

## The Ripple

In June, 1841, the roofless stone walls of the new Territorial capitol rose bare and open to the sun on the crest of a hill overlooking the Iowa River. Facing the unfinished building was a mushroom growth of houses, stores, and inns which had sprung up within two years' time, ready for the coming of legislators and office holders and the attendant population that was expected in the newly created seat of government.

Iowa City was resonant with building activities in those days; but on the twentieth of June there was probably no tapping of hammers or rasping of saws, for it was Sunday. Down at the foot of the hill back of the new capitol was a ferry landing where a boat served the needs of travellers on the Old Military Road; and here was staged on this June Sunday an incident that is best left to the descriptive powers of the editor of *The Iowa City Standard*, in a news item entitled "Arrival Extraordinary!!!".

"We this week announce an event which in our judgment, is of more importance than any that has happened since our city has had an existence.

"On the 20th instant our citizens were surprised by hearing the puffing of an approaching Steamer. We need not speak of the astonishment caused, by such unusual sounds; — sounds which were for the



first time heard on our peaceful river — nor of the many conjectures which were started as to the course from whence they proceeded. Our doubts were soon dispelled by the glorious reality, as the STEAMER RIPPLE for the first time came dashing up the Iowa and landed at the ferry, which henceforth is only to be known by the more appropriate name of *the Steam Boat Landing*.

“The hearty cheers which hailed the arrival, and the warm welcome which the Captain, crew and passengers received from our citizens, showed that they appreciated the enterprise and determination which had originated and successfully carried out such an undertaking. Among the passengers on board we noticed Messrs. Wesley Jones, Moses Cramer, Jas. W. Neally, D. W. C. Barron, Jno. Taylor, of Burlington, Maj. Jno. B. Newhall, the talented author of ‘The Sketches of Iowa,’ and our fellow townsman James Herron.

“The Ripple arrived at the conjunction of the Iowa and Cedar river on Friday evening. On Saturday morning she started and ran up within four miles of this city before she stopped for the night. There were no impediments found to an easy and safe navigation of the river, if we may except a few snags and projecting trees, a few miles below the city, which will be removed by our citizens during the present week. The experiment on the whole was a most satisfactory one. The present comparatively low stage of water will effectually silence any



sneers that may be thrown out concerning high water navigation, &c., and we now have the fact proved, beyond the possibility of a doubt, that the Iowa river is navigable beyond this place for seven months at least during every year.

“This arrival has effectually changed the relation in which we formerly stood to the other towns in this Territory. We are now no longer dependent on the towns on the Mississippi for our imports — nor are we subjected to the labor and expense of drawing across the country all articles brought from abroad. We have now a situation in many respects superior to any in the Territory.

“The advantage of being the furthest point in the interior, which has a safe and easy communication by water with all the great commercial cities in the west, is too manifest to need remark. Indeed some of our neighboring towns on the Mississippi have laid claims to being places of great importance, on this ground alone. We trust we have settled all disputes on this point and that they will now at once yield the palm to us, and surrender all claims that they may have on this score. But when we add to these advantages our acknowledged superiority in beauty of location and fertility of soil and call to mind our almost total exemption from those diseases, which are and have ever been the scourges of the west, we can confidently demand the attention of emigrants and others to a situation which combines every advantage that can attract the merchant and



the farmer, 'the man of business or the man of pleasure.' "

It was a day and an occasion worth celebrating. The citizens calmed themselves sufficiently to retire for the night, but on Monday morning they held a mass meeting at the City Hotel and among other things appointed a committee to invite the captain of the *Ripple* and the crew and passengers to a public dinner in their honor to be given by the people of Iowa City. Another committee was named to interview the innkeepers of the town with this celebration in view. And it was resolved "that a suitable person be selected to accompany the STEAM BOAT RIPPLE down the Iowa River so far as may be necessary to ascertain the principal obstructions, and the best mode and the probable expense of removing said obstructions." Captain Frederick M. Irish, a prominent settler in the town, who had run away to sea in his youth, shipped on a three years' whaling voyage to the northern Pacific and elsewhere, and later became a New York harbor pilot, was deemed a suitable person and was so deputized.

By two o'clock in the afternoon arrangements had been made, the invitation delivered and accepted, and the citizens and their visiting friends sat down to a sumptuous dinner at the National Hotel. *The Iowa City Standard* prints at length the speeches and toasts that enlivened the occasion.

The most notable of the passengers who came up



with the *Ripple* was John B. Newhall, a Burlington resident, who bore the title Major, and acted as Iowa's first real press agent. In the early months of 1841 he had already published a volume entitled *Sketches of Iowa, or the Emigrant's Guide*. Two years later he was lecturing in England on the resources and possibilities of "Western America"; and in 1844 he published in London an *Emigrant's Handbook* for these western States, and followed it by *A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846*.

His was the principal address at the dinner in honor of the *Ripple* and we give it here in part:

"GENTLEMEN:—It is with feelings of heartfelt gratification that we return our thanks for the cordial reception with which we have been honored by our friends of Iowa City. This, is indeed, a triumph; an achievement well deserving all the encomiums so justly bestowed upon my worthy friend Capt. Jones.

"What are the circumstances under which we are assembled? Gentlemen, we are here this day to commemorate the fact that on the 20th of June, 1841, the *first* Steam Boat moored alongside the bluff of your City?

"From this day forward the practicability of navigating the Iowa river remains no longer the subject of conjecture.—From this day henceforth, a new era will commence in the destinies of your City. The most skeptical must now believe; for here is the evidence before you — yes, gentlemen, ere another



month shall elapse the performance of the gallant little 'Ripple' shall be emblazoned to the world in letters of living light.

"I know the farmers of Johnson county will hail this as an auspicious omen. Well do I know too, that every settler upon the verdant banks of the Iowa looks upon it as an era pregnant with the happiest results of the future. Would you know how the people of every village and cabin from the mouth of the Iowa, hailed our arrival with the spirit of gladness? Ask the passengers of the 'Ripple.' They will tell you of the cheering voice of welcome, not only the loud huzzas, but in the sharp crack of the 'rifle' which the sturdy pioneer loaded in the morning for the fleetest deer — little dreaming that ere the sun should sink behind the western prairie — his charge was to salute the FIRST steamer that had ever dared penetrate the serpentine windings of the 'Iowa Fork'. . . .

"A few short years ago 'Fulton and Rumsey' were thought to be *insane* for agitating the subject of propelling vessels by *steam* across the ocean. This too — in the intelligent circles of enlightened Paris. Now gentlemen 28 days will bring you from the Grey Towers of Windsor Castle to the rude Wigwam of my friend Poweshiek.

"Thirty months ago and what was the condition of your country? The shrill 'puff' of the steamer might have startled the wolf from his lair; or perchance the Indian hunter returning to his Wigwam.



The impress of civilization had not even marked its outline. But a change has come over the face of the wilderness. But yesterday morning—and 250 intelligent and accomplished citizens of both sexes, were embarking on a pleasure excursion from your landing, *up* the Iowa by ‘steam.’ Johnson County—from nothing two years and half ago, now contains a population of about 2300 freemen!—And who compose this population on the frontier of the ‘far west.’—Is it that renown class of *outlaws* ycleped the ‘Squatters?’ Let us analyze, for a moment the character of our population,—gentlemen they never asked me ‘down east’ if you were actually cannibals. But some of the *knowing ones* thought you were ‘mighty’ near it. I only wish those respectable personages, who view the world from ‘Vauxhall Garden’ to the ‘Battery’ could suddenly be transported to your firesides. Could ‘drop’ into your rude court houses; they forget that the unshackled and mighty mind of man, soars beyond brick walls and pavements. That the conceptions of the pioneer are tinged with sublimity. Look at him as he grapples with the surrounding elements; look at his self reliance. His sole trust in his own energies that subdues the forest and makes the wilderness blossom like the rose. The man who lives and dies within the confines of his native country east of the Alleghanies, knows not the character of the western man. But to these traits of heroism, of unshrinking energies, do I attribute the mighty power that *we* are destined to wield.



“Such, gentlemen, are the wonders of the 19th century; such the onward march of the freemen of Iowa. The page of our history will be resplendent with brightness, so long as intelligence and virtue are the basis of our actions.

“In conclusion allow me to propose the following sentiment to which I believe your response will be amen.

“The gallant little ‘Ripple’ first to decide the practicability of navigating the Iowa. May her enterprising commander be *first* in the esteem of our citizens, and *first* to reap the rewards of his triumphant achievement.”

Captain D. Jones, whom Newhall so warmly toasted, was a Mormon and a resident of Nauvoo, according to Captain F. M. Irish. He went out with the great migration to Utah some years later and died in the West. For information on his earlier life the reader is referred to this modest response to the toast of Major Newhall:

“GENTLEMEN:—I am neither an orator, nor the son of an orator; but merely a son of Neptune, a son of the Five Oceans.

“From such a one you will not expect a fluent speech, lest you be disappointed. Permit me, however, to make one or two plain and unvarnished remarks on the present occasion. Exploring has been my study and delight from a boy. To accomplish this object, I have sacrificed the comforts of the social hearth. To this end I have endured the rage of



the five elements. I have endured the smiles and frowns of heathen Monarchs. I have grappled with the Lion and Tiger. I have contended with the cannibals, warclub and tomahawk, when my comrades were cut down by my side. I have also been an almost only survivor in shipwrecks. But gentlemen, I have the gratification to say that the reverse has been my fortune in exploring the Iowa river. Providence smiled on this enterprise.

“Instead of the red man’s war club; I have been saluted by the hunters rifle, echoing from bluff to glen. Instead of the roaring Lion, the loud hurrahs of my well wishers welcoming me up your river.

“Encouraged by the generous and spirited feelings of my passengers and officers, with confidence in the suitableness of my boat,— I have surmounted every obstacle, and have come here to prove beyond contradiction, that the Iowa river is navigable.

“It’s true gentlemen; that I have been somewhat presumptuous in thus risking my all to the accomplishing of this object without a guarantee that I could clear my expenses, or that I should be able to return with my boat out of your river. But gentlemen, I am here and congratulate you on this occasion, in this beautiful little queen of Iowa, hoping that the rising generation, who so beckoned me up your river, may enjoy the benefits of this enterprise, and make it a bright page in the annals of the history of Iowa City. And now, gentlemen; your river is navigable. The boat is ready; your obedient servant, is at your service, whenever the public spirit,



and generous enthusiasm of your growing City is ready. Permit me to acknowledge the honor you have done me, and with gratitude, believe me to be ever your obedient servant."

Following this effort, various citizens toasted the *Ripple* and its Captain; and wishing them both many happy returns, the company broke up.

On Thursday morning of the same week, citizens of a small town over on the Cedar River were thrilled by the cry "She comes, she comes!". The *Ripple* had reached Rochester in Cedar County. And straightway, the enthusiastic citizens, headed by Dr. S. B. Grubbs, welcomed and toasted Captain Jones at a public dinner, and indulged in visions of a great future for the town.

But alas for human hopes. Neither Iowa City nor Rochester owes much to steamboat commerce. Occasionally in later years a boat nosed its way up to Iowa City and in the sixties a steamer was built and launched there. But the river commerce failed to develop.

As for the *Ripple*, it never returned. No one seems to know what became of the little craft that first roused the community hope. And though hope was rekindled at each later arrival of a steamer, it is doubtful if the people of Iowa City were ever again stirred as deeply as when Captain D. Jones, the lion hunter, moored the *Ripple* at the ferry landing back of the rising capitol.

JOHN C. PARISH