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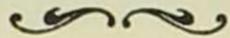
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The Icelander and Gladiator

Readers of the only newspaper in the Territory of Minnesota were attracted by a strange advertisement in the *Minnesota Pioneer* of November 15, 1849. Passengers and shippers were advised by two enterprising steamboat captains that arrangements had been concluded whereby steam transportation would be continued throughout the winter by means of "Locomotive Ice Trains" connecting the mineral region with St. Paul. Residents of the Territory were well aware that steamboats could not ply the Mississippi during the winter. They also knew the railroad had not yet reached Chicago from the East. Indeed, five years were to pass before the iron horse reached the Mississippi at Rock Island, and eighteen years would roll by before St. Paul could claim rail connections with the East. Some readers had never seen a railroad train; few, if any, could visualize a train of cars skimming up the ice-locked Mississippi in the dead of winter.

Under ordinary circumstances most subscribers to the *Minnesota Pioneer* would have dismissed the whole matter as fantastic. But the names of the two steamboat captains involved in the project could scarcely be ignored. Daniel Smith Harris had plied the upper Mississippi for a score of years and had always manifested rare courage and sincerity of purpose. Orrin Smith had been steamboating nearly as long, his career having begun aboard the *Heroine* in 1835. Both were respected and well-known Galenians of unimpeachable character, thoroughly reliable and trustworthy. It was unthinkable that either would stoop to chicanery or indulge in buffoonery.

Orrin Smith in particular was a God-fearing man. Refusing to run his steamboat on Sunday, Captain Smith would tie up to the bank wherever his boat might be at midnight on Saturday. On the following morning, if no minister was aboard, the pious skipper himself would conduct religious services. No steamboat that Orrin Smith captained was allowed to turn a wheel on the Sabbath. After midnight on Sunday the boat would raise steam and continue on her way.

With such commanders behind the proposed venture, the citizens of the frozen northland might look forward to uninterrupted intercourse with the settled area below. The "winter arrange-

ments" which Harris and Smith contemplated were apparently far more elaborate than the steam sleigh which J. D. Carson and Jonathan Haines of Galena had experimented with in 1836. These ingenious Galenians combined an engine and coach in a single water-tight sleigh equipped with seats, windows, doors, and stoves. It was said to be more comfortable and faster than other modes of transportation and perfectly safe, since it could be easily pulled out of the water if it broke through the ice or ran into an airhole.

But the settlers around Galena and Dubuque were destined to be disappointed. Although Carson and Haines were able to start their steam engine it proved to be too small and did not have sufficient power to move the sleigh. Captain George W. Girton and many others present pronounced the demonstration a failure and considered the whole idea infeasible. Seasoned steamboatmen, who knew the vagaries of Old Man River, realized that a dependable road-bed of ice during the winter months was even less likely than a fixed stage of water during the summer. The *Galena Gazette*, on the other hand, maintained the "utility of the steam sleigh must be acknowledged quite as indispensable to the commercial world as steamboats or railroad cars." Although the editor declared that Carson and Haines had

secured a patent for their invention their petition was evidently denied for no patent was granted in Washington. The men planned to build another engine during 1836 and hoped that by the following winter their steam sleigh would work. But the failure of their first experiment seems to have dampened the ardor of the inventors for no steam sleigh appeared in 1837.

Instead of a single sleigh, Captains Harris and Smith proposed to operate two "Locomotive Ice Trains" which they appropriately named the *Icelander* and the *Gladiator*. These, consisting of an engine, a tender, and ten cars, had been "prepared expressly for travel on the ice of the Mississippi". The "passenger cars" were to be attached to the train in the rear of the "baggage cars" in order that travelers should "incur as little risk as possible". Prospective passengers were assured that ample arrangements had been made for meals and sleeping and that the usual discomforts of winter travel would be absent.

The *Icelander* was to be commanded by Orrin Smith, while Daniel Smith Harris was to captain the *Gladiator*. Apparently neither entertained any doubt regarding the speed of the locomotive ice train: it was expected that a train could leave Galena at nine in the morning, make "all the usual steamboat landings" en route, and arrive at St.

Paul and the Falls of St. Anthony twenty-four hours later. This would have meant faster time than Captain Harris was destined to make on his record-breaking run with the steamboat *Grey Eagle* in 1858. Furthermore, each train would make two round trips a week "until as near as practicable to the opening of the river in April next". The *Icelander* was scheduled to leave Galena at nine on Mondays and Thursdays, and the *Gladiator* would set out from the same winter port on Tuesdays and Fridays. Bellevue, Dubuque, Guttenberg, and McGregor were Iowa towns most likely to benefit by this remarkable means of transportation.

The price for freight and passage was to be "the same usually paid on steamboats" during September. Since this "novel enterprise" has been "attended with great expense", the sponsors hoped the public would "extend to it their liberal patronage." In addition to freight and passenger service, it was pointed out, the isolated inhabitants along the way would be furnished with "tri-weekly mails" between Galena and the Falls. Buoyed up by such prospects people along the Mississippi waited for the river to freeze.

On December 7, 1849, solid ice finally formed on the river. It would only be a matter of hours now before St. Paul citizens could welcome their

favorite steamboat captains in a new rôle. The enthusiastic editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer* pointed out that Hudson River steamboats were fitted with contrivances for breaking and cutting the ice and wondered if such a plan might not become feasible for the Mississippi, particularly since Lake Pepin always lengthened the season of isolation. But no mention was made of the ice trains. The following week the editor quoted a comment on the "Locomotive Ice Trains" in the *Independent American*. Would the *Icelander* and the *Gladiator* never come?

Some anxiety regarding the failure of the trains to appear must have been registered by the inhabitants of St. Paul, for the editor comforted them by pointing out that the "openness of the winter" had delayed the project. He promised, however, that "before Christmas" steam would be up and "half Galena" would be on the train. St. Paul, he declared, would welcome them.

But alas and alack, no locomotive ice train ever came. Nor were there any further announcements of the project or explanations for the failure of the *Icelander* and the *Gladiator* to put in an appearance. Diligent search of the existing files of the Galena and Dubuque papers has failed to reveal the reason for the non-appearance of the two trains. Were the engines too weak? Did the ice

fail to become "sufficiently strong"? Were the two trains ever completed and patented? The newspapers of the period are strangely silent.

At any rate, the *Icelander* and *Gladiator* project represented an effort to provide a means of transportation during the ice-bound winter months for the frontier communities of Iowa and the upper Mississippi Valley. Supplies usually ran low before the opening of navigation in the spring. Overland traffic was also suspended during the winter. But the ice train failed to fulfill the need just as the steam sleigh of two other Galenians had disappointed the isolated settlers thirteen years before.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN