# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Crossing the Mississippi

In the early movement of settlers to Iowa, the Mississippi River played a double rôle. To the emigrants from Virginia, Kentucky, and other States bordering on the Ohio and Mississippi, it served as an invaluable highway. To those who came overland from Chicago, Milwaukee, or any point in Illinois, on the other hand, it loomed up as an almost impassable barrier. Either as an aid or a hindrance to travel, it was a factor all early emigrants had to reckon with.

The difficulties to be encountered by travel in a white-topped emigrant wagon in those early days can hardly be over-emphasized. There were few roads and no bridges. Broken traces and mired wheels were the common happenings of a day's journey. Rivers proved to be an unfailing source of trouble. The small streams were crossed by fording; the larger ones by swimming the teams, wagons and all. But when the Father of Waters was reached, these methods were out of the question:

here apparently was an insurmountable obstacle. However, these eager home seekers were not willing to be deprived of the hard earned fruits of their trying journey — now lying within sight — by a mere river. And out of this situation came the ferry.

The earliest type of ferry to operate on the Mississippi River was the canoe. It served the Indians as a means of crossing long before the whites penetrated as far west as the Mississippi. When the white explorers finally reached the valley region, they also adopted the customary mode of crossing long followed by their red predecessors. At a still later period, the canoe answered the more frequent and pressing demands of the hunters and trappers on their way to and from the country then regarded as the far west. It even survived till the day when occasional homeseekers in their emigrant wagons found their way into that pioneer region.

Only the ordinary difficulties and risks of canoeing attended the crossing of the river by the Indians, white explorers, and trappers; but with the emigrants it was different. For as a pioneer account relates, "wagons had to be unloaded and taken to pieces, and both they and their loads shipped in small cargoes at a voyage, till all were over; then the teams had to be unharnessed or unyoked and made to swim, the horses being led by the halter at the side of the canoe, and the oxen by the horns." A still more hazardous undertaking was the crossing

in winter, and in the springtime when huge cakes of ice raced along on the swift current, ready to smash into splinters any luckless craft that might get in the way. But this was not always taken into account by travellers eager to reach their destination, and sometimes, in the face of imminent peril, they insisted on being ferried over.

An example of this is afforded by the story of a New Englander — a young college graduate wholly unfamiliar with the stern conditions of pioneer life. He arrived at a point on the Illinois shore opposite Burlington, in December, 1840. Being very anxious to get across the river that evening, he tried to engage the services of the ferryman, who, however, flatly refused to venture on the river in the dark, giving as his reason that the floating ice made it far too perilsome. Nothing daunted by the ferryman's dark and foreboding picture, the easterner still demanded to be taken over, but it proved futile. So instead of the hoped for conveniences of a Burlington hotel, he was forced to accept the more scant offerings of a one-roomed cabin, and submit to the discomfort of sleeping in the same room with thirty others — men, women, and children. But the next day when the canoe landed him safely on the Burlington side of the river after an hour's trying struggle among the floating cakes of ice, he probably felt less bitter toward the stubborn ferryman.

While the canoe met very satisfactorily the needs of the early explorers, stray travellers, and occa-

sional homeseekers, it proved wholly inadequate for the stream of emigrants which followed the opening of the Black Hawk Purchase. Imagine the situation when a group of twelve or more emigrant wagons lined up on the Illinois shore to be ferried over — the confusion, the frenzied haste to get the wagons unloaded and taken to pieces, the long disheartening wait while the total tonnage of the wagons was being taken over, bit by bit, when the hours dragged and even the best natured grew surly. Hence, to meet this situation brought about by the onrush of settlers to the Iowa country, regular public ferries equipped to carry whole wagonloads at a time came into use.

The regular public ferries passed through several well defined stages of evolution, easily distinguished by the type of motive power. Flat-boats and skiffs marked the initial stage. The craft generally spoken of as "flat-boats" were huge barge-like affairs, so constructed as to hold wagon, team, and other equipment. They were steered by huge sweeps, often as long as the boats themselves. By some these boats were designated as "mud scows". The distinguishing characteristic of this type was that man supplied the motive power. Propelled in some cases by oars, in others by poles, in still others by huge sweeps, it was nevertheless human strength that furnished the moving force.

Although a marked improvement over the canoe, the flat-boat did not do away with the trials of

ferrying. A large element of risk still remained: the craft was always at the mercy of the current and was carried well down stream. After dark the hazards of crossing multiplied and ferrymen charged accordingly. And in many cases it still took an hour or more to cross the river.

While it is very likely that the first flat-boat ferry to operate on the Mississippi within the borders of Iowa was one established at Keokuk to serve the early settlers in the Half Breed Tract, there appears to be no recorded evidence to show it. So far as can be gathered from available records, Clark's Ferry at Buffalo marks the opening of flat-boat ferrying in Iowa. The ferry was established by Captain Benjamin W. Clark in 1833 while he was still living at Andalusia, Illinois. For a number of years it held the distinction of being the most noted ferry between Burlington and Dubuque. Indeed, one writer went so far as to state that it was "the most convenient place to cross the Mississippi . . . . anywhere between Balize and Prairie du Chien." And probably a major portion of the traffic passing from the direction of the Illinois River to the mining region west of the Mississippi, or toward the interior, crossed the river at this point.

However, this reputation was short lived, and later developments lead one to believe that it was based more on the conspicuous absence of other ferries than on any intrinsic qualities. In 1836, Antoine Le Claire established a ferry at Davenport — a few

miles below Buffalo — and he gradually drew away most of the travel that had heretofore passed over Clark's Ferry.

As the stream of emigrants heading for the Iowa country increased in volume, the process of carrying it over the Mississippi in man-propelled craft soon became inadequate. Probably some ingenious individual saw the absurdity in having humans sweat and toil away at the poles and oars while veritable reservoirs of power rested on the ferry boat, and struck upon the happy idea of making the horses furnish the power. At any rate, a transition did take place wherein the crude flat-boat gave way to the horse ferry, an affair moved by horse power rather than by man power. However, the transition was not a complete one; in many cases this stage was not present, the flat-boat being directly followed by the steam ferry.

In a newspaper published in Bloomington (Muscatine) in 1841 the following notice appears:

"A new boat, propelled by horse power, has lately been placed upon the river at this place, for the accommodation of the ferry; and, though hastily made, all of green oak, and clumsy in its exterior, it swims like a swan and will cross in eight minutes with ease and safety. We may flatter ourselves that a ferry is now permanently established."

The third, and by far the most vital step, was the introduction of steam as a motive power. And while very little record is to be had of the actual results of

the change from human to horse strength, evidence as to the effects of the transition to steam is abundant. Whole streams of immigration were diverted from their customary avenues of travel to seek the conveniences offered by steam ferries. Nor is this to be wondered at. Regular trips were now made every hour, in some cases every fifteen minutes. Moreover, in sharp contrast to the time it took to cross in a flat-boat — sometimes several hours — the crossing could now be made in five minutes. This spurt in speed of crossing was closely paralleled by a tremendous leap in carrying capacity. For as a matter of fact, the crude flat-boat capable of carrying a single wagon had now grown to a gigantic affair which could carry eighteen or more teams at once, and even whole trains. As in other industries, the introduction of steam marked a new era in the ferry business.

The extent to which steam power revolutionized ferrying is also revealed in the following comment from a Dubuque newspaper: "Bogy's splendid new steam ferryboat is doing the most rushing business of the season. She is puffing and blowing all the time. She is a perfect Godsend to California emigrants. If the number of wagons that she brings across in a day had to abide the tardiness of the old-fashioned horse boat, they would not reach this side in a week."

Probably the first steam ferry to operate on the Mississippi within the borders of Iowa was estab-

lished by Captain John Wilson in 1852. It is said that he launched the steam ferry as early as 1843, but it was found to be too far in advance of the times and so was taken off the river until 1852. This ferry plied across the river at Davenport.

John Wilson was unusually energetic, enterprising, and capable, as a ferryman. In 1837 he purchased Antoine Le Claire's ferry business, and immediately began building new flat-boats. By 1841 he had a horse ferry boat in operation and his steam ferry was launched in 1843. Moreover, he made an arrangement with the Rock River ferry located at the mouth of the Green River, whereby one fare paid the way over both ferries.

A more novel contribution to ferrying at Davenport accredited to the enterprising Wilson was the ferry alarm. The conditions leading to the adoption of the alarm have been ably told by a contemporary writer as follows: "In primitive times in order to arouse the ferryman on the opposite shore the Stephensonites (now Rock Islanders) who had been over here in Davenport to attend evening services and overstayed their time, or zealous Davenporters who after dark had occasion to visit Stephenson in a missionary cause, had to raise the 'war-whoop'. In order to discourage relics of barbarism Mr. Wilson introduced the ferry triangle, an ungainly piece of triangular steel which, when vigorously pounded with a club, sent forth from its gallows tree a most wretched clanging noise. But it brought the skiff though it awakened the whole town."

No account of ferries in Iowa would be complete without some mention at least of tolls, and cost of franchises. As a matter of fact, these are but special phases of the general subject, and they illuminate it materially. In the early days when the Mississippi was crossed in ferries, money was not so plentiful as it is to-day. Hence, ferry fees were often paid with goods. The circumstances under which Clark collected his first ferriage afford an instance, and they also show something of the man's temper. A company of French traders on their way from the Iowa River to the Trading Post on Rock Island encamped one evening at Buffalo. The information that Clark intended to establish a ferry across the river at this point, they received as a huge joke, ridiculing the whole enterprise. Nevertheless, they called loudly for the ferry-boat to carry their drove of cattle across, little dreaming that it would appear. Nor is it very likely that they realized the type of man they were dealing with.

Captain Clark, his flat-boat completed and ready for service, gathered enough men and boys to operate the boat, and in no pleasant frame of mind set out into the dark to offer his services to the noisy Frenchmen. When the traders noticed the flat-boat approaching, however, they burst into uproarious laughter, aiming to turn the whole matter off as a joke; and they told the Captain they had nothing to ferry and that he might return. But he was not so easily disposed of, for his temper was now thor-

oughly aroused. He landed his boat, marched into the camp of the Frenchmen with his small crew, and angrily demanded ten dollars as his ferriage fee. The whole affair speedily lost its comical aspects, and the traders saw that the infuriated Captain would brook no further trifling. But to their great embarrassment, they had not ten dollars in money among them. So they offered him two bolts of calico which he accepted.

Another incident arising out of the scarcity of money is related of Antoine Le Claire who established his ferry at Davenport in 1836. As his fee for ferrying a number of sheep over the river, he accepted their fleeces, the owner having had them sheared prior to the crossing. This wool he kept for a while, but failing to find any particular use for it, he finally burned it to get rid of it.

But it must not be understood that it was the daily occurrence for a party to pay its way over the river in calico or in raw wool. These were the unusual and striking incidents. Ordinarily, of course, fares were paid in money. The County Commissioner's Court at Rockingham in May, 1838, fixed the following ferriage rates for the Mississippi River:

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| Footmen | $ .18¾ |
| Man and horse | .50 |
| One vehicle and driver | .75 |
| Two horses, vehicle and driver | 1.00 |
| Each additional horse or mule | .18¾ |

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|---|---|
| Meat cattle, per head | .12½ |
| Sheep or hogs | .05 |
| Freight per hundred | .06¼ |

From sunset to sunrise, double rates were allowed.

The puzzling feature of this table stands out in the apparent difficulty of making change in ½ cents and ¼ cents. And for both explanation and solution one must go back to a day when money was nearly non-existent. Says a writer of that early day, "During all this time there was no money of any description. Talk about scarcity now a days! Then the only change aside from barter consisted of bits and picayunes — the former a piece of the eighth part of a Spanish milled dollar, cut with a chisel into eight equal parts when the operation was fairly and honestly done, but the skilful and designing often made nine bits and even ten out of one dollar piece. The picayune in like manner was a Spanish quarter cut into four equal parts, hence the origin of these two terms bits and picayunes."

The table then, was based on the actual circulation of the crude bits of chiseled coin which survived a day when money was very scarce. Not infrequently, however, one party or the other had to surrender the half or fourth cent in making change.

While the ferries of early days rendered practically the same public service that the bridges of to-day do, they were, for the most part, established for private profit. And when one considers the striking similarity between crossing the Mississippi

in a ferry-boat and crossing it over a bridge, it seems odd that a toll should have to be paid in the one case and not in the other. Nevertheless, free ferries were as conspicuously absent then as free bridges are prevalent to-day.

On the other hand, the idea of a free public ferry was not altogether unheard of. By legislative act the commissioners of Louisa County were authorized to establish and keep a ferry across the Iowa River which was to render its services free to all the citizens of the county. And at the extra session of the First General Assembly the Mayor and Aldermen of Ft. Madison were authorized to provide for "the free carriage across the Mississippi river for one year, of all persons with their property coming to Ft. Madison for the purpose of trading with its inhabitants, and bringing marketing and produce to the place". Moreover, there was considerable agitation for the free ferry in a number of the larger towns.

License fees kept pace with the rapid development of the ferries in general — the increase in carrying capacity, the substitution of steam in the place of horse or man power, and the increase in volume of business. Beginning with the humble figure of $2.00 per year or less, the cost of franchises leaped, in the course of time, to the striking figure of $1000 annually. Before the formal granting of ferry franchises through legislative action, licenses were not required. There appears to be no written evidence

that either Captain Clark or Antoine Le Claire or Captain John Wilson paid license fees. But with the establishing of ferries through legal processes, charges were made for the right to carry on the business.

The County Commissioner's Court which met at Rockingham in May, 1838, fixed the following schedules for licenses on the Mississippi: Davenport, $20.00; Buffalo, $10.00; Rockingham, $8.00; and all others $5.00. How long these schedules remained in force we are not told; very likely it was not many years. Gregoire's ferry established at Dubuque was required to pay $100.00 annually. And the Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry Company was charged $1000 annually for the right to operate on the Missouri at Council Bluffs.

In the course of time the steamboat replaced the steam ferry, and this marked the last stage of water transportation. Then came the bridges and wherever they appeared the ferries became an insignificant factor in crossing the Mississippi. In 1855 the first bridge across the Mississippi at Davenport was completed; eighteen years later a second bridge followed. The Illinois shore was linked to the Iowa shore at Clinton in 1864. Four years later work was in full sway on a bridge at Dubuque. And in 1891 the so called "high bridge" was opened at Muscatine.

It is needless to further catalogue these Mississippi crossings. Suffice it to say that since the nine-

ties all the important river towns have built bridges. And although water crossings still exist and doubtless always will, it is apparent that the spanning of the Mississippi with mighty bridges sounded the death knell of the once prosperous trade of ferrying.

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