

The Grand Excursion of 1854

The Grand Excursion of 1854 was brought about largely through the efforts of Henry Farnam, one of the contractors for the construction of the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad. During the winter of 1853 Farnam invited the Minnesota Packet Company to form a joint railroad-steamboat connection from Rock Island to Galena and points above. The invitation was accepted and Captain Russell Blakeley was sent to the annual stockholders' meeting at Chicago to make final arrangements.

The first railroad to unite the Atlantic Ocean with the Mississippi River reached Rock Island on February 22, 1854. To celebrate this event and advertise the transportation facilities to the Eldorado of the upper Mississippi Valley, leading citizens of the country were invited to participate in a joint railroad and steamboat excursion to the Falls of St. Anthony. The response was so hearty and the request for additional passes so numerous that the number of steamboats chartered was increased from one to five. So lavish were the preparations that an eastern paper declared the fete "could not be rivaled by the mightiest

among the potentates of Europe. Without bustle or noise, in a simple but grand manner, like everything resulting from the combined action of liberty and association — guests have been brought hither free of charge from different places, distant thousands of miles, invited by hosts to them unknown, simple contractors and directors of railroads and steamboats." The Grand Excursion of 1854 was properly styled the "Fashionable Tour" — a tour indeed which remained fashionable for many years.

John H. Kinzie was chairman of the reception committee in Chicago where the Tremont House served as headquarters for the assembled guests. There, early in June, 1854, a President by accident, Millard Fillmore, met Samuel J. Tilden, whose failure to achieve that distinction was less fortuitous. Prominent western leaders such as Ninian W. Edwards, brother-in-law of Lincoln, and Edward Bates of Missouri, who was later Attorney General in Lincoln's Cabinet, exchanged views with notable easterners like John A. Dix, John A. Granger, J. C. Ten Eyck, and Elbridge Gerry. Francis P. Blair, of Maryland, greeted his son Francis P. Blair, of Saint Louis. New Haven and Yale University contributed Professors Benjamin Silliman, A. C. Twining, Leonard Bacon, and Eleazar Thompson to match wits with

Judge Joel Parker of Harvard and Professor Henry Hubbard of Dartmouth. George Bancroft, another Harvard graduate and already the national historian, accepted an invitation to make the Fashionable Tour and was continually called upon to address the crowds which gathered to greet the easterners. Catherine M. Sedgwick was one of the more notable women to make the trip.

No profession was more ably or numerously represented than the press. Almost every metropolitan paper of the East sent a delegate. Charles Hudson of the *Boston Atlas* and Thurlow Weed of the *Albany Evening Journal* were seasoned and nationally known editors. Samuel Bowles of the *Springfield Republican* and Charles A. Dana of the *New York Tribune* were at the threshold of long and famous careers. Hiram Fuller of the *New York Mirror*, Epes Sargent of the *Boston Transcript*, Charles Hale of the *Boston Advertiser*, and W. C. Prime of the *New York Journal of Commerce* were other eastern reporters. The West was represented by such editors as William Schouler of the *Cincinnati Gazette* and C. Cather Flint of the *Chicago Tribune*.

Early on the morning of June 5th the excursionists assembled at the Rock Island station in Chicago. Shortly after eight o'clock two trains of nine coaches, gaily decorated with flowers, flags,

and streamers, and drawn by powerful locomotives, pulled out with the most colorful gathering the West had ever seen. Speeches, military parades, and the industrious discharge of cannon, greeted the excursionists at almost every town. A free lunch was distributed at Sheffield, Illinois. Despite frequent stops, the trains reached Rock Island at four o'clock, where the *Golden Era*, Captain Hiram Bersie; the *G. W. Spar-Hawk*, Captain Montreville Green; the *Lady Franklin*, Captain Legrand Morehouse; the *Galena*, Captain D. B. Morehouse; and the *War Eagle*, in command of Captain Daniel Smith Harris, lay waiting to take the easterners aboard.

The large number of additional guests, together with the uninvited and unheralded, quickly jammed the five boats and it was necessary to charter two additional craft — the *Jenny Lind* and the *Black Hawk*. But still accommodations proved insufficient. According to Dana "state-rooms had been allotted at Chicago, where the names had been registered, but many of the tickets had been lost, and very many persons had none at all. Besides there had been some errors — husbands and wives were appointed to different boats, and several young fellows were obliged to part from the fair ladies about whom they had hitherto revolved with the most laudable devoted-

ness." The dearth of berths caused about one-third of the guests to renounce the steamboat trip and return to Chicago. Despite this fact fully twelve hundred remained aboard the boats and were served a "sumptuous feast" said to equal those afforded by the best hotels in the country.

After brief speeches at Rock Island and Davenport, the passengers were entertained with a brilliant display of fireworks from Fort Armstrong. Bells rang and whistles sounded as the flotilla, bows wreathed with prairie flowers and evergreens, left Davenport at ten o'clock "and sailed, with music on their deck, like birds by their own song, lighted by the moon, and saluted by the gay fireworks from the Old Fort." Captain Daniel Smith Harris led off with the *War Eagle*, while the *Golden Era*, with Millard Fillmore aboard, brought up the rear.

Every one was delighted with the bright moonlight and the refreshing river breeze which greeted the boats as they puffed up-stream against the powerful current. Shortly after midnight a violent thunder-storm wound up the day in a manner at once peculiar and sublime. "Impenetrable darkness enshrouded us," wrote one, "and nothing could be seen of our fleet of seven steamers, save the lurid glare of their furnaces shining upon the agitated waves, and their red and blue lights sus-

pended from their bows. A sudden flash of vivid lightning would illumine the entire scene for a moment, and then as suddenly would it be blotted from view. At such moments, so intense was the light, and so vivid the impression produced that each separate leaf upon the trees on shore, each crevice in the bank, the form of each steamer, and even the countenances of those upon the guards, could be seen as plainly as if printed upon canvas." After a few hours the storm subsided and the weary travelers were quickly lulled to rest.

The night was spent with varying degrees of comfort, for many of the young men were obliged to "rough it" on mattresses laid upon the floor. But none of these was heard to complain, and Miss Sedgwick praised them for their good-natured and manly attitude. Another tourist was less optimistic, declaring that "through the whole trip many gentlemen" who deserved better accommodations "had but from two to four hours sleep at night, while sleeping by day was even more out of the question."

Dawn found the boats a few miles below Bellevue from whence the *War Eagle* led the fleet booming up the Fever River to Galena. A trip to the lead mines was followed by a picnic dinner in the woods. "Wines of Ohio and of France stood upon the board, sparkling Catawba the favorite,

and glasses were drained to the health and prosperity of Galena and its citizens." Charles A. Dana noted with regret "that total abstinence is not the rule of the Mississippi Valley, everybody feeling it to be a sort of duty to temper the limestone water of the country with a little brandy, or other equally ardent corrective."

Leaving Galena, the boats proceeded to Dubuque where, despite a heavy downpour, they were met by a throng of people. Ex-president Fillmore, Benjamin Silliman, George Bancroft, Edward Bates, Charles Hudson, and others addressed the citizens of Dubuque in much the same vein as at Galena, Davenport, and Rock Island.

Besides stopping at the scattered settlements along the river, frequent landings were made to "wood up" and the excursionists invariably trooped ashore. The process of "wooding up" always attracted considerable attention from those passengers who were not inclined to go ashore and wander about. While "wooding up" at Trempeleau, President Fillmore's daughter mounted a horse and scaled "the mountain that stands in the water". Her appearance at the summit was greeted with a salvo of steamboat whistles and the prolonged cheers from those aboard.

Amusements aboard the boats were as varied as human ingenuity could devise. Promenading on

deck and allowing the ever changing landscape on shore to "daguerreotype new pictures on the mind" formed the principal pastime for most of the travelers. In the evening the tourists resorted to dancing, music, and flirtation — the latter by those romantic souls who have always found their greatest joy on the upper deck of a steamboat with none but the moon to disturb their tryst. Since racing was prohibited, the boats were often lashed together and passengers enjoyed the opportunity of visiting old friends and making new ones. On such occasions dancing in one cabin would foster "a *conversazione* in another".

Slavery was probably the chief topic of conversation, for the Kansas-Nebraska Bill had just been passed. Other feature items in the news, such as riots in Brooklyn, the tragic wreck of the *Powhatan*, and interesting inventions were also discussed. One evening the distinguished Yale scientist, Silliman, attracted a large audience, but Dana was lured by "the gayer sounds from another boat" and was unable to report the lecture to the readers of the *New York Tribune*.

A mock trial was held in the cabin of the *G. W. Spar-Hawk* one rainy and disagreeable evening. William Schouler of the *Cincinnati Gazette* was tried for assault and battery on the person of Dr. Kennedy. The prisoner pleaded not guilty and

Moses Kimball of Boston was selected to defend him. W. C. Prime acted as prosecutor. Both Kimball and Prime appeared before the court heavily armed with dueling pistols and bowie knives. Both attorneys attempted to bribe the jury but happily evidence was produced to show that the injury had been done by breaking down the berth and bruising the plaintiff with slats while both he and the defendant were asleep. The case was promptly dismissed.

The appearance of the fleet on rounding the bend below Saint Paul on the morning of June 8th was described by those who witnessed it as "grand beyond precedent." The boats "approached in order as regular as though they were an armed squadron taking their position in line of battle" with two full bands aboard playing lively airs. Shortly after arriving at the landing, the excursionists were "bundled" into every conceivable class and variety of vehicle and trundled away at various rates of speed to the Falls of St. Anthony. Three prominent New York editors were seen perched precariously upon a one-horse water cart. The editor of the *Galena Jeffersonian* declared "the 'March to Finley' was nothing compared to our motley cavalcade. Here was a Governor bestride a sorry Rozinante of which even the Great Don would have been ashamed;

here an U. S. Senator, acting the part of footman, stood bolt upright in the baggage boot of a coach, holding on by the iron rail surrounding the top; here the historian of which the country is justly proud, squatted on his haunches on the top of a crazy van, unmindful of everything but himself, his book, his hat and spectacles; there a hot house flower, nursed in some eastern conservatory, so delicate and fragile that a falling leaf might crush it, but a beautiful specimen of the feminine gender, withal, would be seated over the hind axle of a lumber wagon, supported on either side by opera glass exquisites".

After viewing the Falls of St. Anthony the easterners visited Minnehaha Falls, Lake Calhoun, and Fort Snelling. In the evening a reception was held in the capitol where Henry Sibley welcomed the visitors. Millard Fillmore thanked the citizens of Saint Paul for their cordial reception and pointed out the significance of that city as a central point on one of the routes leading from the Atlantic to the Pacific. George Bancroft responded in behalf of the railroad directors and bade Minnesota become "the North Star of the Union, shining forever in unquenchable luster." At eleven o'clock the tired tourists returned to the landing where the boats lay illuminated, with steam hissing in their boilers. Shortly after mid-

night the fleet cast off from Saint Paul whose hills and lighted windows disappeared as the boats rounded Dayton Bluff.

Speeding down-stream at the rate of ten miles an hour, the passengers found time passing all too rapidly. In addition to the usual dances, lectures, and musical entertainment in the cabin, meetings were called for the purpose of drawing up resolutions of thanks to the hosts of the Grand Excursion. Not only were many toasts drunk to railroad officials, captains, and boats, but concrete appreciation was manifested by the generous contributions for the presentation of loving cups and gold plate. Millard Fillmore presided over the meeting in the *Golden Era* where \$300 was raised to buy a silver pitcher for Captain Hiram Bersie.

Cabin resolutions also gave unstinted praise to the lower officers and crew for their efforts in making the travelers comfortable and happy. Miss Sedgwick was delighted with the courtesy of Captain Legrand Morehouse and the "civil lads" aboard the *Lady Franklin* who performed their work as if it were "a dainty task, to be done daintily." The other captains and crews undoubtedly received similar recognition from the talented writers who graced the decks of their boats.

The responsibility of providing varied and well-prepared meals fell upon the stewards who never

before had been called upon to provide for such an array of notable guests. Since the floor of the cabin was covered with sleepers, it was the steward's duty to awaken them gently and diplomatically in order that the mattresses might be removed and the tables set for breakfast by seven o'clock. No deckhand or roustabout could perform so delicate a task. Breakfast over, the cooks were given the menu for dinner. Meats and vegetables were prepared in one kitchen while pastry and desserts were made ready in another. Stocks of fish, game, eggs, and vegetables were bought when needed at the various towns along the way. At Trempeleau, for example, two bushels of speckled trout were purchased and proved a rare treat for the excursionists.

Guests were never invited to visit the meat and vegetable kitchens for good and sufficient reasons, but they were cordially urged to drop into the pastry and dessert kitchen at any time. The number and variety of the delicacies prepared there was astonishing. "Morning, noon, and night," Miss Sedgwick declared, "a table was spread, that in most of its appointments and supplies would have done honor to our first class hotels, and its confections would not have disgraced a French artiste with all the appliances of a French cuisine. By what magic art such ices, jellies,

cakes, and pyramids, veiled in showers of candied sugar, were compounded in that smallest of tophets, a steamer's kitchen, is a mystery yet to be solved."

The notables who made the Fashionable Tour in 1854 were almost unanimous in their praise of the upper Mississippi steamboats. Only one adverse but by no means harsh criticism was made by an anonymous writer to the New York *Tribune*. "As the Upper Mississippi must now become a route for fashionable Summer travel," the critic observed, "it is only proper to say that those who resort here must not yet expect to find all the conveniences and comforts which abound on our North River steamers. Everything is very plain; the staterooms are imperfectly furnished, but the berths are roomy; the table is abundant, but butter-knives and sugar-tongs are not among its luxuries."

But sugar tongs or no sugar tongs, the Excursion of 1854 was by far the most brilliant event the West had ever witnessed. Millard Fillmore declared it to be an enterprise for which "history had no parallel, and such as no prince could possibly undertake." George Bancroft dwelt at length on the easy and agreeable manner in which over one thousand people had been conducted a greater distance than from New York to Liver-

pool. The Chicago *Tribune* described it as the "most magnificent excursion, in every respect, which has ever taken place in America".

The steamers arrived at Rock Island on June 10th. While some of the excursionists continued on down the river to Saint Louis, most of them boarded the train and returned to Chicago. They had been gone just six days, from Monday morning to Saturday evening. Every one was reported to be well and in excellent spirits. "Not a single accident had occurred to mar" the pleasure of the trip.

The New York *Tribune* urged travelers to follow "in the wake of the just completed Railroad Excursion, ascend the Upper Mississippi, the grandest river of the world, flowing for a thousand miles between shores of incomparable beauty — the boundaries of States destined to wealth, population and power almost without rivals in the Union." Miss Sedgwick observed that as a result of the completion of the railroad to the Mississippi, "the fashionable tour will be in the track of our happy 'excursion party, to the Falls of St. Anthony.'" Probably no other single factor was so important in popularizing the Fashionable Tour with easterners as the Grand Excursion of the Rock Island Railroad in 1854.

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