

THE PALIMPSEST

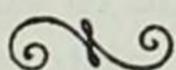
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How It all Came About

To Dr. Louis Pelzer, professor of history at the University of Iowa, belongs the credit for launching me on the subject—"Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi." It happened in this way.

I had just passed my oral examination for the M.A. degree and Professor Pelzer and I were walking slowly down the steps of Old Capitol discussing my thesis on George Canning and the Oregon Boundary written under Professor Harry Plum. I had come to the University in 1926 to secure an M.A., bent on a career of teaching and coaching. It was 1927, I felt well-grounded in my special fields, and several promising jobs had already cropped up.

I had been telling Professor Pelzer about my boyhood on the banks of the Mississippi in Dubuque. Suddenly he stopped short, as we were about to enter the Liberal Arts building, grabbed me by the arm, gazed intently into my eyes, and said: "Petersen, do you mean to tell me that your father was associated with the Diamond Jo Line

Steamers and that a considerable amount of manuscript material is available on the subject?" Somewhat startled by his abrupt inquiry, I answered in the affirmative. In deadly earnestness Professor Pelzer declared: "Petersen, I personally will pull the rope that hangs you to yonder tree if you don't start working on the history of steamboating on the Upper Mississippi for your Doctorate."

Needless to say, I gulped in amazement at this invitation to continue graduate work as a student under the most successful director of theses in the University of Iowa history department. Before we entered the Liberal Arts building I had accepted his invitation, one that was destined to completely change my future.

When I began my research on the subject of Upper Mississippi steamboating I had no idea of the magnitude of the assignment. Little did I realize that before my Ph.D. was written I would spend three years of unremitting toil paging through 200 years of newspaper files, and combing the records of the Collector of Customs and the Supervising Inspectors of Steamboats in such far-flung cities as St. Paul, Galena, Dubuque, St. Louis, Louisville, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh—records that now are all securely housed in the National Archives in Washington. Nor could I visualize the hundreds of books of travel, government documents, and contemporary periodicals in various libraries, all of which I would want to consult.

There were no travel expenses for graduate students in those days and, in order to reach these widely dispersed sources, I would have to depend on my own resources. One thing was certain; I was determined not to ask my father for assistance. Fortunately I had saved \$2,200 by the time I was a sophomore in college. Knowing this sum would not last long, I decided to do something I had never done before—hitchhike. In the following three years I traveled 20,000 miles—3,000 by steamboat and 17,000 by hitch-hiking rides along both banks of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.

Transportation for the 20,000 miles cost me a total of \$1.03 but of course room and meals were extra. Usually I stayed at a Y.M.C.A. at around \$1.25 per night. My three meals rarely exceeded that figure. For example, I left Dubuque with \$100, took a barge line boat to St. Louis, spent two weeks researching in St. Louis, rummaged through various sources in Cincinnati, Louisville and Pittsburgh before returning to Dubuque via Columbus, Ohio, and Chicago. After an absence of 35 days I still had \$16 left out of \$100.

My experiences were the talk of the historical profession. Dr. Joseph Shafer, Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, told Professor Pelzer that I should write a book about it. The main point is that, after three years of intensive research, aided by \$350 annual fellowships from the University for three years and a \$200

honorarium from the State Historical Society of Iowa between 1929 and 1930, I could still count over \$600 left in my personal bank account after receiving the coveted Ph.D. degree.

In the course of my travels I picked up thousands of old bills of lading, one of which was of the steamboat *White Cloud* carrying lead from St. Louis to New Orleans in 1844 at 10 cents per 100 pounds. In 1849 this boat set fire to 22 other steamboats and 15 city blocks of St. Louis in the greatest conflagration to strike that city. I was offered \$500 for this rare item some years later.

I consulted countless records, many that heretofore had never been used by historians. In one of my sorties I was fortunate in discovering Mark Twain's Pilot License issued to him in 1859. My find gained widespread publicity over the AP from coast to coast in 1928. These records can be found in the footnotes to my *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi*—which is my doctorate expanded 150 percent.

The author was deeply indebted to two men whose support and encouragement while engaged in historical research were of immeasurable value. Halleck W. Seaman of Clinton, Iowa, was a member of the board of the Inland Waterways Corporation. His brilliant grasp of all phases of transportation, both rail and waterways, was a constant revelation and inspiration to me. Major General T. Q. Ashburn, President of the Inland Waterways

Corporation was quick to note the importance of my research as articles appeared in *Minnesota History*, the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, *The Palimpsest* and the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, all of which appeared before receiving my Ph.D. The opportunity of securing first hand information about both the steamboat and towboat eras was made possible through the understanding and always available support of Halleck Seaman and General Ashburn.

Folks have frequently asked me how I acquired the nickname—"Steamboat Bill." Professor Pelzer used the name "Steamboat Petersen" to differentiate me from another Peterson in his History of the West class in 1927. It was Dr. Benjamin F. Shambaugh, Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa, who dubbed me with the sobriquet "Steamboat Bill" in 1929, twenty years before our celebrated steamboat trips began out of Clinton. Most people have erroneously associated the nickname with these State Historical Society summer outings.

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