In the Steamboat Era

Since Davenport was a Mississippi River town, all the boys of my acquaintance enjoyed riding on steamboats. We went aboard for Sunday School picnics, which invariably wound up at Port Byron upriver or Linwood downstream. The wheezing stern-wheeler had a barge attached and an orchestra that played for dancing. On a few Sunday excursions I traveled as far as Clinton, then quite a voyage. There also were moonlight trips, but I was far too young for that romantic experience. Steamboating got into my bones, and as I wrote once, in an introduction for Ben Lucien Burman's *Steamboat Round the Bend,* I can still hear steamboat whistles in my sleep. When I grew older I made longer trips as a reporter. I loved to stand in the pilot house behind Captain Walter Blair and watch for the markers toward which he steered his craft, meanwhile taking in his rich fund of river lore. To me the panorama of the upper river, unfolding as the steamboat wove back and forth between its banks, was enchantment.

My insatiable curiosity led me, on several Saturday afternoons, to climb the steep stairs to the power room on the drawbridge of the Government

bridge. The engineers were friendly and explained the mechanism, which operated on a turntable. It was a great thrill to watch a raft go through and count the strings of logs that it propelled.

I used to visit the levee to talk with Captain Jim Osborn, the steamboat agent, whose office occupied a corner of a dingy warehouse. The big event was the semi-weekly arrival of a Diamond Jo liner, usually the *St. Paul* or the *Quincy*, side-wheelers that operated between St. Louis and St. Paul. They were many times the size of the slim packets that made the daily run to Clinton, or the *W. J. Young, Jr.*, which ran semi-weekly to Burlington. The shuffling Negro stevedores added picturesqueness to the river; they had an easy lope and a ready chuckle, and no one would have predicted their disappearance.

Once I was standing on the levee looking up at the promenade deck of a Diamond Jo steamer and listening to the music of a group of Negro players who performed with great gusto. Suddenly they burst into a rollicking song that made every spectator want to shout and prance and clap his hands. It was Metz's *Hot Time in the Old Town*, destined to become one of the country's most infectious tunes and to hang on for years and years.

The calliope was not part of the steamboat noise when I was a small boy; I saw it only at

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the end of the circus parades, when the cry was: "Hold the horses!" But later one of the Streckfus boats installed a calliope, and Lee B. Grabbe, who played for dances and had a local reputation as a songsmith, operated it. I recall it as a horrendous contrivance of ear-splitting noises.

In a machine shop at the foot of Brady Street, a mechanic named Pugh was tinkering with a horseless carriage. It was a four-wheeled buggy, with an engine box attached. I never did see it run. I believe the first motor car to reach Davenport was a runabout used by Hi Henry, the minstrel, to lead his parade. To my knowledge the first Davenport man to use a motor car every day was Henry Techentin.

As a schoolboy I became tremendously interested in the Indian history of Davenport and the surrounding country. I was always eager to stand on a historic site. Camp McClellan, where Iowa soldiers had drilled prior to leaving for the Civil War, was then untouched woods, sometimes used as a picnic ground. I searched the terrain for relics of the past, and when, on one occasion, I picked an Indian arrowhead out of a brook, I was elated.

I recall my surprise at learning that my schoolmates not only did not know that the War of 1812 had reached our city, but refused to believe it. I never did get to investigate Credit Island, later Offerman's, where Major Zachary Taylor was

routed by a band of British and Indians on September 6, 1814, but I wandered over the island above East Moline where Lieutenant John Campbell's party was attacked, and tried to determine where he had beached his boat.

I read Black Hawk's story, but found it hard to visualize a conference with General Winfield Scott north of the Rock Island tracks at Perry Street, for Antoine Le Claire's house had not yet been reproduced. I used to talk with a collateral descendant of Le Claire, who had a law office in the Masonic Temple, and whose swarthy complexion was an Indian legacy. I also read the Goble memoir, which tells about the building of Colonel George Davenport's house on Rock Island. Although I often saw the ruins of the house from the decks of steamboats, I never stood beside it until after it had been restored. I also read Franc Wilkie's *Davenport Past and Present,* Edward Bonney's *Banditti of the Prairie,* and Ambrose C. Fulton's autobiography, *A Life's Voyage,* which Fulton gave me when he was over 90.

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