

The Race of the *Grey Eagle*

In the United States great strides had been made in telegraph construction since the first message had been flashed between Washington and Baltimore in 1844. The Atlantic seaboard had been linked with the Mississippi at a number of points between St. Louis and Dubuque as early as 1848. A decade later every important river town as far north as Prairie du Chien could boast a connection with the East. Citizens of Keokuk, Fort Madison, Burlington, Muscatine, Davenport, and Dubuque would learn of the successful laying of the Atlantic cable the instant the work was consummated. But St. Paul and the river towns in Minnesota must still rely on the steamboat to bring them this important news.

For a week before the cable was actually laid the *Daily Pioneer and Democrat* at St. Paul had amused its readers with imaginary messages between Queen Victoria and President James Buchanan. But the complete isolation of the North Star State weighed heavily upon the editor for well he knew that such towns as Dubuque, Galena, and Prairie du Chien would chide St. Paul for her backwardness. Still unaware that the Atlantic cable had already been laid, the editor

urged his readers on August 18th to give financial assistance to the company already chartered to build a telegraph line between Prairie du Chien and St. Paul. Only \$40,000, or \$150 per mile, was needed to perform the work. He considered it a "shame" that every State save Minnesota should be connected with the Atlantic seaboard by telegraph. Because of her isolation Minnesota was "way behind" and must "sit apart" from the rest of the world until local pride saw to it that the telegraph line was built. Minnesota, he concluded, was farther from Prairie du Chien in 1858 than Prairie du Chien was from London or Constantinople.

Almost simultaneously with the penning of these words the first message flashed across the Atlantic. "Europe and America are united by telegraph. Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, and good-will to men." Other messages followed and none more notable than Queen Victoria's to President James Buchanan.

Since Dubuque lay sixty-five miles below Prairie du Chien and since the Packet Company had boats scheduled to leave both these ports on their regular run at exactly the same time it was generally conceded that the Prairie du Chien boat would reach St. Paul first. But Captain Daniel Smith Harris of the speedy *Grey Eagle* determined that it should be otherwise. And it was the *Grey Eagle* that was scheduled to leave Dubuque

at nine o'clock Tuesday morning, the same hour the *Itasca* was leaving Prairie du Chien.

News of the laying of the Atlantic telegraph, together with Queen Victoria's message, reached Dubuque on the evening of August 16th and was printed in a special edition by the local press. While Dubuque was rejoicing over this epochal event, Captain Harris determined to celebrate the occasion by beating Captain David Whitten into St. Paul with the news. In order to do this it would be necessary to run the *Grey Eagle* 265 miles while the *Itasca* was traveling 200 miles. This was not an easy task, since the *Itasca* was a boat that had been hanging up records for fast time.

The *Grey Eagle* left Dunleith at 8:30 A. M. on August 17, 1858, carrying copies of the Dubuque and Galena papers containing the Queen's message and President Buchanan's reply.

Every bit of combustible material — pitch, butter, and grease — that could be obtained was aboard the *Grey Eagle* when she started up the Mississippi. The boat responded nobly to the extra fuel, sped swiftly up Maquoketa Chute, past Cassville, Guttenberg, Prairie du Chien, La Crosse, and reached Winona, one hundred and fifty miles above Dunleith, at about 9:30 P. M. The *Itasca* had arrived just three and one-half hours before, so that her nine-hour lead had been reduced by almost two-thirds despite the fact that

the *Grey Eagle* had towed a wood flat for twenty miles. After a twenty-minute delay at Winona the *Grey Eagle* continued upstream, so far ahead of schedule that Captain Harris ordered a deck hand to stand on the stage and heave the mail to the bank at each landing as the boat went by at half speed. Freight was discharged only where necessary and many of the passengers, induced by a generous offer of free meals and berth and moved by a desire to be a party to what already promised to be a record-breaking run, agreed to remain on board.

At 4 A. M. the next day, the *Grey Eagle* came snorting up to the Red Wing levee, sixty-five miles above Winona and only fifty miles from St. Paul. The *Itasca* had not stopped at Red Wing, thereby gaining several precious minutes on Captain Harris' boat. Fire brands streamed from the funnels of the *Grey Eagle* as she continued upstream, past Cannon River, Vermilion Slough, Sturgeon Lake, Diamond Bluff, and on to Prescott, at the mouth of the St. Croix. The *Itasca* blew for Hastings, just two and one-half miles away, as the *Grey Eagle* came up to the Prescott levee. Mail and freight were dumped pellmell on the levee, and the *Grey Eagle* whisked by Point Douglas and over to Hastings in time to see the smoke of the *Itasca* disappear around the bend of the river about two miles upstream.

When Captain Whitten discerned the smoke

of a racing boat hard astern it did not take that shrewd Yankee long to guess the reason for this haste. He promptly ordered the engineer to crowd on every pound of steam possible.

Just below Pine Bend the astonished master of the *Itasca* saw the *Grey Eagle* poke her nose around a curve a mile away, running almost ten hours ahead of her regular schedule. At Merrimac Island the distance was reduced to three-quarters of a mile, at Newport a half mile intervened, Red Rock found the *Grey Eagle* a hundred yards closer. Kaposia, Pig's Eye, Dayton Bluff — and a boat's length separated the two boats. One mile further and they would be in St. Paul.

The frenzied passengers and crew of the *Grey Eagle* cheered madly as the gap slowly closed and the bow of their boat drew abreast of the *Itasca's* stern. But the latter had the inside track and in the next quarter of a mile it was clear that Captain Harris could not hope to reach the levee first. In the succeeding minute, the two boats drew almost neck to neck, with whistles blowing and cannon booming, but the *Itasca* nosed into the wharf first. While her crew was busy putting out the stage, the *Grey Eagle* glided alongside with a deck hand perched on the swinging stage, a number of papers fastened into the notch of an arrow of wood. The next instant they were cast into the arms of Harris' agent on the dock.

Captain Harris had made the run from Dun-

leith to St. Paul in twenty-four hours and forty minutes, making twenty-three landings, and taking on thirty-five cords of wood en route. His average speed, counting all stops, was a fraction over eleven miles an hour upstream, but the *Grey Eagle* probably ran thirteen miles an hour while under way. This was the fastest time ever made by a steamboat; it eclipsed the *Die Vernon's* record of 1853 by over three hours.

The race of the *Grey Eagle* against time and the *Itasca* is without a parallel in Upper Mississippi steamboating. The fast time of such boats as the *War Eagle* (first), the *Die Vernon*, and the *West Newton* pale beside this colorful exploit. For sheer drama it equals the heated contest between the *Robert E. Lee* and the *Natchez* in 1870. Only a venturesome skipper like Daniel Smith Harris would have conceived a plan so daring. Only a sleek boat like the *Grey Eagle* could have carried such a plan to a victorious conclusion.

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