

Steamboats *Dubuque*

The afternoon of August 14, 1837, was blistering hot for the passengers aboard Captain Smoker's sturdy little steamboat, the *Dubuque*, bound from St. Louis to the lead mines. Sprawling about in their cabins or on the lower deck they drowsily watched the low-lying hills and sandbanks below Bloomington (Muscatine) slowly unfold before them. The *Dubuque* was running under a moderate pressure of steam when the flue of the larboard boiler collapsed with terrific force, throwing a torrent of scalding water and steam over the deck passengers. Screaming in agony, the wretched victims groped and stumbled to the bow of the boat. The pilot, with commendable presence of mind, steered for the bank and managed to effect a landing. Some of the scalded victims, mad with pain, sprang ashore and ran frantically through the woods tearing off their clothes, which in some cases pulled away the skin, and even the flesh, with them. Nor could medical attention of any kind be administered until the arrival of the steamboat *Adventure* from Bloomington several hours later. Twenty-two lives were lost in the explosion on the *Dubuque*, the first and most appalling steamboat explosion on the upper Mississippi.

In the realm of steamboat nomenclature the use of

the name Dubuque, or its sobriquet Key City, is surpassed by only one Iowa river town. Keokuk led them all in the number of times its name was chosen to grace the paddle-box or pilot house of an upper Mississippi steamboat. Between 1844 and 1907 six vessels bore the name "Keokuk" while her sobriquet, "Gate City", was chosen twice. Four boats were christened "Dubuque" while "Key City" was emblazoned on two others. Davenport rejoiced in three namesakes, while Burlington, Muscatine, and Clinton each had two. Even such small towns as Lansing, McGregor, Bellevue, and Le Claire were honored at various times. Cedar Rapids, Des Moines, Iowa City, Maquoketa, and other inland towns also boasted their own steamboat namesakes. But Mississippi River towns that never had an opportunity to sponsor a steamboat were considered most unfortunate. In sheer desperation they sometimes vented their pique by inscribing their names upon their own ferry-boats. Thus, little Nezekaw, a paper town in Allamakee County, assuaged her ruffled feelings.

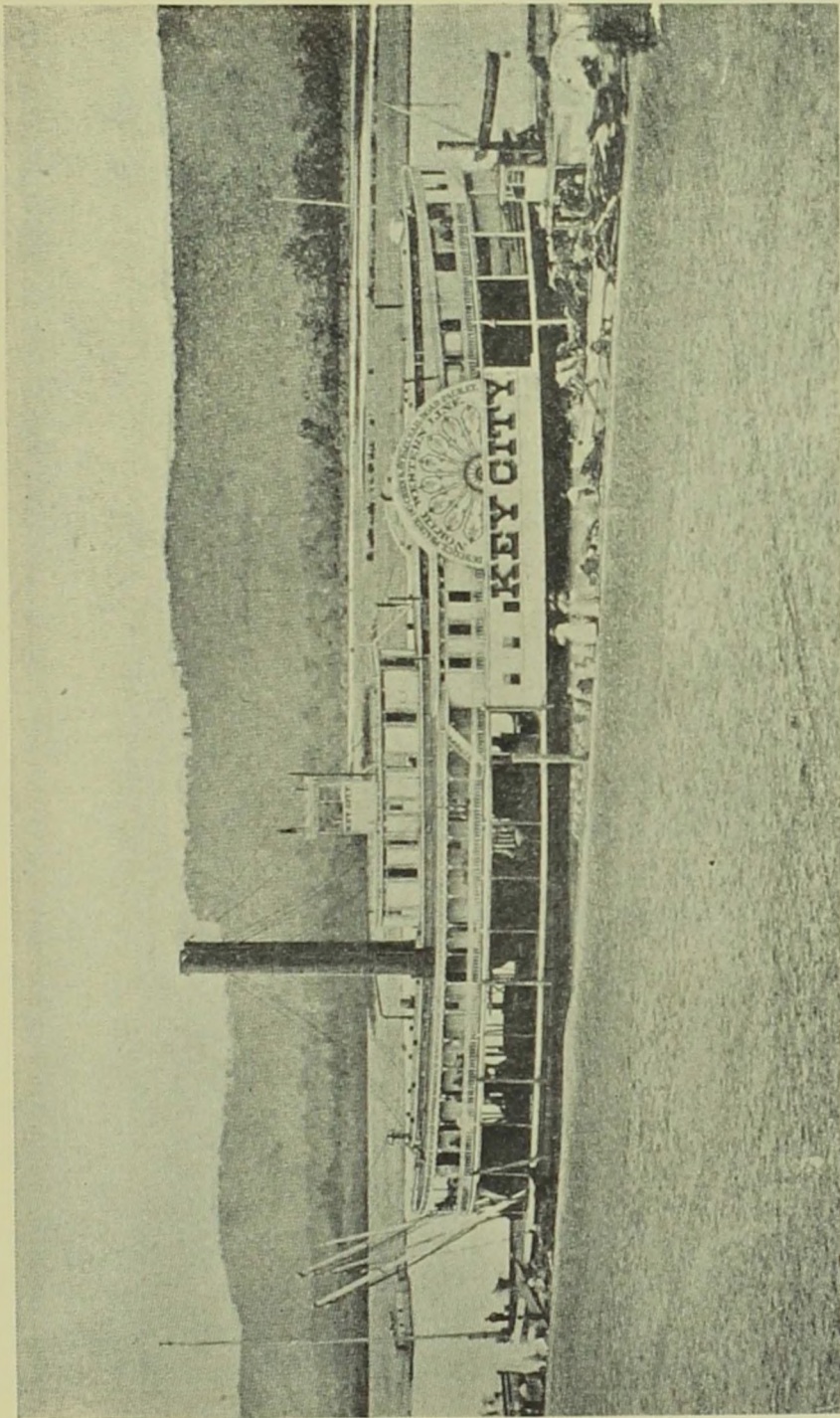
As a steamboat patronymic Keokuk was the most popular, but the boats named for Dubuque had the most eventful history. Built at Pittsburgh in 1835, the first *Dubuque* bore the name of a two-year-old mining community, the first Iowa town to be so honored. No doubt the chief credit for this distinction was due to John Atchison and George W. Atchison of Galena, Illinois, who with George B. Cole and

James M. White of St. Louis were owners of the ill-fated craft.

Unfortunately, the explosion of the first *Dubuque* left the embryonic mining community without a namesake for ten years. Finally, in 1847, a second *Dubuque* was built at Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, by George Collier and William Morrison and Company of St. Louis and William Hempstead and Company of Galena. Captain Edward H. Beebe who commanded the new boat received a hearty welcome upon his arrival at Dubuque. Late in the fall of 1855, after nine uneventful years, the second *Dubuque* sank opposite Mundy's Landing, Missouri.

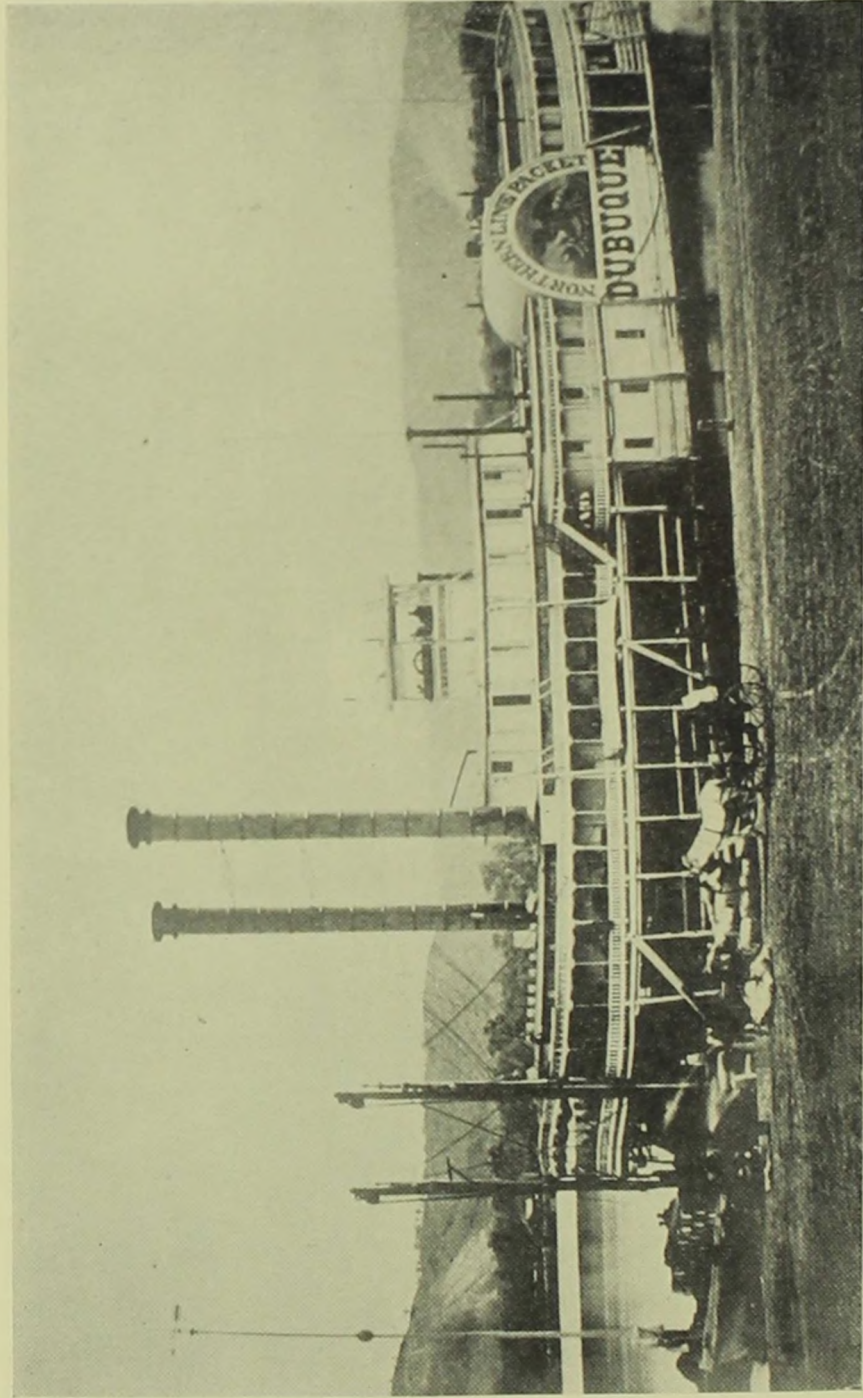
From 1847 to 1876 the name "Dubuque" or "Key City" was carried on some of the finest packets on the river. Only once, in 1856, did Dubuque go without a namesake. The first *Key City* made her appearance in 1857. Owned by the Minnesota Packet Company, the *Key City* saw service during the heyday of steamboating on the upper Mississippi and brought a useful and picturesque career to a close after twelve years of hard service.

Before the *Key City* was discarded, however, the third *Dubuque* made her appearance in 1867 under the Northern Line flag. For ten years this noble craft plied the waters of the upper Mississippi. She was burned while in winter quarters at Alton Slough in 1876. The tragic fate of the third *Dubuque* was a fitting end for a boat whose name is associated with the worst race riot on the upper Mississippi. Early



FROM THE COLLECTION OF WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

THE FIRST *KEY CITY*



COURTESY OF FRED A. BILL

THE THIRD DUBUQUE

in the morning of the twenty-ninth of July, 1869, the *Dubuque* left Davenport bound up-stream in the command of Captain John B. Rhodes. Among the two hundred deck passengers were many raftsmen returning to the harvest fields and logging camps. They had boarded the *Dubuque* at various points below and each landing had been the occasion for obtaining a fresh supply of liquor. By the time the boat left Davenport they were fluent in profanity and quarrelsome in their inebriety.

About eight o'clock the second clerk went to the lower deck to collect fares and examine tickets. To facilitate this task Moses Davis, a negro deckhand, was stationed at the head of the stairs with orders to permit no one to ascend while the fares were being collected. No sooner had the second clerk left than "Mike" Lynch, a pock-marked Irish lumberjack attempted to pass the guard — perhaps to secure another drink at the bar above. His way was blocked, a heated quarrel ensued, and Lynch returned cursing to his drunken cronies. They decided that they were opposed to negroes and concluded to put them all off the boat. Armed with knives and clubs, the raftsmen rushed at Davis and the riot began. The hapless negroes fled before them in terror, while the officers of the boat stood unarmed and helpless. Beaten with clubs and slashed with knives, five of the negroes were forced to jump overboard where flying missiles soon ended their struggles to swim ashore. A few managed to hide in the rooms of

officers and cabin passengers, while others escaped when the *Dubuque* landed at Hampton, Illinois.

News of the riot having been telegraphed ahead, a heavily armed posse boarded the *Dubuque* at Clinton and easily overpowered the rioters. About twenty were arrested. Unfortunately, however, Lynch and another ringleader had left the boat at Camanche. Ten of the rioters were indicted and seven were finally convicted of manslaughter. Lynch himself was eventually captured in an Arkansas lumber camp, returned to Rock Island, convicted, and sentenced to ten years in the State penitentiary at Joliet.

The second *Key City*, built at Dubuque in 1876, was only a ferry-boat which paddled back and forth across the river from Dubuque to Dunleith for several years.

The fourth *Dubuque*, originally named the *Pittsburgh*, was built at Cincinnati in 1879. Diamond Jo Reynolds purchased her in 1881 and she ran in his line under the same name until a cyclone completely demolished her top works at St. Louis. The wreck of the *Pittsburgh* was towed to the Diamond Jo Boat Yards at Eagle Point, where, under the direction of Captain John Killeen, she was given an entirely new upper works. She was then re-named the *Dubuque* and continued under that name until the Streckfus line converted her into an excursion boat. To-day, after fifty years of service, the *Capitol* or fourth *Dubuque* plies the upper Mississippi as far north as

Stillwater, Minnesota, during the summer months while in winter she withdraws to the warmer waters in the vicinity of New Orleans.

It was not merely civic pride which prompted a river town to sponsor a steamboat. It was a form of advertising that was supposed to produce material results. To have the name of a town constantly before the eyes of those who saw a proud steamer plying up and down the river each season was bound to attract favorable notice. Moreover, the name greeted the reader of steamboat advertisements in the newspapers, while the boat's arrival and departure was chronicled in the port events. Drownings and accidents, a spirited race or an exceptionally fast run between two ports, heavy cargoes, or notable passengers — anything, in fact, of distinct interest to the community — was reported in a column devoted to river news alone and immediately became the subject of local discussion and debate. Those immigrants who were trekking into the Northwest with no particular destination, doubtless gave sober consideration to those cities whose names were borne by the great packets on which they came.

While the value of such advertising was recognized, the results were often nebulous in character and difficult to measure. That the actual clink of coins in local cash drawers was directly connected with trade attracted by the name of a steamboat, however, was commonly claimed. "In a financial point of view," declared the *Dubuque Daily Express*

and *Herald* of April 10, 1859, "it may be safely asserted that through means of this boat alone [the *Key City*] a sum not less than \$12,000 is annually directed to the coffers of our enterprising merchants and mechanics, which would otherwise go to our rival city, Galena. And it ought to call forth an expression of heartfelt gratitude from every one who has the prosperity of our city at heart."

But steamboat captains and owners were equally enriched by this flourish of good will. Local merchants and travellers usually felt a strong attachment to their namesake and gave it the bulk of their patronage. Generally speaking, this feeling was best expressed in the local press where every one from the captain and clerk to the lowliest deckhand and roustabout was commended and extolled for their Herculean efforts to make the passengers on board comfortable.

Although great profits were reaped because of city preferences for their namesakes, the steamboats derived still other benefits. Scarcely had the third *Dubuque* splashed from the ways at Pittsburgh when a resolution was offered and adopted by the city council "that the steamer *Dubuque*, (Captain J. W. Parker) be permitted to arrive at our city landing the present season free of wharfage, and that the marshal notify the wharfmaster accordingly." The profit derived from such action varied with the tonnage of the boat, the number of arrivals during the season, and the rate of wharfage in effect

at the time. Assuming that a five per cent wharfage rate existed, a boat of six hundred tons would save six hundred dollars if it arrived twenty times during the season. The Northern Line of St. Louis was especially adept at taking advantage of this practice. In 1868, for example, five of their eight boats were the *Muscatine*, the *Davenport*, the *Dubuque*, the *Red Wing*, and the *Minneapolis* constituting a daily line from St. Louis to St. Paul.

Besides free wharfage it was also the custom of the citizens to present a set of colors to the vessel which bore the name of their city. These consisted of dozens of small flags made of the finest bunting. Whenever an excursion was planned, a race won, or the time and occasion demanded that the boat be adorned in holiday attire, the colors were run up the flagstaff and around the ship from stem to stern. Thus arrayed in gala apparel, an upper Mississippi steamboat of the middle period rivalled Coney Island itself.

The celebration of the arrival of the third *Dubuque* in 1867 surpassed all others. The progress made in building and launching the sturdy craft was chronicled by the local press with enthusiasm. Finally, on April 6th, the welcome news was heralded that the *Dubuque* was ready to leave Pittsburgh with an immense cargo of hardware. From that moment the new steamboat was the topic of the day.

While the loungers about the levee reeled off fabulous yarns about previous celebrations, the mer-

chants and leading citizens prepared for the present reception. A news item reported the daily progress of the *Dubuque* down the Ohio River and up the Mississippi. On April 10th the colors were ready for presentation and the boat scheduled to arrive within a week. Three days later it was announced that the exact date of arrival would be April 25th. On April 21st a detailed account of the grand reception was printed. There was some anxiety lest the boat might not reach the port of Dubuque on the appointed day on account of her heavy cargo and two cumbersome barges. But the *Petrel* was engaged to aid in towing the heavy load, and the *Dubuque* came in on time.

At last the grand event! "Yesterday," narrates the *Herald* of April 25, 1867, "a grand reception was given to the steamer Dubuque by the citizens and one that will be long remembered. About 3 o'clock in the afternoon the gallant boat was first signalled and as soon as her smoke stack became visible a salute was fired from Capt. Hayden's battery on the bluff to which the steamer responded with her whistles. At the first signal given, pursuant to programme, the fire companies formed near the square in a procession and, headed by the Germania Band under the superintendence of Marshall Hyde Clark, marched for the levee, while every street leading there was crowded with hundreds of men, women, and children, all in holiday attire, and all intent on beholding the namesake of the Key City.

“By the time the boat reached the landing the levee was literally dotted with human beings and although the sky was overcast with angry clouds, and rain commenced to fall, they still kept coming, resolved not to be pulled off by an April shower. No sooner was the boat made fast and the plank thrown out than a living stream of humanity poured over it and into the spacious cabin of the *Dubuque*. Captain J. W. Parker, hat in hand, stood upon the hurricane deck and bowed recognition to many of his old friends, and to the multitude who had assembled to accord him this grand ovation in behalf of his boat.

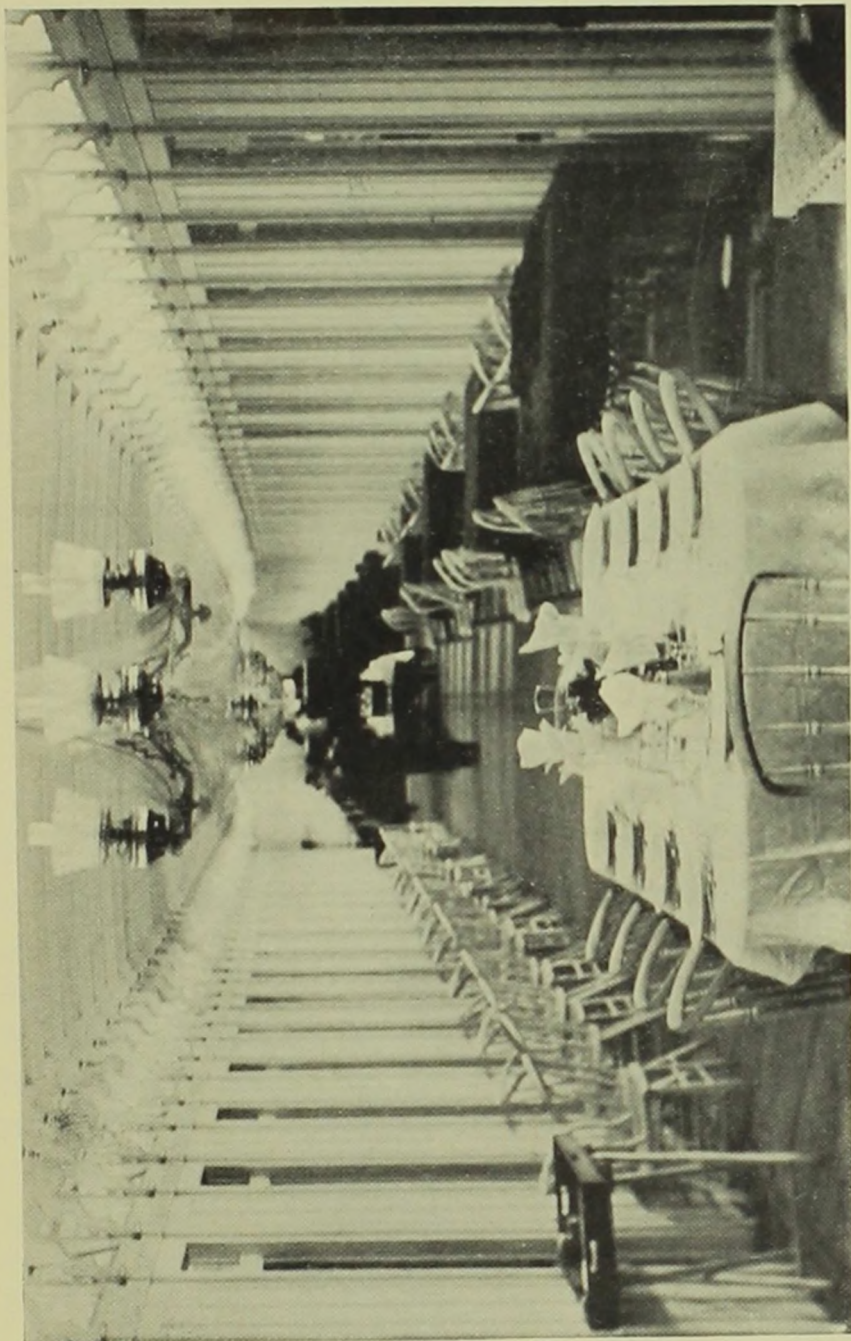
“The enthusiasm of the crowd was unbounded. From stem to stern, from hold to hurricane deck, was a perfect mass, in which beavers and hoops were strangely commingled. Everyone was delighted, everyone was surprised, everyone said she was a beauty, the calculating business man studied her capacity for freight, the artist and traveler extolled her symmetry, the ladies went into ecstasies over the sumptuous appointment of the cabin, and dirty faced young America, looking up into the countenance of his chum, whispered, ‘Golly, Bill, ain’t she a buster.’ In short everyone expressed themselves more than satisfied with the noble creation of man’s genius and skill that stood before them.”

The third *Dubuque* was not a showy boat. She indulged in no gingerbread or filagree ornaments. Built primarily for business, comfort, and speed,

under the direction of Captain Dick Grey, she was nevertheless by far the finest boat yet constructed for the Northern Line. Fully equipped and furnished the third *Dubuque* cost between ninety and one hundred thousand dollars. She was 230 feet long, 27 feet beam, 5 feet hold, had 4 boilers 30 inches in diameter and 26 feet long, and two engines 20 inches in diameter and 7 feet stroke.

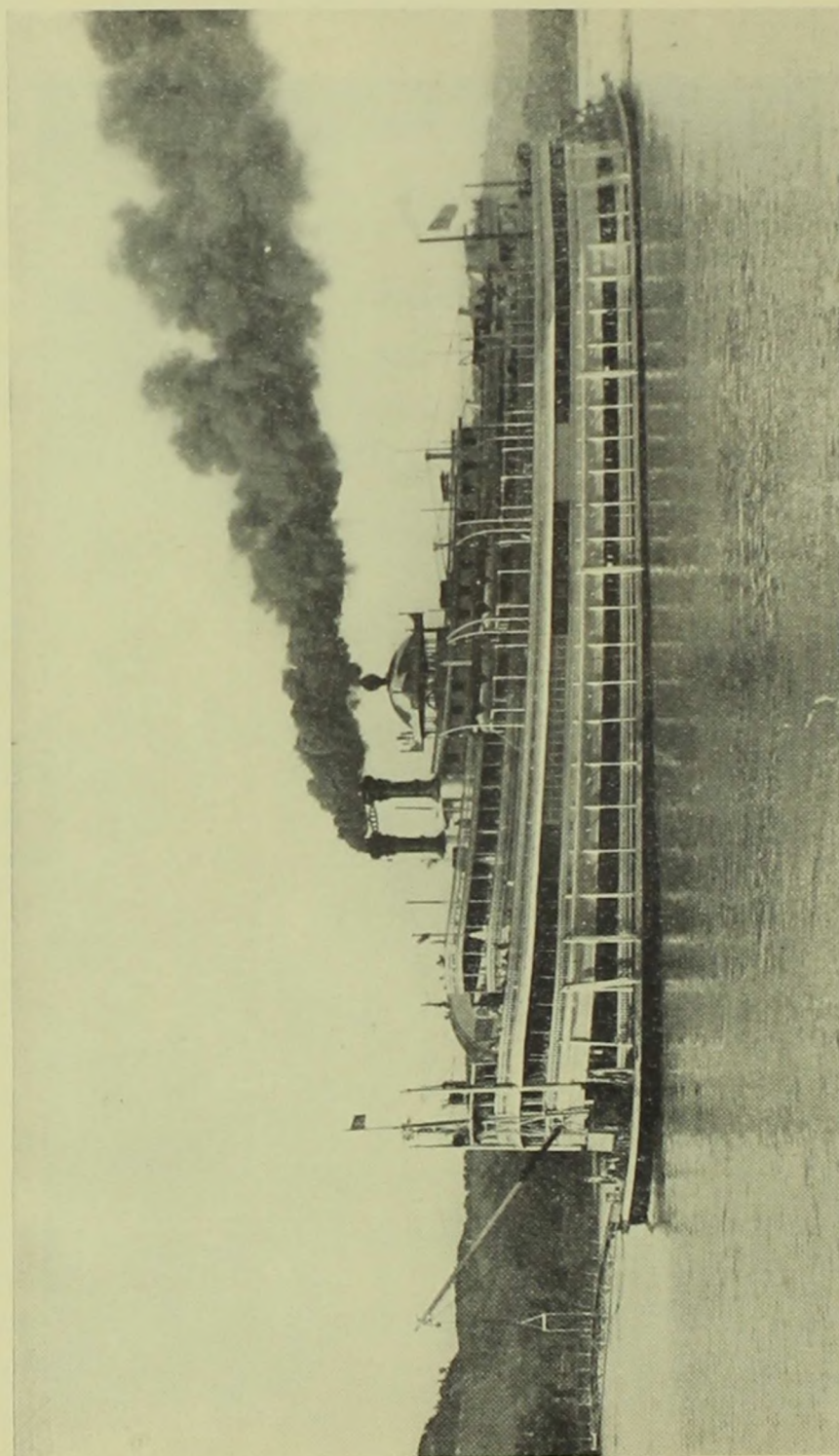
The cabin, 180 feet long, was luxuriously finished. Five Brussels carpets covered the floor, rich chandeliers hung pendant, and splendid mirrors adorned the walls. The mural paintings were of "unparalleled beauty". A landscape painting of the city of Dubuque in the rear of the cabin was especially noteworthy and attracted favorable comment. Equipped with all the necessary conveniences, the *Dubuque's* fifty-two "palace staterooms" were capable of accommodating one hundred and two cabin passengers.

"The Bridal Chamber", declared an enthusiastic reporter, "must be seen to be appreciated. It was furnished by Messrs. Raymond Bros., of this city, and speaks volumes for the good taste of that enterprising firm. It was painted and decorated by those well known artists, Newburg & Crummer. The Latin inscription '*Iti Sapis Potitis,*' is done in Joe's best style, and we venture to say can not be beaten in the northwest. The chamber almost makes us wish we were 'a bride', and we would advise all persons contemplating marriage to visit the *Dubuque* on her



COURTESY OF FRED A. BILL

THE CABIN OF THE FOURTH DUBUQUE



FROM THE COLLECTION OF WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

THE CAPITOL

return, and engage the bridal chamber for their marriage tour."

After a brief inspection of the boat, Mayor J. K. Graves stepped forward and presented the colors to Captain Parker. They consisted of six large bunting ensigns and fifteen dozen small flags purchased by the citizens of Dubuque at a cost of four hundred and fifty dollars. Captain Parker in a brief speech of acceptance thanked the citizens of Dubuque for the cordial reception accorded him and his boat.

A long and woefully dry oration by the Hon. J. H. O'Neil drove the less resolute to the barroom. The great majority, however, awaited with commendable fortitude the presentation of the horns by the inimitable Commodore Thomas Levens, who performed his arduous task in a manner not soon to be forgotten. Said he, addressing the Captain, "You see them horns, they are a nice pair, and have got the North Star stuck right between them. They are a horny set of fellows, and carry a good number of points. Captain, them horns were once worn by the proudest animal that brooks the conquest of a hunter, and it is proper that they should hereafter be borne by the proudest craft that walks these waters, the steamer Dubuque. I ain't much, Captain, on speech making, but I always try to do my duty, and entrust these antlers to your keeping, hoping that you will always cherish them. In conclusion, Captain, in the words of a distinguished friend of mine 'Take your damned old horns'." The effect

of the old Commodore's speech was electrical, he was the hero of the hour, and by general consent the crowd repaired to the barroom for further refreshments.

Invitations had been sent out to two hundred of the elite of the city to attend a private dance and supper that evening. Those who were slighted acted upon the theory that it was a free country and attended the festivities anyway. A splendid banquet had been prepared by E. Mainey, the *Dubuque's* steward, and the rich foods were reinforced by generous contributions from Bill Henderson's stock of finest wines. At the conclusion of the banquet, a dance was held in the spacious cabin of the *Dubuque* with music furnished by the ship's band. Dawn streaked the eastern bluffs before the last group of merry Dubuquers departed and allowed Captain Parker to proceed on his way.

Though the average life of a steamboat on western waters was usually estimated at five years, the steamboats named "Dubuque", except the first, far surpassed the allotted span of service. Altogether the second and third *Dubuque* and the first *Key City* plied the waters of the upper Mississippi for a period of thirty-one years, or an average of over ten years each. But the fourth *Dubuque* has eclipsed them all in the amazing longevity of her career. During the present season of 1929 she celebrated the golden anniversary of her wedding with the waters of the upper Mississippi and has thus run sixteen

years longer than the combined service of all the other namesakes of Dubuque, excluding the ferry-boat *Key City*.

One hundred and six years ago, in 1823, the *Virginia* made the first steamboat trip to Fort Snelling. The excursion boat *Capitol*, christened *Pittsburgh* and converted into the fourth *Dubuque*, has churned the waters of the upper Mississippi for almost one-half the period of time that steamboating has existed on that great waterway. Her record is without a parallel among the steamboats on the upper river.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN