

The Trans-Atlantic Cable

The laying of the Atlantic cable a century ago attracted tremendous international interest. For sheer public excitement it would compare with such modern feats as the breaking of the sound barrier or the launching of Sputnik. Since 1958 marks the centennial of this event it is important to point out its special significance to Iowa.

When the submarine cable was invented in 1840 men began to speculate on its practical use. The completion of a cable across the English Channel touched off a wave of activity in which Cyrus W. Field took the leading role. Indeed, the ultimate success of this stupendous undertaking can be attributed in large measure to the perseverance and courage of Field.

Cyrus W. Field was born on November 20, 1819, of sturdy New England ancestry. His father was David Dudley Field, a Yale graduate and Congregational minister. His mother was Submit Dickinson, the beautiful daughter of Captain Noah Dickinson. Cyrus West Field was the eighth child and seventh son of this union. He was given a careful Puritanical upbringing but at the age of fifteen received permission from his

parents to seek his fortune in the business world rather than attend college.

Although his early life was marked by hard work and all too frequent misfortune, young Cyrus forged slowly ahead. He married Mary Bryan Stone in 1840. Six months later the firm with which he was associated failed and it fell upon him as junior partner to repay the debts. He was so successful that in 1849 he had paid all obligations; by 1852 he had amassed a fortune of \$250,000.

Two years later Cyrus Field met a Canadian engineer, Frederick N. Gisborne, who was promoting a telegraph line across Newfoundland for the purpose of connecting with fast mail steamers running between St. John's, Newfoundland, and Ireland. It was Gisborne's hope to shorten the transmission of news across the Atlantic by several days.

About this same time, while studying a globe in his library, Cyrus Field got the idea of a cable spanning the ocean bottom between Newfoundland and Ireland. He wrote Samuel F. B. Morse about his bold idea. Morse and others had envisioned such a plan, but no promoter such as Field had ever lent his support. Up to this time the longest submarine cables had been laid between England and Holland, and Scotland and Ireland. Shorter cables had been laid to various islands in the Mediterranean.

In a book, *Railways Steamers and Telegraphs*, published in London and Edinburgh in 1867 by W. & R. Chambers, the following is recorded:

The year 1856 came, and found Mr. Field and his company still engaged in laying down cables to connect Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia. A grand experiment was made for him one night by the English and Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company; they sent messages through 2000 miles of underground wire, and shewed that the force was quite adequate to that amazing amount of work. In order to bring greater monetary power to bear on the project, English capitalists were invited to join; and at length was born, towards the close of the year (1856), the *Atlantic Telegraph Company*.

On August 6, 1857, the U. S. S. *Niagara* and the H. M. S. *Agamemnon* set out from the west coast of Ireland and commenced laying a cable across the Atlantic Ocean. The ships had been "suitably equipped" for this work and loaned to Cyrus W. Field and his associates by the governments of Great Britain and the United States. As they proceeded slowly westward the cable which was being paid out from the *Niagara* suddenly snapped and the end was lost. Unable to continue, the *Niagara* and the *Agamemnon* returned to Plymouth and the remainder of the cable was carefully stored away.

Undaunted by this initial failure, Field raised additional capital and constructed seven hundred miles of new cable. A fresh start was made early in 1858, but misfortune stalked the venture as a

double break resulted in the loss of 144 miles of cable. By July 17th, however, the *Niagara* and the *Agamemnon* were ready for a third attempt. Proceeding to mid-ocean the ends of their respective cables were carefully spliced and on July 29, 1858, the two ships separated. The *Niagara* proceeded slowly toward Newfoundland while the *Agamemnon* steamed cautiously to the Irish coast. Should the vessels succeed in their undertaking, news in Europe and America would become the common and instantaneous property of both hemispheres. Breathlessly people on both sides of the Atlantic awaited the outcome.

As the first reports of the third attempt to lay an Atlantic cable trickled through there were plenty of Doubting Thomases who scoffed at the plan. The *Sioux City Eagle* of August 21, 1858, quoted the well-known promoter and builder of telegraph lines in Missouri as follows:

Tal P. Shaffner publishes a letter stating his belief that a current of electricity of no known force or mode of generation can be transmitted through submerged wire for a distance of three thousand miles. He predicts that the cable will be laid a thousand or more miles, and then be found unavailable for telegraphing. "In this dilemma the company will have the cable broken again, and the accident will be charged to Providence. This will be a *finale*." The Transmission of an electric current through so much submerged wire was the most formidable of threatened difficulties. It might have been decided by dropping the cable into some quiet bay, and experimenting there. A telegraph across the Continent, over Behring's Straits,

through Northern Asia and Europe, is likely to be built before the present cable is submerged. The longest cable now in existence stretches from Varna to Balaklava, across the Black Sea, a distance of 340 miles. This affords no criterion for a judgment of the success of a cable from Ireland to Trinity Bay.

The interesting fact in this news commentary is that it was printed two weeks after the cable had been laid and five days after Queen Victoria's message had been sent. It illustrates the isolated position of such towns as Sioux City and St. Paul compared with towns in direct communication with the East by telegraph.

Towns connected by telegraph, on the other hand, were in closer touch with the great enterprise, since Cyrus Field kept a daily log which was later published by many newspapers.

Let W. and R. Chambers record the story as taken from this log:

Day after day the operations went steadily on, paying out eastward by one ship, westward by the other — 265 miles on the 30th, 540 by the evening of the 31st, 884 by the 1st of August, 1256 miles by the 2d, about 1550 by the 3d, 1854 by the 4th, and 2022 by the 5th. How it happened that they could lay so much as nearly 400 miles in one day was because each ship did half that quantity — one eastward and the other westward. So well had the work been timed, that the ships arrived at the two islands on the same day, the one at Valentia and the other at Newfoundland. . . .

The first lightning message, the first electric telegram, was flashed across the Atlantic on the 6th of August 1858.

The *Agamemnon* and the *Niagara* spoke to each other, telling what they had done in landing the two shore-ends of the cable; and then Valentia sent word to London, and Newfoundland to the United States and Canada. England was delighted, but America was almost wild with joy. Mr Cyrus Field, in Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, sent messages to the New York Associated Press and to President Buchanan; . . . and the Lord Mayor of London interchanged compliments with the Mayor of New York. But the most majestic messages were between Queen Victoria and the President of the United States, on 16th August.

The excitement in the United States was recorded in all papers, and bitter rivalry was revealed as each publisher tried to "scoop" the others by being first with the news. The *New York Times* for August 16 declared:

From the time the first message concerning the operation of the Atlantic Telegraph Cable was received yesterday, until 10 o'clock at night, when the various bulletins gave what purported to be an abstract of the Queen's Dispatch to President BUCHANAN, there were crowds of people on the TIMES Square, waiting, with more or less impatience, for the announcement of the Simon Pure message. They had been hoaxed by the *Herald*, in relation to the working of the line, and in relation to the whereabouts of the *Niagara*, and were determined not to swallow anything more that came through . . . unless its correctness should be vouched for by some reliable establishment. They waited, and the longer they waited the more the excitement increased. Whenever anything later was placed upon the TIMES bulletin, they would crowd around it in admirable disorder—those in the periphery of the circle shouting to those nearer the centre of attrac-

tion, to read it aloud; and those near the centre shouting to the periphery, to hold its tongue and listen. While thus engaged, the newsboys would ventilate some old papers, and announce the Message. The eager crowd would buy them up rapidly, and rush under a lamp to peruse them, and discover that they had been sold. Then another bulletin would appear, and another rush would be the result. And so they kept it up until a late hour. When exhausted by their efforts, they were obliged to retire before having seen the President's reply.

Elsewhere there was considerable feeling exhibited. On the Battery there were large assemblages, until a late hour, looking out anxiously and unsuccessfully for the *Niagara*. As soon as the substance of the Queen's dispatch was known, there was a display of fire-works from the Pewter Mug.

Second only to the laying of the Atlantic cable itself was the interchange of messages between Queen Victoria and President Buchanan. These were published in full by editors in Iowa and throughout the United States and read and re-read by excited Americans. The Queen's message to President Buchanan follows:

TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, WASHINGTON

The Queen desires to congratulate the President on the successful completion of this great international work, in which the Queen has taken the deepest interest.

The Queen is convinced that the President will join with her in fervently hoping that the electric cable which now connects Great Britain with the United States will prove an additional link between the nations whose friendship is founded upon their common interest and reciprocal esteem.

The Queen has much pleasure in communicating with the President, and renewing to him her wishes for the prosperity of the United States.

This message was transmitted from London to Washington in sixty-seven minutes through the ocean cable and land wires; and in about the same time the following message was transmitted back to the Queen by President Buchanan:

TO HER MAJESTY VICTORIA, QUEEN OF GREAT BRITAIN.

The President cordially reciprocates the congratulations of Her Majesty the Queen on the success of the great international enterprise accomplished by the science, skill, and indomitable energy of the two countries. It is a triumph more glorious, because far more useful to mankind, than was ever won by conqueror on the field of battle.

May the Atlantic Telegraph, under the blessing of Heaven, prove to be a bond of perpetual peace and friendship between the kindred nations, and an instrument destined by Divine Providence to diffuse religion, civilisation, liberty, and law throughout the world. In this view will not all nations of Christendom spontaneously unite in the declaration that it shall be forever neutral, and that its communications shall be held sacred in passing to their places of destination, even in the midst of hostilities?

Other cities in the United States were equally excited over this successful feat, as revealed by the following telegraphic despatches printed in the *New York Times*:

Boston, Monday, Aug. 16.

The successful working of the Atlantic Telegraph will be celebrated in this city to morrow, as follows: One

hundred guns will be fired on the Common, at noon, and all the bells in the city rung. In the evening, the trees on the Common will be hung with French and Chinese lanterns; all the city buildings will also be illuminated, and four bands of music will discourse music on the Common. The citizens generally will also illuminate their residences.

Albany, Monday, Aug. 16 - 10¹/₂ P. M.

There is immense excitement here owing to the receipt of the Queen's Message. As soon as the intelligence reached the city, rockets were fired from opposite the telegraph office, bonfires blazed in all the streets, and the greatest rejoicing prevailed. Cannons are now being fired and the bells are ringing.

Buffalo, N. Y., Monday, August 16.

The receipt of the Queen's Message caused great excitement throughout the City. St. Paul's chimes, together with all the church and fire bells are ringing. Crowds congregate in the streets, and immense enthusiasm prevails. Preparations for a grand illumination are in progress.

Ithaca, N. Y., August 16 - 10 P. M.

Upon the receipt of the Queen's Message, the Telegraph-Office here and other buildings were brilliantly illuminated. Cannon are now firing, flags flying, bonfires blazing, bells ringing, and WHITLOCK'S brass band is playing English and American national airs in front of the Telegraph-Office.

Baltimore, Monday, Aug. 16.

The Mayor has issued a proclamation congratulating the citizens of Baltimore on the success of the Atlantic Telegraph, and recommending the firing of a salute of two hundred guns, the ringing of all the bells in the city, and displaying of flags from the public buildings and shipping, between 12 and 1 o'clock to-morrow.

Louisville, Ky., Monday, Aug. 16.

The reception of the Queen's Message was announced by a grand display of fireworks by the Directors of the National Telegraph Company. The greatest enthusiasm prevailed, and all doubts respecting telegraphic-communication across the Atlantic are thoroughly dispelled. The City authorities are making great preparations to celebrate the event.

New-Orleans, Monday, Aug. 16.

The Queen's Message was received by the National Telegraph Line at 7 o'clock this evening.

It caused much excitement, and the disbelievers are now satisfied.

Although most disbelievers may have been satisfied, not all were pleased with the messages. Thus, *Harper's Weekly* of August 28, 1858, declared that the Queen's message was "sane but Commonplace" while the President's message was "silly and impertinent." Others found cause to criticize the messages but these were definitely in the minority.

Typical of the excitement in Iowa over the successful laying of the Atlantic Cable was the reception of the news in Iowa City. On August 1, 1858, the *Iowa City State Reporter* hailed the "Glorious News" and noted that "We have assurances from all points, that so soon as the Queen's and President's messages are received, there will be public and private demonstrations of joy, by the ringing of bells, firing of salutes, &c., in every city, town and village, throughout the

whole country." On another page the editor chronicled the Iowa City celebration:

Last Friday afternoon the news of the success of laying the Atlantic Telegraph Cable was received in town. Kelley's Battery "blazed away" and a large crowd gathered at the University Grounds where speeches were made by L. B. Patterson, Esq., Mr. Cornick, Cap't Kelley and W. W. Forney.

Like other Iowa cities, Davenport observed the successful laying of the Trans-Atlantic cable. When one editor suggested another celebration, however, the Davenport *Daily Gazette* of September 2, 1858, demurred and subsequently was glad to report:

There was no Telegraph Cable celebration here yesterday, as was proposed by our contemporaries. We are inclined to the opinion that two reasonably fair and very spirited celebrations are quite enough for a city even as big as Davenport, and even over such a triumph as the successful laying of the Atlantic telegraph cable. Besides, we think our speakers have fully exhausted themselves whether they have the subject or not.

Webster City was far removed from direct telegraphic communication with the East and had to rely on the stagecoach to bring the latest newspapers from Dubuque or Iowa City. On August 13 the *Hamilton Freeman* (Webster City) recorded the "Glorious News!" and assured its readers there was "No Humbug This Time!"

The news of the final success of this great undertaking

was despatched on the wings of lightning through all parts of the Union, on the 6th instant. . . . This glorious and rather unexpected news was everywhere received with the greatest rejoicing . . . Our exchanges bring us news of the demonstrations of joy at the various cities where the news of the success of this great enterprize has been received.

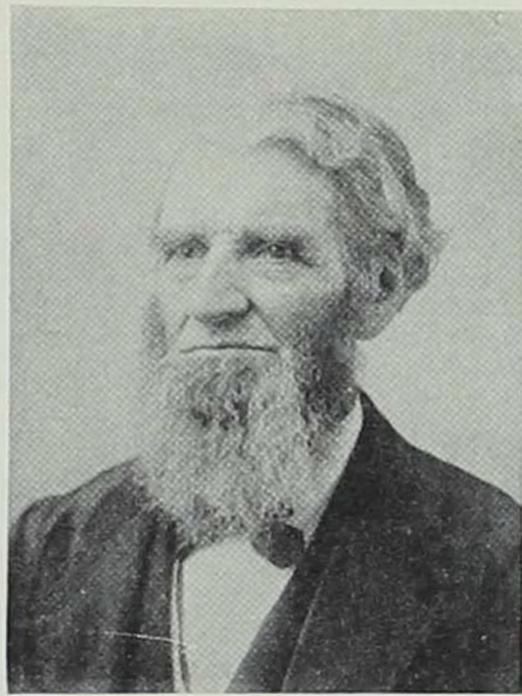
It was not until August 27, however, that the Queen's message and final details were read by readers of the *Hamilton Freeman*.

Equally remote but just as enthusiastic was the *Mitchell Republican* of September 2, 1858.

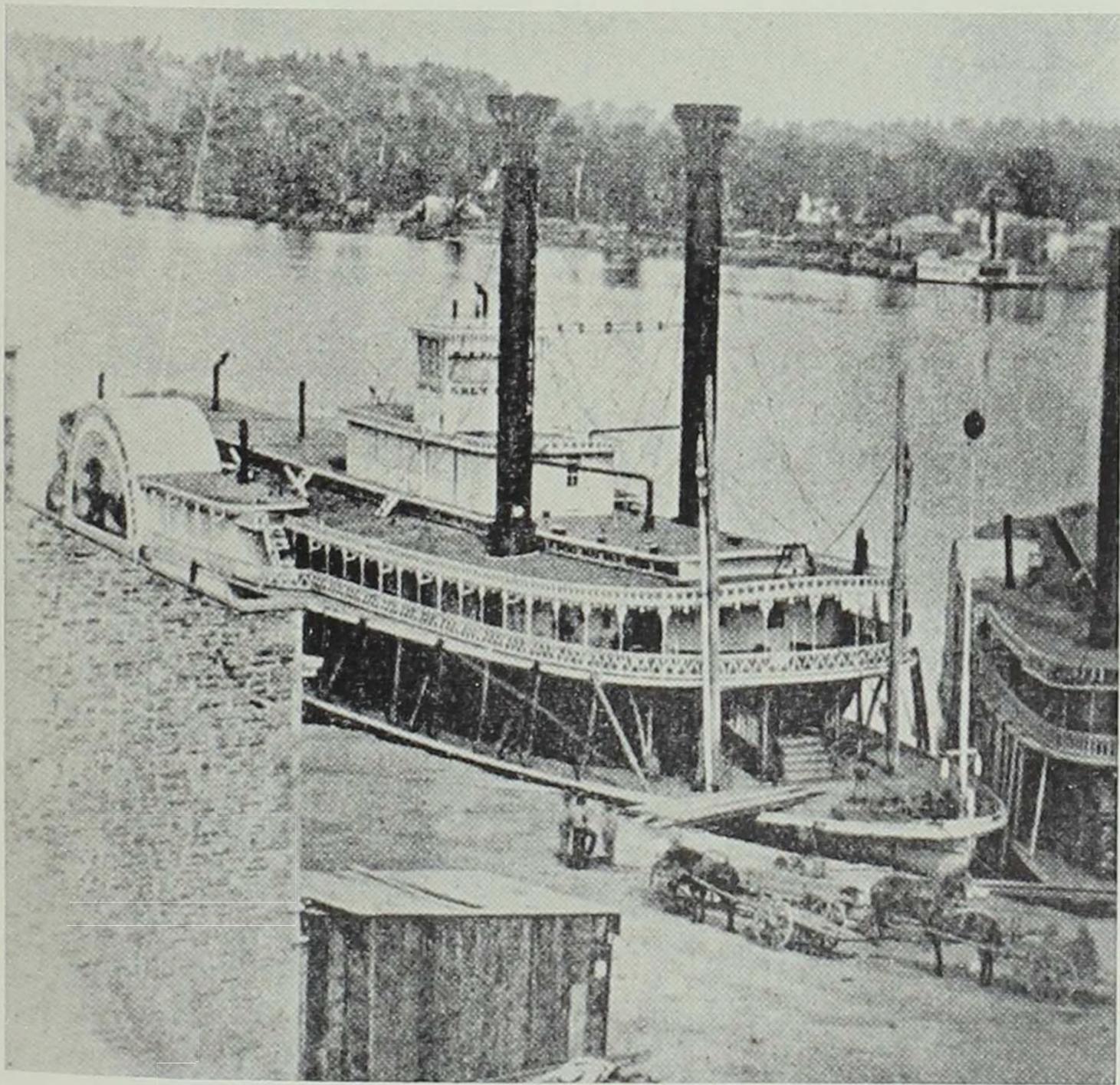
Two great continents with their teeming millions, which had ever been separated by weeks and months of travel, were, by the consummation of this enterprise, brought into speaking distance. The commercial men of the old and new worlds could at once meet, and, as it were, traffic through this subtle yet obedient messenger; and the missionary upon the Levant greet and encourage his fellow laborer in the western "wilds of America." What a consummation! No wonder our people half adore the projectors and carriers out of the enterprise. The names of Prof. Morse and Cyrus W. Field will ever stand out in bold characters, upon the world's history, as chief among the benefactors of the race.

All the metropolitan newspapers carried screaming headlines. The *New York Weekly Tribune* of August 7 contained a "postscript" of the "reported success" of the Atlantic Telegraph, but it was not until the following week that "The Greatest Event of the Age" could be reported fully with

Intrepid steamboat captain from 1829-1861, who raced his *Grey Eagle* from Dubuque to St. Paul in 1858 and was the first to deliver Queen Victoria's message to President Buchanan on the successful laying of the Atlantic Cable.

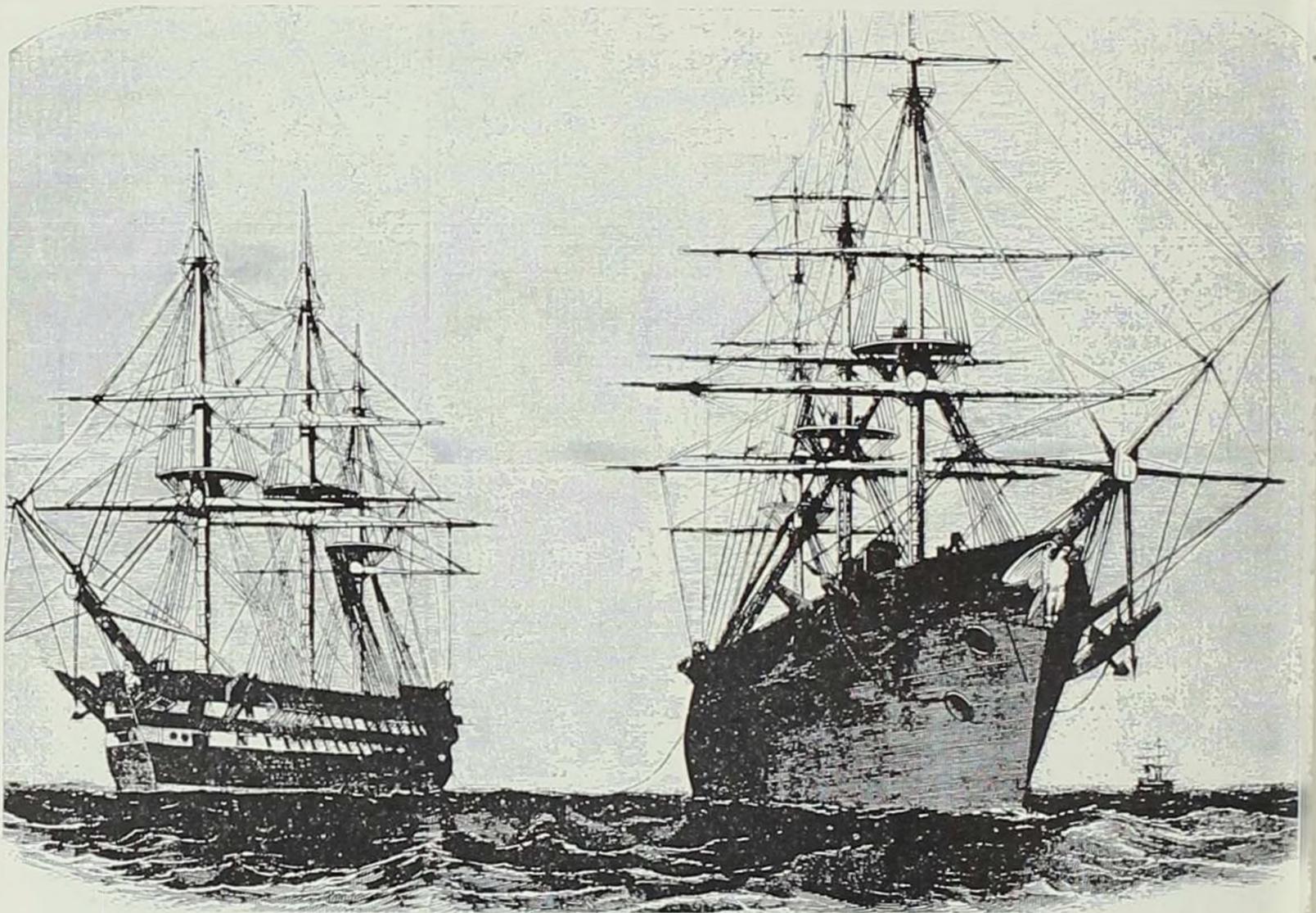


DANIEL SMITH HARRIS



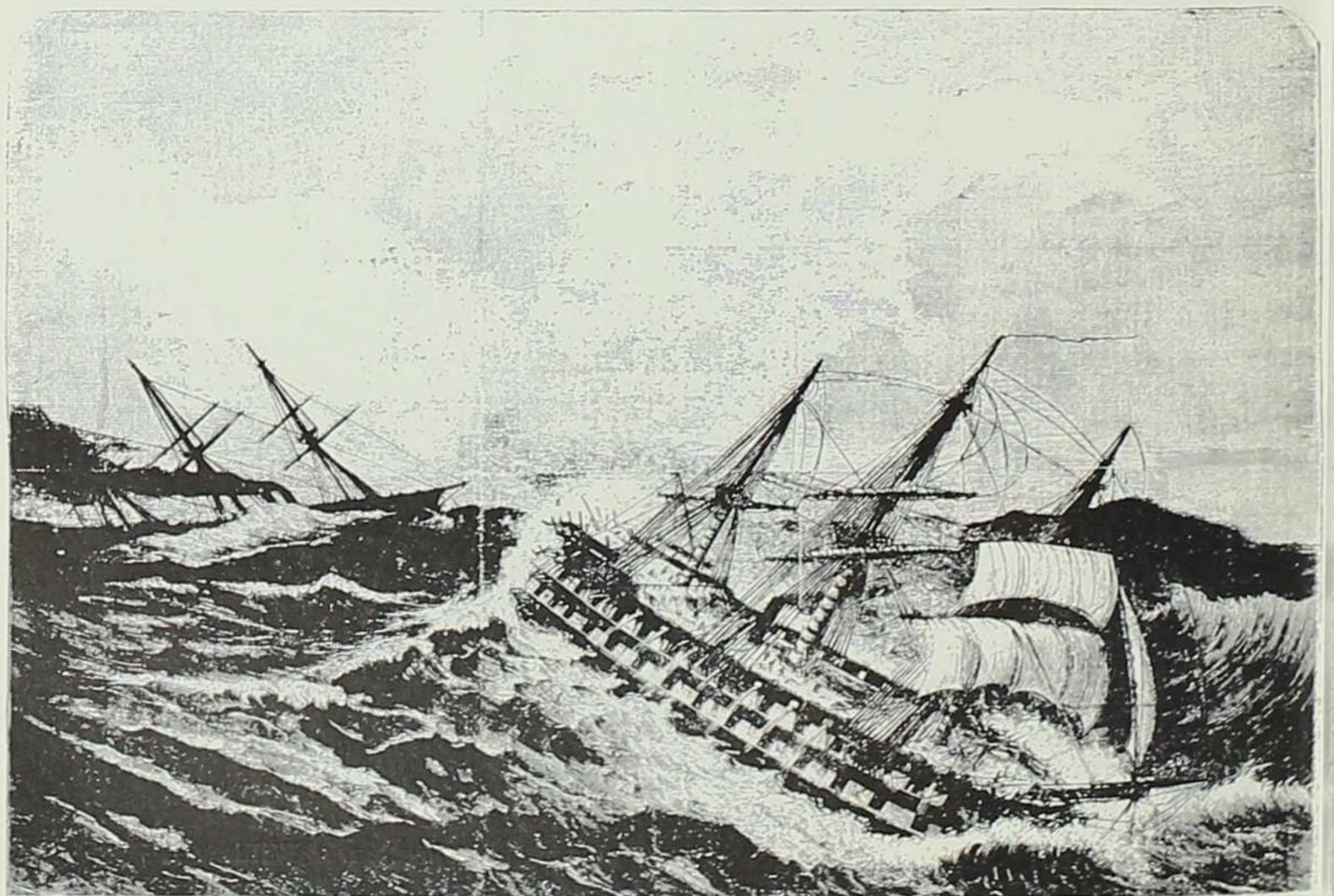
From the collection of William J. Petersen

The Steamboat *Grey Eagle* at the St. Paul Levee
She set a record of 24 hours and 40 minutes from Dubuque
to St. Paul carrying Queen Victoria's message.



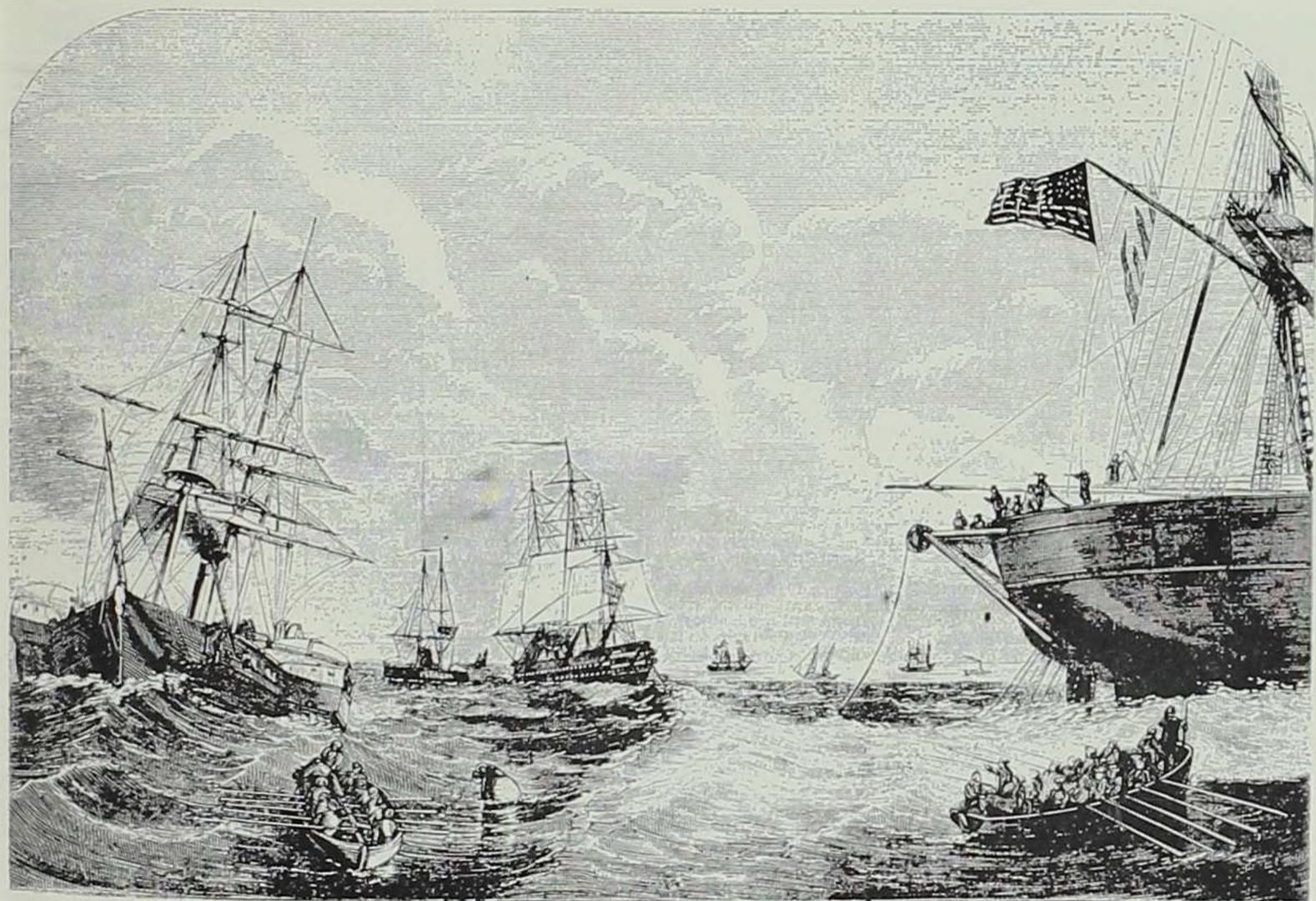
From *Harper's Weekly*

The *Agamemnon* and the *Niagara* Laying the Cable in Mid-Ocean



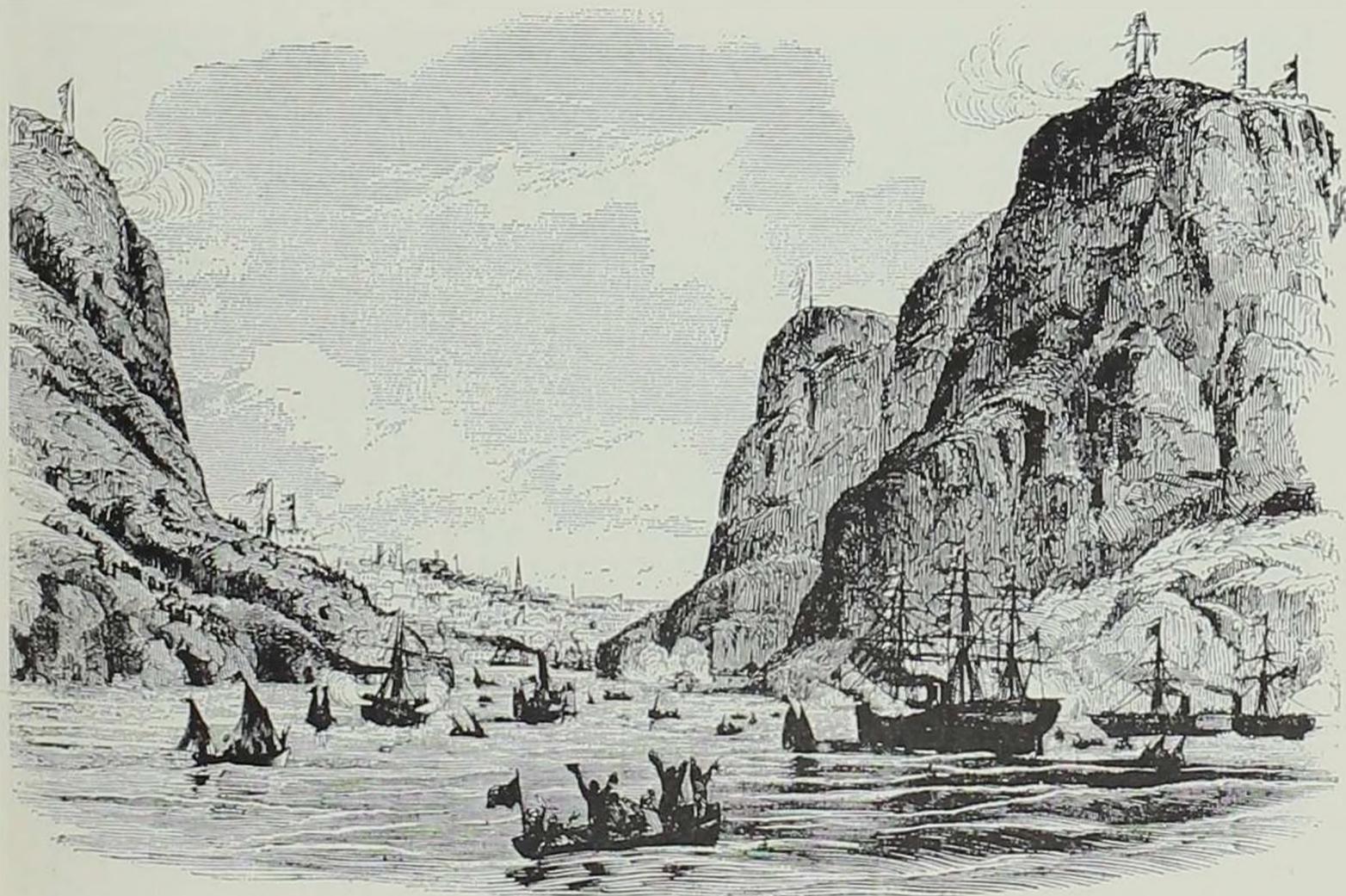
From *Harper's Weekly*

The *Niagara* and *Agamemnon* in The Gale



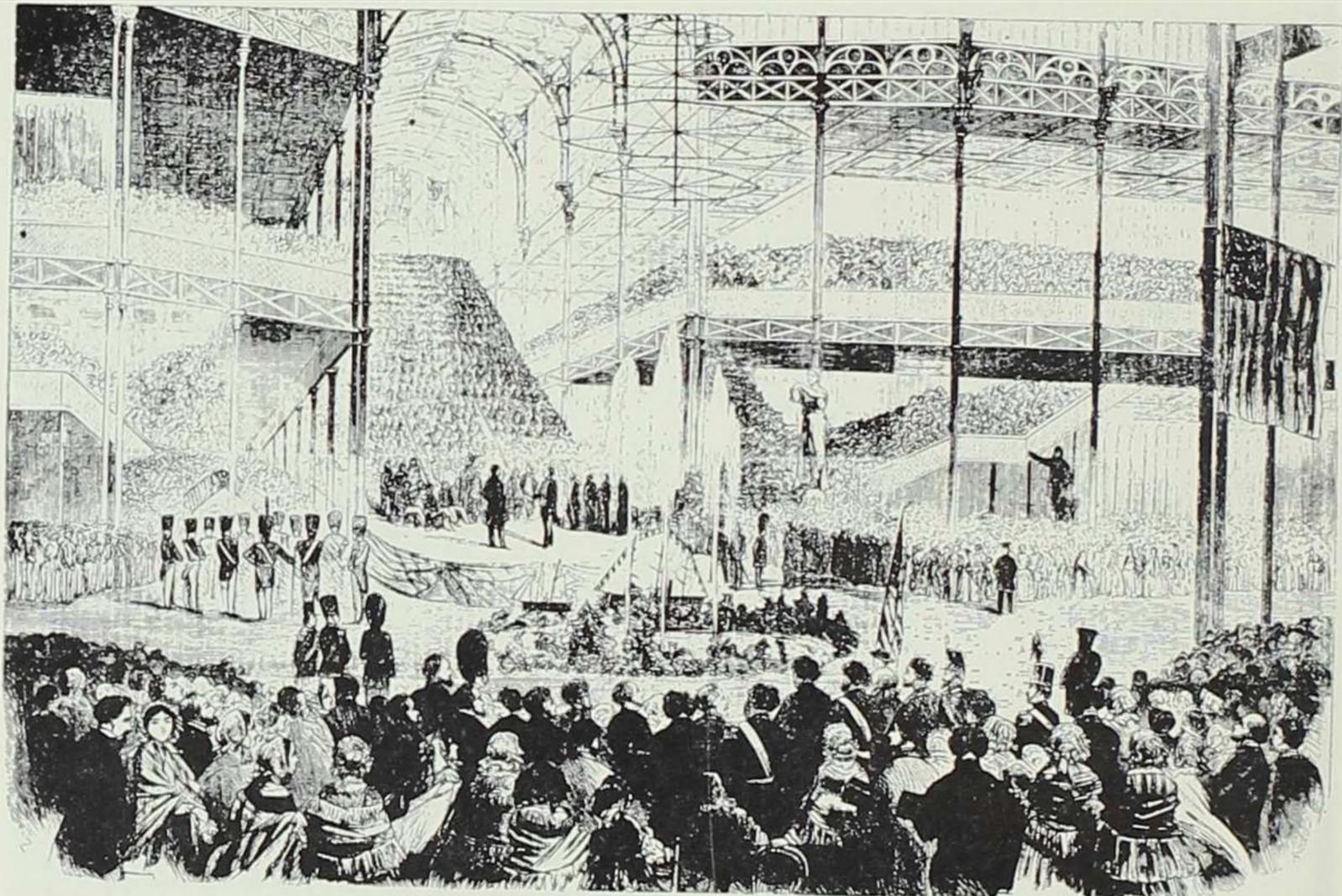
From *Harper's Weekly*

Laying the Cable in Mid-Ocean



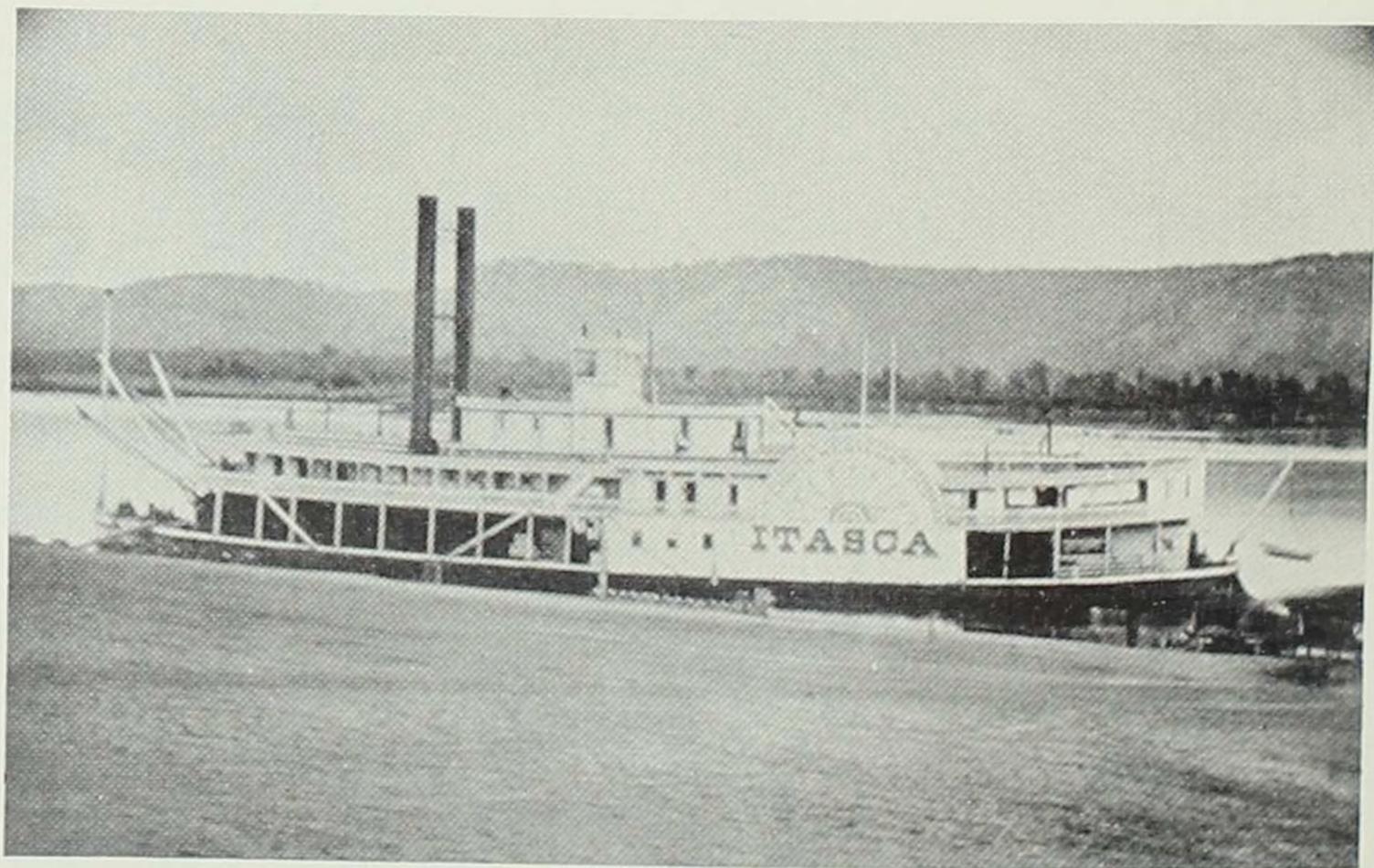
From *Harper's Weekly*

The Reception of the *Niagara* at St. John's, Newfoundland



From *Harper's Weekly*

The Atlantic Cable Celebration
Presentation of Cyrus W. Field in the Crystal Palace



From the collection of William J. Petersen

The Steamboat *Itasca*

She carried Queen Victoria's Message from Prairie du Chien to St. Paul
congratulating President Buchanan on the successful laying of the Atlantic Cable.

appropriate editorial comment on the "enormous intelligence."

After noting that "man must feel freer in the accession of so much power," the *Tribune* reviewed the previous failures and the tendency of most men to brand Field as "A right good fellow, certainly, but too sanguine — in fact, rather visionary." The editor concluded his two-column editorial by asserting:

The country rings with the praises of Mr. Field; shall their echoes die away and leave no mark of their existence? Richard Cobden received from the British People a free gift of \$500,000 for his agency in effecting the repeal of the Corn Laws; shall no effort be made to attest, in some substantial manner, the pride and gratitude with which the American People regard Mr. Field's heroic achievement?

Needless to say, no such appropriation was forthcoming in America. Moreover, three weeks after the cable had been laid and several hundred messages had been sent, the cable ceased to function, due, it was thought, to faulty insulation or to the use of too strong an electric current. At any rate the "Bold Cyrus" who had been feted during a mammoth two-day "cable carnival" in New York City was shortly taunted with opprobrium by the fickle public, the charge being made that all the messages had been faked to sell stock, even though Field had sold none.

Undaunted by this misfortune, and by the loss

by fire of his New York office and warehouse, Cyrus Field continued his efforts in America and England to bring his dream to a happy fruition. The Civil War intervened but before its conclusion Field engaged the world's largest steamer, the *Great Eastern*, to lay a new cable. This was successfully accomplished in 1866, whereupon Congress voted the indomitable Field a gold medal for his labors. Meanwhile, it was truly fitting in 1958 that the United States Post Office Department should issue a Commemorative postage stamp in honor of the "Atlantic Cable Centenary 1858-1958."

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN