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Captain Joseph Throckmorton

Prior to the advent of the railroad no type of pioneer was more influential than the steamboat captain in expanding the frontier and building an empire in the West. Adventurous, hardy, ambitious, he brought his crude craft into waters frequented only by the transitory visit of the keelboat, and offered a means of communication and transportation to the Indian agent, the missionary, the fur trader, and the soldier, as well as to the pioneers who were slowly straggling into the West with their families and few worldly possessions. He formed an integral part in the economic life of the Mississippi Valley.

Of all the pioneer river captains on the Upper Mississippi, none was better known than Joseph Throckmorton who during twenty years of activity commanded a dozen boats and probably had a financial interest in as many more. Efficient, prudential,

and every inch a gentleman, he won the respect of those he served and established a high standard for steamboat transportation.

Little is known of the early life of this picturesque riverman. Born in Monmouth County, New Jersey, on June 16, 1800, he made his first venture in the business world as a youngster with a mercantile firm in New York City. He soon tired of this work, however, and in 1828 moved to Pittsburgh where, in company with several other young men, he bought a part interest in the steamboat *Red Rover*. While plying between Pittsburgh and Zanesville, Ohio, the boat collided with another vessel and sank. After she was raised Throckmorton seems to have acquired a controlling interest and brought his steamer around to St. Louis where he immediately engaged in the upriver trade.

The *Red Rover* arrived at St. Louis late in the month of June, 1828, just five years after the *Virginia* made the maiden steamboat trip above the Des Moines (or Lower) Rapids to Fort Snelling. A few scattered villages were cropping up on both sides of the river below the rapids and farm houses were beginning to appear above the rapids on the Illinois shore. The western side was a wilderness broken only by an occasional Indian village or the rude hut of a half-breed. Except for the few military outposts and fur-trading establishments along the Mississippi and the lead mines huddled about Fevre River, the country was still a virgin estate.

Scarcely two dozen steamboats had preceded the *Red Rover* in the five years that had elapsed since the trip of the *Virginia*, and most of these were transient craft. Lead shipments had just reached a point where captains could look for a plentiful cargo and Throckmorton was not slow in taking advantage of this opportunity. Occasionally a boat load of supplies or a detachment of troops afforded a profitable trip to Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien or Fort Snelling at St. Peter's. The transportation of Indian annuities and delegations also brought a tidy sum to the ever watchful steamboat captain. But the year of 1828 was rather unprofitable and Throckmorton was forced to make several trips to the Illinois and Missouri rivers. When winter shut him off from this trade he went around to the Ohio and engaged in the commerce of that river with the Lower Mississippi.

Navigation opened early in 1829. The *Red Rover* was lying at the St. Louis levee on April 14th, having already completed one trip to Fevre River. Midsummer found the *Red Rover* at the head of the Lower Rapids, unable to proceed downstream on account of low water and hopefully waiting for a cargo with which to return to the mines. Here Caleb Atwater, one of the three commissioners appointed by the government to treat with the Indians at Prairie du Chien, came upon the impatient Throckmorton. The low stage of the water had abruptly ended Atwater's voyage on the steamboat

Missouri at the foot of the rapids. While making his way on foot along the river from Fort Edwards to the head of the rapids, he found many of the packages which he had forwarded several weeks before scattered along the banks and exposed to the elements. The sight of the *Red Rover* must have been as pleasing to Atwater as the prospects of a lucrative trip were to Throckmorton.

By sunset most of the goods were on board and provision was made for the shipment of the remainder on the next trip. Darkness set in before the *Red Rover* had gone many miles and orders were given to tie up for the night. It was not until noon of the third day that Throckmorton was able to reach Rock Island. Low water and innumerable sandbars made steamboating extremely hazardous. In order to lighten the boat so that she might more easily twist and squirm her way to the head of the Upper Rapids all passengers were required to walk along the shore. Only Brigadier General John McNeil and the ladies on board were excepted. All afternoon was spent in bringing the boat to the head of the Rock Island Rapids where the captain tied up for the night. Two days later the *Red Rover* reached the mouth of Fevre River. After visiting the lead mines at both Galena and Dubuque, the boat proceeded to Prairie du Chien where the commissioners were landed, and then Throckmorton steamed down to pick up a cargo of lead and return with the remaining annuity goods which had been

left at the head of the Lower Rapids. In the middle of August the *Red Rover* again carried all of the commissioners to St. Louis except Atwater who returned overland to his home.

In 1830 the first coöperative association of steamboat captains on the Upper Mississippi was formed by Throckmorton and Captain S. Shallcross. During the period of low water Captain Shallcross operated the *Chieftain* between St. Louis and the Lower Rapids while the *Red Rover* plied the river above. To avoid delay in the transit of goods, keels were provided to transport freight over the rapids, in the event of extreme low water. Previous to this agreement, about the first of August, Throckmorton had made six trips to the lead district and had thus covered a distance of nearly seven thousand miles. The new plan met with immediate success since both passengers and shippers were disposed to patronize the boat which could guarantee the completion of a trip.

In 1831 Throckmorton bought the *Winnebago* and formed a similar combination with Captain James May of the *Enterprise*. Late in the fall, however, he sold his interest in the *Winnebago* and went over on the Ohio River to build the steamboat *Warrior*. Subsequent events proved the fitness of this name. She was a side-wheel steamboat and towed a safety barge for passengers instead of having a cabin on deck. Such an innovation served both as a protection to the passengers from explosions and as a

means of decreasing the draft of the boat to facilitate passing over the rapids in low water. An exact description of the *Warrior's* safety barge is unavailable but it was probably modeled after the pioneer of its kind which had been used on the Ohio River by the *Merchant* in 1826. The *Merchant's* safety barge had fifty-two berths, three cabins, and drew but twenty inches of water. Captain Throckmorton was the third to bring this type of craft to the Upper Mississippi: Captain Shallcross of the steamboat *St. Louis and Galena Packet* had introduced one as early as 1827.

Early in the spring of 1832 the rumblings of the approaching Black Hawk War were daily becoming more threatening and when the storm finally broke the steamboats on the Upper Mississippi and Illinois rivers were soon busily engaged in transporting troops and supplies. Steamboating on these waters became so hazardous that it was necessary to barricade the cabins and pilot house against the Indians who frequently lay in ambush along the shore and fired upon the passing boats. It was midsummer before Throckmorton brought the *Warrior* and her barge to St. Louis whence he immediately set out for the seat of war.

The *Warrior* arrived at Prairie du Chien just as Black Hawk and his band were retreating toward the Mississippi. She was immediately pressed into service and the captain was given orders to patrol the river above the fort to prevent the Indians

from crossing. Lieutenants James W. Kingsbury and Reuben Holmes, together with a company of fifteen regulars and six volunteers, were sent aboard and a small six-pounder was placed in the bow of the boat. The *Warrior* first steamed to Wabasha's village where about a hundred and fifty Winnebago Indians were enlisted to help patrol the river. Thence Throckmorton proceeded downstream and reached the spot where De Soto now stands just as Black Hawk and his warriors were pouring down through the hills to the river. A white flag was raised by Black Hawk and Throckmorton was invited to land, but he promptly refused. Black Hawk in turn refused to board the *Warrior*, whereupon hostilities began. During the brief engagement the Indians fired hundreds of shots, only sixty of which reached their mark. One man was wounded. Four shots of grape from the six-pounder sent the Indians scurrying for shelter where they continued a desultory fire.

Having halted the advance of the Indians the *Warrior* steamed grimly down to Fort Crawford for a fresh supply of fuel. While this brief skirmish was of no great significance in itself it served to check the Indians sufficiently to allow the troops to come up and completely rout them at Bad Axe a short time later. After the battle of Bad Axe Brigadier General Henry Atkinson took passage on the *Warrior* to Jefferson Barracks. A short time later Throckmorton's old boat, the *Winnebago*,

brought down Black Hawk and eleven of his head men as prisoners to Jefferson Barracks.

While the skirmish with Black Hawk and his warriors must have been replete with thrills, it was not merely the vicissitudes of war which presented perils to steamboat men. In 1833 an event occurred on board the *Warrior* which might have proved far more fatal. This elicited "A Gentle Caution" from Throckmorton which was published in the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*.

"We have many hardships to encounter, and are exposed to many dangers, which of course we submit to without a murmur;" wrote the captain, "but we would respectfully request our friends not to heap upon us, through their *kindness*, more than we can conveniently endure. Now, *a short story at a woodpile*. On loading my boat at a place of this kind last trip, I discovered several black marks upon the deck, which, on examination, I found to be gunpowder, from a box which my men were about to store away as dry goods, which in part did contain dry goods, but in the middle, concealed, was a considerable quantity of powder, so carelessly placed, that it was strewn throughout the package. Now, I have only to request, that whenever any of my customers have powder to ship, that they will not conceal it, and thereby endanger our lives, but inform us of it. I am not a little surprised that so respectable a concern should attempt a thing of this kind, particularly as the freight would not have

been more upon the article of powder than any other. I should suppose that shippers would have taken the *hint* after what has recently occurred on our western waters. At any rate, it is high time that *we* should. It is not my wish to complain, but *it is* my wish to run my boat with as much safety as possible; and I trust this gentle caution will be attended to."

This sharp but courteous letter reveals a man not afraid to lose his trade if an abuse might be corrected. The "hint" which he referred to was undoubtedly the explosion which occurred in July of the previous year on board the *Phoenix* as she was making her way up the Mississippi from New Orleans. A fire broke out on the *Phoenix* but the boat might have been saved by the strenuous efforts of the captain and crew if some gunpowder, secreted in packages, had not exploded.

Throckmorton continued in command of the *Warrior* until the close of the season of 1835. The boat remained on the upper river in command of Captain E. H. Gleim throughout the season of 1836, but thereafter she disappeared from record. Five years of active service probably made the boat unfit for further use.

The *St. Peter's*, the largest boat on the Upper Mississippi at the time, arrived at Galena in command of Captain Throckmorton on June 8, 1836. She was built at Elizabeth, Pennsylvania, in 1836. On July 2nd she tied up at Fort Snelling with a

cargo of supplies. Among the passengers were J. N. Nicollet, the French geographer, and several ladies from St. Louis who were on a pleasure excursion to the Falls of St. Anthony. Throckmorton continued in the upriver trade with the *St. Peter's* until early fall, when he took command of the *Ariel* and ran her until the close of that year.

In 1837 Throckmorton brought out the *Burlington* and on June 28th he had completed his third trip to Fort Snelling bringing with him one hundred and forty-six recruits of the Fifth Infantry. The *Burlington* should be remembered if only for the many notable characters who graced her deck. Early in the season came Colonel John Bliss and his family with the renowned artist George Catlin and his wife for fellow passengers. During the same year J. N. Nicollet, John C. Frémont, Henry Atkinson, Franklin Steele, and many other prominent personages took passage with Captain Throckmorton. Captain Marryat, the novelist and British sea captain, also paced the deck of the *Burlington* that year. Sweet and serene in the dignity of her eighty years came the widow of Alexander Hamilton, braving the wilderness with its many discomforts to visit her son, Colonel William S. Hamilton, then located in the lead district. Her visit caused a furor of interest wherever the boat stopped.

At the beginning of the season of 1839, Throckmorton replaced the *Burlington* with his new one hundred and sixty ton steamboat, the *Malta*, which

was built in Pittsburgh at a cost of \$18,000. She was one hundred and forty feet long, twenty-two feet beam, and had a hold five and one-half feet deep. The usual business of carrying supplies and annuities to the forts on the Upper Mississippi occupied the first season. In the summer of 1840 the *Malta* was advertised in the *Galena Gazette* to make a pleasure excursion to the Falls of St. Anthony. During the season of 1841 she made four trips to the lead district with five keels in tow, for which her receipts were estimated to be \$4000 on freight and \$4000 on passengers. Late in the fall of 1841, Throckmorton engaged the *Malta* in the Missouri River trade where she was snagged two miles above Laynesville, Missouri, at a point henceforth called Malta Bend. Within one minute she sank in fifteen feet of water. Both the boat and the cargo of furs for the American Fur Company were a total loss.

In 1842 Throckmorton brought the *General Brooke* into the Upper Mississippi trade. Receipts for five trips to the mines that year amounted to \$10,000 while in 1843 fifteen trips to the lead district produced \$25,000. During the same year she made seven trips between Galena and Fort Snelling, besides engaging for a while in the Missouri River trade. A card of thanks for the many favors extended on a trip to Galena early in 1843, signed by Henry Dodge and fourteen others, is eloquent testimony of the character and standing of Captain Throckmorton.

The *General Brooke* started the season of 1845 as a regular St. Louis, Galena and St. Peter's packet, but in midsummer Throckmorton sold her to Joseph La Barge for \$12,000. This was the first boat La Barge owned and he immediately entered her in the Missouri River trade. It was in the great fire of 1849 at St. Louis that the *General Brooke* met her fate, together with twenty-two other steamboats. She was being used at the time as a towboat by Captain A. J. Ringling, who estimated his loss at only \$1500.

After making a few trips on the *Nimrod*, an American Fur Company boat, Throckmorton took command of the *Cecelia* and ran her in the St. Peter's trade for the remainder of the season of 1845. Once she poked up the St. Croix River as far as Stillwater. Throckmorton's old boat, the *Ariel*, had been the second to navigate that tributary in the fall of 1838. When the Mexican War broke out in 1846, Throckmorton brought down the dragoons stationed at Fort Crawford and Fort Atkinson to St. Louis on the *Cecelia*, and during the remainder of the season many volunteers from the upriver region crowded her deck.

During the winter of 1845-1846 Throckmorton built the side-wheel steamboat *Cora* at Rock Island, a significant index to the development of the country in which he had been a steamboating pioneer. The *Cora* had a displacement of one hundred and forty-four tons and measured one hundred and

forty feet in length, twenty-four feet in beam, while the depth of her hold was five feet. Her engines had been built at St. Louis. Throckmorton took command of the *Cora* late in the fall of 1846 and in the following year was the first to reach Fort Snelling, battering his way through floating ice to reach that port on April 7th. The *Cora* was advertised in the Galena newspaper for the St. Peter's trade as early as the twenty-sixth of February. Throughout the season of 1848 Throckmorton continued to command the *Cora*, but in March, 1849, sold her to Captain Reilley who took her into the Missouri River trade.

When Throckmorton disposed of the *Cora* he ended his career as an active captain on the Upper Mississippi. For a few years he was agent for the Tennessee Insurance Company at St. Louis, but the urge of a pulsing steamboat overpowered him and he returned to his former occupation on the Missouri River. For three years he commanded the *Genoa* which he built in 1854. In 1857 he built the *Florence* and in 1864 the *Montana*. Four years later he purchased the *Columbia* and employed her in the trade between St. Louis and Fort Benton. After several trips on the Illinois River he sold her to the Arkansas River Packet Company.

Captain Throckmorton spent the last two years of his life as a United States engineer under Colonel John N. Macomb in the improvement of the Upper Mississippi. He died in St. Louis in December,

1872, after having engaged in river work for almost fifty years. It is said that he accumulated several fortunes during his colorful career as a river captain, but finally died a poor man.

Joseph Throckmorton showed himself to be a conservative steamboat captain during his twenty years of service on the Upper Mississippi. Unlike Daniel Smith Harris, who was continually seeking to establish new speed records or exploring hitherto unnavigated streams, Throckmorton's ambition was to establish a reliable and remunerative business. This could not be accomplished with a "nigger" hanging on the safety valve. His enterprising spirit was evidenced by his formation of the first coöperative agreement between steamboat captains on the Upper Mississippi, and again shortly afterward when he used the safety barge as a further means of gaining business. Chief Keokuk was so impressed with the personality and character of Throckmorton that it is said he offered him the site of "Flint Hills" where Burlington now stands as a token of friendship. Hercules L. Dousman, agent of the American Fur Company at Prairie du Chien, recommended Throckmorton's boats in preference to those of rival captains. His steamboats were indeed among the finest then afloat and their popularity was further attested by the type of passengers he carried. Cabin passengers rarely failed to subscribe a title to their name, so that the register became a galaxy of generals, majors, doctors, and

judges. If nothing better was available an "Esquire" was appended to lend dignity to a signature.

Throckmorton's cargoes varied widely. On April 10, 1830, for example, the *Red Rover* arrived at Galena with five hundred and thirty-seven packages, bales, and barrels in addition to a thousand feet of plank. Four hundred and sixty-three packages had been unloaded at various towns on the way. Besides the freight the boat had brought up nineteen cabin passengers and a hundred and twenty-five deck passengers. Pigs of lead constituted the main cargo downstream.

Amusements on board were as varied as human ingenuity could devise. A landing at a town or fort was always an interesting event. Indian villages were often visited and the dusky savages could usually be prevailed upon to perform their dances and sing their songs for a nominal sum. Dancing and games were popular among the cabin passengers and during the presidential years innumerable straw votes were cast.

It was the captain's duty to pass among his cabin passengers and minister to their wants in a kindly and courteous manner. At the end of the trip the cabin passengers would usually meet informally and select a committee to draw up resolutions commending the captain and his officers for their many courteous and gentlemanly qualities. These resolutions, with the names of the passengers subscribed, were then printed in a newspaper. Indeed, this practice

became so common that one English traveller humorously wrote that Mississippi steamboat captains must be an exceptionally polite and cultured class. Among the deck passengers games of chance, coarse jokes, fishing, and often drunkenness prevailed. Robberies were frequent. In 1833 some thieves carried away almost every piece of wearing apparel they could find belonging to the passengers on the *Winnebago*.

Captain Throckmorton witnessed a remarkable change in the country he helped to develop. In 1828 there were few settlements above the head of the Lower Rapids. Eight years later the Galena newspaper advertised the sale of lots at Port Byron, New York, Oquawka, Rockingham, Paris, Platteville, Pauquette, Van Buren, Bloomington, Parkhurst, Illinois City, Burlington, New Rochester, Keithsburg, and Rockport, some of which are probably unknown even to the oldest inhabitants of this region.

Within this broad valley to-day there dwell many people, the descendants of those pioneers who were carried on the decks of the *Red Rover*, the *Winnebago*, the *Warrior*, the *St. Peter's*, the *Ariel*, the *Burlington*, the *Malta*, the *General Brooke*, the *Nimrod*, the *Cecelia*, and the *Cora*. Such boats in landing their cosmopolitan passengers left their tribute of farmers, landseekers, tradesmen, soldiers, and others who helped to settle the Middle West.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN