

## Comment by the Editor

### *RIVER TRAFFIC*

The navigation of inland rivers has always been characterized by contradictions. When the water is high enough for easy navigation, towns and fields are likely to be flooded; when agriculture and business flourish, the waterways are often too shoal to serve the waiting commerce. Though the vehicles of river transport have progressed in speed and capacity from rowboats and rafts to steamboats and barges, they have never kept pace with the demands of expanding trade. In regions no farther north than Iowa, ice inexorably seals the passageway when human needs of communication are often most imperative. Innumerable bridges provide conspicuous evidence that waterways, though the most universal medium of travel, are also obstacles to rival ways of intercourse.

The most remarkable paradox of all, however, is to be found in the history of river transportation. The period of heaviest traffic occurred before the navigation of inland streams had been "improved". Steamboating flourished in the upper Mississippi Valley during the three or four decades before the railroads superseded the water routes. In those days the rivers were full of snags,

reefs, and shifting sandbars. Channels were unmarked by buoys or lights. According to Mark Twain, river navigation demanded exact knowledge of every riffle, bend, island, sandbar, snag, hill, point, woodpile, and tall tree, in fog and sunshine, by day and night, in flood stage and low water, upstream and down for hundreds of miles. Steamboats sometimes ran aground; delays occurred; contact with remote communities depended upon the vicissitude of spring freshets: and yet this was the golden era of river transportation when natural hazards were unmitigated by political solicitude.

About the time that steamboating began to decline, the government started to improve the rivers. Even though the Des Moines River improvement project was undertaken in the heyday of river traffic, the need of navigability waned before the work could be accomplished. Millions of dollars have been spent to dredge sandbars, blast reefs, remove snags, build dams, construct levees, and mark channels. But the popularity of river shipping seems to have disappeared around the bend with the romance of the side-wheel packet.

Genius can not be created by legal fiat: neither can minor tributaries, half filled with soil from cultivated fields, be converted into commercial thoroughfares by Congressional appropriations.

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