

The Doremus diary:

Dodging sandbars & log booms

Doremus's diary begins in 1867. The following entries are excerpts from his years along the Iowa portion of the Mississippi River.—The Editor

Thursday, Oct. 12th [1876]. Took views about Buena Vista Tuesday and Wednesday. Today I went on the ARKANSAS with the LADY ANNIE to Cassville. Rowed up the Turkey River, telegraphed down for my apparatus and took ten negatives of the bridge and bluff. Got back to the boat at six o'clock. Went back on the railroad cars, leaving my boat on the Turkey River.

Saturday, Oct. 14th. Put my small boat on the railroad cars and went to the Turkey River station. Rowed from there to Cassville, Wisconsin. Took some views from the top of the Dennison house where I had to tie my dark tent and camera fast on account of the high wind. Rowed back about four o'clock.

Monday, Oct. 23rd. Reached Savanna, Illinois about 9 o'clock. I was in my dark room developing and they cast off too soon and the wind took us on shore a half mile too far up. Laid there until sundown and started but ran upon a rock and stuck.

Tuesday, Nov. 7th. Sent to Capt. E.J. Chacey, Albany, Minnesota, a tinted stereo of his boat HELENE SCHULENBURG and the WHITMORE towing rafts at Lansing.

Tuesday, Dec. 5th. Went to Sabula this morning and took some negatives of the pork packing establishment. Will came in a hurry to tell me there was 16 inches water in the hold so I walked back leaving him to bring the things by the train. Have got the ferry pump in and a man pumping her out now at 10:30 p.m.

[Doremus returned to the East Coast on December 21, 1876; within two months he was back on the Mississippi.]

Sunday, March 11th [1877]. It has been extremely cold but the weather moderated this morning and about noon it commenced to snow and is snowing hard now. Had a conversation today with Capt. McCracken regarding the Diamond Jo Line of steamers. The owner is Jo Reynolds who first started in business buying furs and skins along the river carrying his scales with him. He wore a large diamond breastpin from which he got the name of Diamond Jo. His steamers are called the Diamond Jo Line.

Wednesday, May 23rd. Took negatives from the tower of the Clinton water works in the forenoon and of the bridge in the afternoon. Lost my Dalmeyer stereo tubes (\$80) in the river. Offered a reward of five dollars and got them again.

Thursday, May 24th, 1877. Started at 5 this morning. Current took us wrong at the bridge, so we went the wrong side of the pier and into a boom filled with logs. I got my anchor up stream. Hired four men and pulled up and into the channel. Took up anchor and started down. The steamer LITTLE EAGLE with a raft overtook us so I bargained with them to take pictures of their boat for them and have them tow us to Princeton, Iowa. . . .

Monday, July 16th. The steamboat which was to tow us to Davenport having stopped running, forced us to start down the rapids on our own hook this morning. We pulled across the river and got along very well until after dinner when the wind rose and we tied up. I swung the hammock on shore under some crabapple trees and the rest of them, Al, Hattie, and Lizzie set up the arches and commenced playing croquet. After supper we started again. We kept a little too close to the Iowa shore for fear of being blown to the other side and ran on some rocks which projected under the water letting the hull of the Wanagan [raft with a shelter for sleeping or preparing food] go over but raking the top. It knocked it in some and knocked down all the shelves on that side and took out the same corner that was taken out last year. There was the greatest rattling and cracking ever heard as the side crushed in. The things on the shelves came rattling down. We got to Davenport and tied up at half past ten.

Friday, Sept. 7th. Took in \$3.00 this morning as I told the people I was going away immediately at noon. Proctor's gallery came along and we tied all the boats together and floated down in a big fleet. . . . As we were starting from Port Louisa, a man called out to know if we wanted help, as he wanted to work his passage down. I told him to jump on. His name is Jas. Williams. We got down to New Boston, Illinois about dark.

Wednesday, Sept. 12th. Found that our new man James Williams had decamped during the night taking the old LADY ANNIE which we lately called the MATTIE. He took plenty of food and a new rubber coat belonging to me and some clothing belonging to Al. I telegraphed to Keokuk, Iowa to



COURTESY PAUL C. JUHL

The *Lady Annie*, a dinghy named after one of Doremus's daughters. The *Success* is in the background.

have him arrested if going down the river and sent postal cards to Iowa towns down the river. Took some negatives of Burlington, Iowa before dinner. We started about sundown and got about six miles down the river.

Thursday, Sept. 27th 1877. Left Montrose, Iowa this morning having hired two men to go along to the beginning of the Des Moines canal. The bottom of the river here is all smooth rock. We ran on the rock soon after starting, but hauled off with the anchor and crab and by that time there was a steamer aground in the narrowest part of the channel below us and another on the rocks still farther down, so we had to wait an hour or more until they got off. Then before we got through that place we saw another stuck and before we got to the canal we saw another big steamer with barges aground on the rocks, so I think we did very well. Reached Nashville, Iowa at 11 o'clock.

Sunday, Oct. 14th. As the wind was up stream yesterday morning, I took the railroad cars and started down to La Grange, Illinois for the *LADY ANNIE*. Started up river with her at 10 o'clock. Eight miles up my mast broke. I cut down a small tree with my pocket knife and made a mast and got to Canton, Missouri for my dinner. . . . At dark I stopped and got some supper from some wood chip-pers and started out hoping to reach Gregory Land-ing, Missouri and stop for the night. Before I got there the wind got up, so I up sail and went for the gallery. As there was a thunderstorm coming up, it was rather dark and I had to feel my way around the sand bars. (Got to my boat about 5 hours after dark).

Editor's note: After Doremus passed Iowa, he continued to record his travels in his diary. He encountered yet more entrepreneurs on the river — a gunsmith and candy boat, several medicine boats, a junk boat whose operator bought rags and old iron, and showboats.

He also encountered more danger on the river: Near Bolivar, Mississippi, he writes: "We are near a weak place in the levee and a large body of convicts are working at it cutting brush and trees and wheel-ing earth. . . . It is raining hard and they are in the mud and swamp up to their knees. The river is 15 ft. or more above the surrounding country and we are near the top of it and look down on the houses in town. If the levee should break at the weak place, we would shoot across the country and the *SUCCESS* would never see the Mississippi River again." Another time he notes, "We soon lost sight of land in the fog, got in a big eddy and started on a voyage in search of the North Pole."

Doremus did more than navigate swift currents and shoot photographs; he nursed feverish pas-sengers. "Will and Lizzie are getting better and I have struggled on alone until now, 3 meals a day to be carried to each besides drink, medications, oranges, lemons, lemonade etc.," he writes in October 1879. "Three beds to make, my own meals to cook, wood to collect and saw and split, pictures to take, my own courage to keep up which is the hardest of all."

Yet his travels had lighter moments. He writes of sharing whiskey with hospitable captains; of passing by "noble" plantation houses; and always of pho-tographing and selling images.

By the diary's end, he had succeeded in reaching New Orleans — in fact, he had been towed back up to St. Louis and was now headed south again. The last entry is for September 27, 1881, as Doremus, suffering from malaria, writes, "Pulled off [a sand-bar] and remained at anchor all night. . . . I am so weak I can hardly move and my heart is way below zero. All alone. . . . Stopped about dark just above the eddy at Columbus, KY." Doremus lived another eight years.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Ralph R. DuPae, research consultant at the Murphy Library, University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse, transcribed the entire Doremus diary (1874-1881) and made this material available for research. John P. Doremus's great-great-granddaughter, Charlotte E. Doremus of New York City, gave permission to quote from it. Mary Noble of Iowa City provided useful material on Mitchell County. Biographical information was provided by the Passaic County Historical Society (Paterson, N. J.)