

THE PALIMPSEST

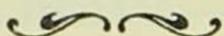
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On River and Highway

"The truth is, and we are compelled to say it, our mail establishment is a mere mockery; calculated rather to tantalize than to accommodate the public." The editor of the *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette* clearly expressed the feelings of Burlington and the whole Territory of Wisconsin. "We would almost as soon have a lodge," he continued on that gloomy day in January, 1838, "in some vast wilderness, where a mail never reached or was heard of, than to be subjected to the annoyance, disappointment and chagrin, incident to the mails of this flourishing, beautiful and populous country."

A week later, on January 27th, the same editor apologized to his readers for his failure to print more news. Although he subscribed to three Washington papers, he had received only one number of the *Globe*, and that was dated December 6th. He had just received a letter from the Territorial Delegate in Washington dated De-

ember 8th which acknowledged receipt of a letter two months after it had been posted in Burlington. Such a delay clearly could not be attributed to winter. "No weather or climate seems to suit the mail-carriers", he complained. "Summers too hot; Winters too cold. — When it rains its too wet, and when it don't its too dry . . . Presently," he prophesied, "we shall get three bushels of papers from the east, and the latest will probably be up to the 20th or 25th of December". Scarcely had he set this type when the "three bushels of papers" arrived ranging from November 1st to December 23rd. "Of course nothing *quite new*, and little interesting," he grumbled to his readers. "What we have gleaned you have."

But unhappy as was Burlington's lot, Dubuque seemed to envy her rival's facilities. "At present," declared the *Iowa News* of February 3rd, "there is a line of stages running from Burlington to Davenport tri-weekly, and yet from that place to this, we have only a horse mail, weekly by the contract, and this often fails, owing to the inefficiency of the mode of conveyance."

Spurred on by weekly editorials and personal disappointments, Dubuque's citizens appointed a committee on February 18th to secure signatures to a petition praying for the establishment of a tri-weekly four-horse coach mail route from Dubuque

to Milwaukee; weekly one-horse mail routes from Dubuque to the center of Delaware County and to the Cedar River settlement. They also sought to secure daily transportation of mail between Dubuque and Chicago and urged the inauguration of tri-weekly four-horse coach mail service between Dubuque and Saint Louis via the west bank of the Mississippi. Judge Ezekiel Lockwood, Joseph T. Fales, and John Plumbe, Jr., served as a committee to draft the petition to Congress.

Little development in postal facilities had occurred in the five years since George Karrick delivered a weekly mail from Galena to Dubuque. By 1838 more than a score of post offices had been established in the Territory of Iowa but mail delivery was generally haphazard. Mails for the Black Hawk Purchase were frequently left in a store or pioneer cabin along the way to be picked up on some future trip by the carrier. Weeks, and even months, sometimes passed before the receipt of important letters and newspapers. Occasionally mail carriers lost their mail bags while fording some swollen stream. Thus, in March the eastern mail that came by way of Chicago and Galena was lost in crossing Apple River. "A HEAVY MAIL FOR TWO HORSES" was the ironic caption of an item in the Burlington newspaper stating that only one letter from Bloomington "and *not a single news-*

paper!!!" had been received on a delivery from the north in May. Two post offices in Van Buren County were practically "out of the world" so far as mail service was concerned.

The roads in the Black Hawk Purchase were mere trails. Not many stagecoaches were in operation, for the whole region contained fewer inhabitants than present-day Appanoose County or the city of Clinton. Mails were carried either on horseback or in wagons that jolted over the ruts and bogged down when the snows melted and the rains fell. It is no wonder, therefore, that there was general rejoicing throughout the Territory when news came from Washington that the government had determined to provide a steamboat mail line between Saint Louis and Dubuque.

The inauguration of a fast line of mail boats promised valuable service to the upper Mississippi Valley, for the steamboat was the chief means of transportation and communication. Despite the Panic of 1837 and extremely low water on the Ohio and upper Mississippi rivers during the summer of 1838 at least twenty-eight steamboats plied along the eastern border of Iowa: the *Adventure*, *Ariel*, *Bee*, *Brazil*, *Burlington*, *Cygnets*, *Demoine*, *Empire*, *Fayette*, *Gipsy*, *Governor Dodge*, *Irene*, *Knickerbocker*, *Missouri Fulton*, *Newark*, *North Star*, *Olive Branch*, *Palmyra*, *Pavilion*, *Quincy*,

Relief, Richmond, Rio, Rolla, Science, Tempest, Transit, and Wisconsin.

During 1838, too, many new craft entered the trade. The *Empire* was described as a superior vessel of modern construction, beautifully finished and furnished. She boasted four boilers and was intended to engage in the trade between Pittsburgh and the lead district. Captain Orrin Smith appeared with the *Brazil*, a "swan-like" craft somewhat larger than the *Empire* and "a small sprinkle" faster. She had a gentlemanly captain, an experienced pilot, an obliging clerk, neat waiters, and a skillful cook. From stem to stern the boat was described as a perfect beauty. The *Knickerbocker*, another Pittsburgh-built craft of about 200 tons, had an elegant cabin lined with separate state rooms. The men's cabin alone contained fifty berths.

Measured by later standards, most of the boats that churned along the eastern border of Iowa in 1838 were dingy contraptions. The *Adventure*, for example, was described as "a very small, dilapidated and filthy boat". When William Rudolph Smith boarded her at Saint Louis in 1837 he found Black Hawk and some thirty men, squaws, and papooses aboard. The boat stopped at "every town on both sides of the river" and often at farms.

A passenger who arrived at the foot of the Des

Moines Rapids aboard the *Irene* late in September, 1838, found a horse-drawn keel-boat ready to proceed upstream to where the *Palmyra* lay at the head of the rapids waiting to exchange freight and passengers. Although delighted with the beautiful scenery and fine country which unfolded before him as the *Irene* steamed along, the traveler was astounded at the disreputable villages. "Keokuk, a cluster of Indian log huts," he declared, was a "disgrace to the name of the noble chief after whom it was called."

Failing to meet the *Palmyra*, the traveler fumed against yet another form of "imposition" practiced upon passengers by sundry captains. He was perfectly aware of the unpopularity of speaking disrespectfully of steamboats. "But when you see it advertised in your paper," he wrote a Saint Louis editor, "that a certain boat will meet a certain other boat at the Rapids, and there is an understanding between them to wait upon each other, and exchange freights and passengers — *don't believe a word of it.*"

Although such experiences were not uncommon, the steamboat was by far the fastest, most comfortable mode of travel to the Black Hawk Purchase. In 1838 a traveler made the trip by steamboat from New Orleans to Dubuque in nine days and seventeen hours, having spent twenty-seven

hours in Saint Louis while on the way. The *St. Louis* carried him upstream from New Orleans while the *Rolla* took him from Saint Louis to Dubuque. No other means of transportation could possibly match this for celerity. In the same year the *Brazil* made her maiden trip from Cincinnati to Dubuque in eight days, landing at nearly all ports along the way to take on and discharge freight and passengers.

Scarcely a boat put into port that did not carry passengers and freight for the straggling towns and villages that had cropped out along the eastern border of the Black Hawk Purchase. Thus, in the spring of 1838, the *Demoiné* discharged "upwards of 50 tons of freight" and 45 immigrant farmers at Fort Madison. Steamboats left their tribute of passengers and freight at every port, returning downstream with a cargo of lead or pelts. Since the Iowa country was not yet self-sufficient, grain and livestock was an upstream, rather than a downstream, cargo.

Steamboating was not without its hazards, however. Explosions, collisions, the dangers of snag and sandbar, and the presence of the Lower and Upper rapids all added to the perils of travel. In 1837 the *Dubuque* had exploded below Muscatine with a loss of twenty-two lives. Such tragedies led to stringent legislation for licensing captains

and inspecting steamboats "to prevent the destruction of lives". But accidents continued. The explosion of the *Moselle* at Cincinnati cost the lives of 125 passengers, including James Douglas, the postmaster at Fort Madison, the only person lost from the Iowa country. The *Rio* exploded about ten miles from Saint Louis while bound upstream to Galena. About thirty persons were injured, three or four dangerously. One night in September the *Missouri Fulton* struck a snag a dozen miles above Davenport and sank to her boiler deck. All the passengers were saved. Before the season of 1838 closed the *Irene*, the *Rolla*, and the *Governor Dodge* were also snagged and sank.

When low water stopped steamboating between Saint Louis and the ports on the Ohio during October, business operations were practically suspended. The general effect was to paralyze trade on the Upper Mississippi for not only was there little merchandise in Saint Louis to ship upstream but the extremely low water made the cost of steamboat transportation actually higher than by wagon. A charge of \$1.50 per 100 pounds was made for freight from Saint Louis to Quincy while \$2.00 per hundred was paid to transport goods as far north as Warsaw or Keokuk. In low water it was impossible for steamboats to cross the Lower or Des Moines Rapids.

During 1838 word was received that a young army officer, Lieutenant Robert E. Lee, had recommended the improvement of both the Des Moines and Rock River rapids at a cost of \$344,280. The *Iowa News* felt that the benefits derived from this work "*would more than authorize ten times the sum, and that the community at large will be repaid an hundred fold.*" By June sixty men were busy constructing boats with which to deepen the channel. Considerable work was done, but by October the weather became so cold that workmen refused to go into the water, even when three dollars a day was offered them.

That the tributaries of the Mississippi were considered important is attested by the surveys made to determine the possibility of improving these streams. Captain Gray ascended the Rock River to the mouth of the Pecatonica River with the *Gypsy*. The thriving settlements along the Iowa and Des Moines rivers also welcomed the steamboat. Early in May, the *Pavilion* with more than fifty passengers aboard, William Phelps commanding, performed the experiment of ascending the Iowa River to present-day Columbus Junction. The voyage of the *Pavilion* brought cheer to the settlers who were penetrating the Iowa River Valley. Steamboats plied the Des Moines River as far as Keosauqua and Iowaville.

Many immigrants to the Black Hawk Purchase took a Great Lakes steamer to Green Bay, Milwaukee, Racine, or Chicago, and then purchased an outfit with which to travel overland. From Milwaukee one road paralleled the proposed Milwaukee and Mississippi railroad, passing through Watertown, Madison, and Dodgeville. A second road struck out in a southeasterly direction from Milwaukee to the Galena mineral region by way of Lake Koshkonong. Another road ran almost due west from Racine through Janesville to the mineral region. From Chicago immigrants could proceed overland in a northwesterly direction by way of Elgin, Midway, and Galena to Dubuque. Another road from Chicago swung off in a southwesterly direction to Ottawa. From there one trail veered sharply to the northwest across the Winnebago Swamp to Dixon's Ferry whence the Mississippi could be struck at either Savannah or Dubuque. Or, prospective settlers might travel westward through Hennepin to Andover at which point different roads led to Davenport, Buffalo, Bloomington, Oquawka, and Burlington.

Some immigrants traveled overland to Chicago and then followed one of these dim trails across the sparsely populated prairies of northern Illinois. Others came westward over the Cumberland Road, turning off to the northwest on one of the

many branches that led to the Black Hawk Purchase. Settlers who followed this famous highway found it "horrid in spring; but in the autumn, when the weather was dry, it was one grand pavement."

Overland traffic found the broad and swiftly flowing Mississippi a barrier to westward progress. Ferries were accordingly established at strategic points to transport immigrants into the "Promised Land". Important crossings of the Mississippi were located at Dubuque, Bellevue, Davenport, Clark's Ferry (Buffalo), Muscatine, Burlington, Fort Madison, and Keokuk.

Most ferries were crude flat boats — for with such craft all pioneer communities had their beginnings. The *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette* carried an advertisement by the Saint Louis Ferry offering to sell a "Horse Ferry Boat, with Six Blind Horses, and gear complete for eight horses."

Typical of such ferries was that operated between Stephenson and Davenport by John Wilson. This energetic pioneer advertised "two good Ferry Flats, beside several small Boats" which he promised to hold in "readiness to accommodate the public" at all times. Wilson hoped by "industry and perseverance to merit and receive the patronage of travellers and emigrants." He also had a steam ferry under construction which would

make the Davenport crossing unsurpassed. "Travellers from Chicago, Peoria, or any other point at the south or east," Wilson declared, "will find it to their interest to pass by this route, on their way to the fertile valleys of Pine, Cedar, Iowa, Wabesipineca [Wapsipinican], or, indeed, any other part of the territory. It is the most direct route to Du Buque or even to Galena, as it cuts off a great bend in the river, and the traveler passes over a direct, dry and level road. Be not therefore diverted from this route by the idle tales of interested speculators."

To command a large share of the traffic across the Mississippi was the ambition of every ferryman and town along the river. When little Oquawka announced that it would soon have a ferry, the Burlington editor informed immigrants to the Black Hawk Purchase that an excellent steam ferry was plying regularly between Burlington and Montreal on the opposite bank. "They need not wait", the editor pointed out, "until the promised boat at Oquawka shall go into operation."

In September the ferry company at Burlington announced to the public that their steam ferry was in complete order and that the road on the Illinois side from Montreal to the Bluffs had been repaired and that travelers could cross without delay. The

ferriage rates were typical of those charged along the Mississippi:

For one horse and wagon	\$1.00
Two horses (or oxen) and wagon	1.50
Four " " " "	2.00
Each additional horse or ox	.25
Footman	.25
Man and Horse	.50
Horse, mule, ox or cow	.25
Hogs or sheep	.08
One hundred lbs. of freight	.12½

A liberal deduction was offered on droves of cattle, hogs, and sheep; and when the Mississippi was so low as to be fordable the rates were usually reduced one-half.

Once across the Mississippi the pioneers of 1838 found themselves in a land almost devoid of roads. True, as early as 1836 the Assembly of the Territory of Wisconsin had passed an act appointing six commissioners to lay out a Territorial road west of the Mississippi "commencing at Farmington on the Des Moines river, thence to Moffit's mill, thence on the nearest and best route to Burlington, in Des Moines county, thence to Wapello, thence by the nearest and best route to Dubuque, and thence by the nearest and best route to the ferry opposite Prairie du Chien."

In 1838 the firm of Hinman & Dutton published a *Map of the Settled Part of Wisconsin Territory*

which showed this historic river road. Commencing at Farmington the road joined another at Fort Madison that came northward from Missouri through Keokuk and Montrose to Fort Madison. Thence it continued in a northeasterly direction by way of Augusta to Burlington. Two roads branched northward from Burlington, the one following the Mississippi to a point opposite the Oquawka ferry and the second, the regular river road, extending to Bloomington. Closely hugging the Mississippi, this road passed through Iowa, Clark's Ferry, West Buffalo, Rockingham, and Davenport, whence it swung inland in a northeasterly direction to Pleasant Valley and Higginsport on the Great Maquoketa and back to Bellevue on the Mississippi. From Bellevue the road flanked the western bank of the Mississippi, passing through Dubuque, Peru, Jacksonville, and on to the mouth of the Turkey River. Thence travelers might cross the Mississippi on the Cassville Ferry to Prairie du Chien or turn westward up the Turkey River to Salisbury. The latter settlement was connected with Peru by a road that ran up the Little Maquoketa to Durango and then swung in a northwesterly direction to Salisbury.

Such roads could scarcely be called highways in the modern sense, the commissioners simply being commanded to mark the route "by stakes in

the prairie a reasonable distance apart, and by blazing trees in the timber." On January 8, 1838, a law was approved establishing a Territorial road from Bloomington "to the town of Geneva, thence the nearest and best route to Moscow, thence the nearest and best route to the town of Rochester, thence the nearest and best route to the forty mile point on Cedar river." Another act was approved the same day to locate and establish a Territorial road from Dubuque "to Whiteside's mill, on little Maquoketa, thence the nearest and best way to Andrew Bankston, on the head waters of little Maquoketa". This road ultimately led to the settlement in Delaware County.

The absence of roads, bridges, and ferries made travel over such trails by ox-team and wagon very difficult. "In dry weather," one pioneer recalled, "common sloughs and creeks offered little impediment to the teamsters; but during floods and the breaking up of winter, [they] proved exceedingly troublesome and dangerous. To get 'stuck' in some mucky slough, and be thus delayed for an hour or more, was no uncommon circumstance. Often a raging stream would blockade the way, seeming to threaten swift destruction to whoever would attempt to ford it."

Transportation and communication in the Territory of Iowa were still in a primitive state. De-

spite glowing editorial descriptions, the steamboat was still crude, and another decade was to pass before these craft could begin to merit the title of "floating palaces". Comfortable stagecoaches were unknown in a land where roads existed only on paper and the population scarcely equalled that of an average Iowa county today.

But there were men of action as well as dreamers in the Territory. Residents of Iowaland were active in their support of internal improvements: work was going on to improve the rapids in the Mississippi, stock was being sold to construct the Milwaukee and Rock River Canal, meetings were being held to join Dubuque with Lake Michigan by rail or canal. One visionary, John Plumbe, actually prophesied the transcontinental railroad. More important was the first of a series of special acts, approved on December 29, 1838, that provided for "laying out and opening of Territorial Roads". Before Statehood was achieved the legislature had passed ten general statutes and nearly two hundred special acts authorizing the location of roads. Except for steamboats, contact with the outside world was still as difficult in 1838 as it had been for Daniel Boone in Kentucky.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN