a celebration and probably more than one member of the crew needed assistance in returning to the boat. No wonder the notoriously tough river towns were the object of many revivals and prayer meetings!

The typical river man was a genial fellow, liberal with his money which went more easily than it came. He was not much worried about the future for he assumed that the river would always provide a living. So it is that few river men died rich and

many in their old age depended solely upon the small pension granted by former employers.

How the heart of the merchant in river towns was gladdened in those old days when a steamboat whistled and a boat put out to shore or when a landing was made! No wonder he slept above his store, for boats came and went by night as well as by day. Once, while looking through some papers in my father's desk, I found an old order for supplies to be ready when the boat passed Le Claire. It contained thirty-six items, including canned goods, fresh fruits and vegetables, hams, toothpicks, soap, molasses, and brooms. A footnote attached, stating that only goods of the best quality would be accepted, was proof that the crews were well fed and that the packets spread a bounteous table for the passengers.

River cooks were noted for their skill and many favorite dishes among the housewives in river towns to-day were originally prepared on the steamers. With a great abundance of everything the packet cooks found no difficulty in creating dishes that would tempt the traveller. Three or four kinds of meat, innumerable vegetables, both hot and cold breads, fruits, and pastries were included in each meal. Indeed, I have very pleasant childhood memories of stolen visits to a boat whose cook was a favorite of all children, and never did we leave empty-handed. Amusing stories are often related about these cooks — of he who carried salt in one vest pocket and pepper in the other pocket, and of

the one who annually cast a pan of biscuits into the water in memory of all river cooks who were dead.

Since life was centered about the river it is only natural that the arrival and departure of a boat was more or less of an event to the children. Many youngsters learned to read by spelling out the names of favorite boats, and such fascinating names they were — *Phil Sheridan, Red Wing, Northwestern, LeClaire Belle, Eclipse, Diamond Jo, North Star, Saturn* — all symbolical of romance and adventure. Mothers constantly worried about their children playing on log rafts, or riding the waves in small skiffs, and scarcely a season passed when some child was not pulled out of the water more dead than alive. It was perfectly natural that the river children took to the water like ducks. Truant boys could usually be located along the river bank or on small islands playing Robinson Crusoe in a shack of logs and willows.

Just as the cowboy had words and phrases peculiar to his life and occupation, so the river man's vocabulary abounded in provincialisms and characteristic terms. No little girl ever dreamed of calling a rope other than a line and all unskilled work on a boat was referred to as "decking". The cook's helpers were called "slush-cooks"; "roosters" were the men employed on raft-boats, possibly so called because they slept anywhere, always ready to go out on the raft. To address an old river man by the title of captain was the height of flattery.

Of course, the river man was a teller of tales — many true, some the delightfully improbable yarns spun on the deck, in the engine room, or around a card table. Politics had no fascination for these men, and rarely did a discussion of that kind disturb the minds or excite the temper of the genial group. Stories of races between rival boats (that most famous of all races between the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee* still excites comment), storms on Lake Pepin, tieups in Cat-tail Slough, broken rafts, black nights when the rain fell in sheets and only instinct guided the pilot's hand, of the mate who ruled his crew by carrying the spoke of a wagon wheel about with him — all these and many more offer a rich field of romance and adventure for the professional story teller.

Tragedy stalked along the Iowa shores in Civil War times when cholera raged along the river. When the *Canada*, a North Line packet operating between St. Louis and St. Paul, cleared St. Louis she was free from the dread disease. But case after case broke out and just below Le Claire a landing was made and the victims were quickly buried on a near-by bluff. The graves were marked by rude stones from which the lettering has long since been obliterated by wind and sand. And again from the lower Mississippi during the Civil War comes the story of the *Sultana* which was blown up near Memphis, Tennessee, and fourteen hundred Union soldiers lost their lives.

We children were much interested in one white-haired pilot who for years brought a packet up from St. Louis. He had given his dog to some friends and every time the packet whistled "Maje" dashed to the boat landing, eagerly and affectionately greeting his old master. In his younger days "Maje" had been trained to look through the boats and barges for stowaways and seeping water. No watchman was needed to bring out the former, and "Maje's" wet feet were proof of the latter.

Since the steamboats all had distinguishing whistles, no one needed to scan the river to learn what boat was coming in. Only a few weeks ago I heard one of the few remaining steamers whistling a greeting to the captain's wife as the boat went up the river. But the long rafts, carefully guarded by the "tow-boat" and the "bow-boat", which used to float slowly past our house, have disappeared forever. Gone also are the packets white and trim, and the "side-wheelers" churning the water impatiently, with the captain on his bridge giving orders to the sweating, hurrying crew, while presiding over all the bustle and apparent confusion stood the pilot, serenely aloof and remote behind his wheel, confident of his knowledge of an ever-changing river.

Possibly not many people know that the Mississippi contains a series of rapids between the city of Davenport and the town of Le Claire. A government canal and locks have done away with the necessity of running the rapids, but before this canal was con-

structed every boat was steered over the rapids by a special pilot. Raft-boats never ventured over these rapids at night, and when the water was low the raft was divided and taken over in sections.

Whoever has lived in an old river town who can not recall the ghostly play of the lights along the shore as the pilot sought a landing; the creak of the lowering gangplank; the shouts of the mate and the crew as they made fast the lines? But the old river life is gone. The last raft floated around the bend of the river fifteen years ago and many of the old river aristocracy and lesser members have passed on. Only the quiet little river towns remain, sole relics of the romantic time when the Mississippi was the principal highway to Iowa, when steamboating was an art as well as a job, and when culture and gaiety reigned in the ports on the Father of Waters.

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